

Russian Hardliners Gain from US Putin-Bashing

The harsh U.S. rhetoric denouncing Russian President Putin is having the adverse effect in Russia of strengthening hard-line “populists” in upcoming elections who think Putin’s ruling party is too soft on the U.S., reports Gilbert Doctorow.

By Gilbert Doctorow

Last week, Hillary Clinton told reporters on her campaign plane that the Russians are trying to disrupt the U.S. elections to discredit the process and sow discord among Americans. This goes one step further than her previous charges of Russian influence thought the “Kremlin’s candidate,” Donald Trump, or still earlier, the claim that the Democratic National Committee’s server had been hacked by intelligence services reporting to Vladimir Putin. Of course, all these charges were made without proof.

Meanwhile, in the Russian Federation, where folks are facing their own national elections on Sept. 18, a kind of mirror-image denunciation of foreign (meaning American) interference in their domestic politics is also heard from many in the Russian Establishment.

In the past week, the widely respected Levada Center, best known for its public opinion polls, found itself accused by federal authorities of being a “foreign agent” due to revenues it earns from multinational companies for whom it does marketing studies. Its director said that if the label sticks, the Center may be forced to close its doors.

Also, this past week, the International Republican Institute (IRI), a “non-governmental organization” chaired by Sen. McCain and with an operation in Moscow, was declared a threat to Russian national security and ordered to halt its activities in Russia. (Most of IRI’s money comes from the U.S. Agency for International Development, the U.S. State Department and the U.S.-government-funded National Endowment for Democracy, whose president has called for Russian President Vladimir Putin’s ouster.)

But the way the elections in both the U.S. and Russia are taking shape has considerably more in common than these complaints of outside interference. I see a much bigger common factor in the growing, possibly decisive role of populism in both Russia and the U.S. this year.

In the United States, the rise of populism and its possible victory at the polls

in November over the opposition of the political establishment of the Democratic and Republican parties have been obvious from the start and throughout the progression of the candidacy of Donald Trump.

In a recent full-page analytical article headlined, "The Trump Phenomenon," the *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, one of Russia's most serious and well-written daily newspapers, identifies economics as the driving force behind the populist wave that Trump is riding. Specifically, he made himself a voice of the millions of working-class Americans who have suffered over the last 30 years from the deindustrialization and outsourcing which have been part and parcel of the globalization that successive U.S. administrations from the two mainstream parties have actively promoted through "free trade" deals.

Meanwhile, the foreign policy component of Trump's agenda gives voice to the views of the majority of Americans who consistently over the past 30 years have said they want their country to stop being the world's policeman and to pursue more peaceful policies by acting in consensus as an equal partner with the world's other major powers.

This resistance to the Establishment's insistence on U.S. global dominance has been a constant feature of Pew polls, including one last spring that found nearly six in ten Americans (or 57 percent) feeling that the U.S. should deal with its problems and other countries should deal with their own. Only 37 percent thought the U.S. should help other countries deal with their problems.

But this attitude has been dismissed by the foreign policy establishment as revealing nothing more than public ignorance of the world's dangers and complexities, a preoccupation with consumerism, and an unwillingness to accept hardships for the common security by exercising global leadership.

Consequently, one can summarize and conclude that Donald Trump's planned foreign policy has deep populist roots. His proposals to find dialogue with Russia on common security interests are neither a sign of his being "Putin's candidate" or of arbitrarily and capriciously adopting a position solely to run against what the Establishment is saying for the sake of drawing attention to himself.

Hard-line Russian 'Populism'

By contrast, the curious and important thing to note about Russian populism is that it is driven far less by economics, although the Russian citizenry is hurting badly from the third year of recession that came out of the fall in energy prices and Western sanctions over Crimea and Ukraine.

The driving factor of Russian populism is instead national pride over the reunification with Crimea and the country's resistance to U.S. and European

punishment. This populism is expressed through belt-tightening, import substitutions and other measures.

Russians have traditionally been a complaining people but my own reading of the popular mood not so much from media as from talking to ordinary people – and especially to ordinary people over the fence and in the grocery store of the hamlet where I have a summer home, 80 kilometers south of St. Petersburg – is that they are getting by and making the best of it without fuss.

Populism has merged with patriotism, as shown by the massively successful May 9 celebrations of Russia's World War II victory which channeled a wellspring of emotion into the Immortal Regiment marches in cities and towns across the country. This patriotic pride explains the 82 percent approval rating that Vladimir Putin currently enjoys.

Translated into electoral politics, the patriotic sense of mind means that Russian populism will likely bring a turn to the right at the voting booths this Sunday. Although the governing party United Russia advertises itself as “the party of the President [Putin],” it also is the party of Dmitry Medvedev, who is its chairman. As prime minister, Medvedev is still seen as a liberal who promotes free-market economics rather than state-guided reindustrialization. He is seen as soft on the U.S. and soft on Europe.

In other words, the street says the governing party, United Russia, will not retain its majority of seats in the Duma and its showing may dip as low as 30 percent of the vote, a reaction not to Putin but to the party's perceived lack of toughness against the West. The consequence would likely be a coalition cabinet, bringing in ministers from the runners-up. And who might those runners-up be?

In the U.S. media, there is the very mistaken view that Russia has no opposition parties. That view is predominantly only because the U.S. State Department and Official Washington's specialist institutes and think tanks disdain any politicians and movements in Russia that are not on the U.S. payroll. Unless you are Yabloko or Parnas, you are not an opposition party, so our experts tell us.

Nothing could be further from the truth. I am persuaded that the position of being the second largest party in the Duma will be hotly contested between the Communists, who throughout the 1990s actually were the country's majority party, and the Liberal Democratic (LDPR) party of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, which was the first non-Communist party founded back in what was still Soviet Russia.

On questions of economic policy, those two parties stand at opposite poles. But on the question of foreign policy, they are both more royalist than the king.

Judging by the level of paid outdoor advertising on highways around the metropolises of St. Petersburg and Moscow, I would put my money on an LDPR high turnout and vote on Sept. 18.

In what little exposure U.S. media has given Vladimir Zhirinovskiy in the past, Western readers might assume that is just a buffoon who has served the Kremlin's interests by drawing nationalists away from the Communists and so reducing its threat. But my reading of Zhirinovskiy, including from seeing and sparring with him up close, is that his buffoonery has been calculated as has Donald Trump's.

Playing the clown and wearing the outlandish bright red sports jacket on TV spared Zhirinovskiy from being taken too seriously by the Establishment even as he delivered below the belt punches against the powers-that-be.

A Challenge to Putin's Party

In a feature television program celebrating his 70th birthday in July, Zhirinovskiy made it clear that in his 27 years in parliament he has seen it all, understands very well how the Kremlin has maintained power by one dirty trick after another. In particular, he explained to the Pervy Kanal presenter and journalist Vladimir Soloviev how the single-mandate scheme which is being used in 2016 to complement the party list system of electing Duma deputies gives an unfair advantage to United Russia.

The scheme, which was taken from practices in some West European democracies, has been popularized as a means of bringing into parliament at least some deputies who are well known and dedicated to the district that elects them. But since United Russia has more candidates with more experience in power across the country, it can profit best from this scheme.

In LDPR's full-page advertisement-campaign manifesto in *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, Zhirinovskiy and his associates denounce another feature of this year's national elections: the appearance on the ballot of a half-dozen ersatz parties, parties that long ago combined forces and disappeared as separate entities. Zhirinovskiy is calling them "subsidiaries" of United Russia, launched solely for the purpose of sopping up protest votes that otherwise might go to Duma parties like his own.

It is to be expected that there will be no vote-rigging or other illegal abuses in Sunday's national elections such as set off the dramatic protests during the last Duma elections in December 2011. The tricks that Zhirinovskiy is denouncing are legal even if they are unethical. They are no different from what goes on in mature democracies like the U.S. (gerrymandering and giving built-in advantages to the two major political parties, for example) for the purpose of "managed

democracy," which is by no means a made-in-Russia concept.

The astute critique of the Russian elites in power which Zhirinovsky puts forth underlines the justified fear of United Russia that it will lose control of parliament. Meanwhile, Zhirinovsky has changed his wardrobe to a classy business suit and changed his demeanor to almost calm, measured speech as I saw a few days ago when we both took part in the Pervy Kanal's leading political talk show, "Sunday Evening with Vladimir Soloviev."

This was my second chance to observe him up close in the past four months and the difference was palpable. You could sense that he feels power within reach and is hoping for a ministerial portfolio in the new post-election government.

A good showing for Zhirinovsky's party on Sept. 18 and demotion to minority party for United Russia may well mean the renunciation of any lingering hopes of getting along with or being buddies with the U.S. It could result in new, harder-line marching orders for Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov, who has been the principal negotiator with the U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry.

On Sunday, before the show, I had a five minute tete-a-tete with TV host Vladimir Soloviev about Trump. Given Soloviev's position as the darling of Russian state television, the man who gets to do the big interviews with Vladimir Putin, I think it is safe to say that Soloviev represents a significant part of the Kremlin establishment. And he does *not* want to see Trump elected.

This runs directly counter to everything the American neocons, the Democratic standard bearer and the mainstream U.S. media are saying about the Putin-Trump "relationship." But it is perfectly logical. Soloviev sees Trump as volatile and unpredictable. In this resistance to a potentially unpredictable Trump, we see characteristic Russian trust in the virtues of stability. Better the devil you know...etc.

But there is also something else going on. Soloviev, like a large swath of Russians both in and out of power, enjoys seeing the U.S. as a malicious enemy. In a direct mirror image of the U.S. budget process, having such an enemy is good for those seeking resources for the Russian armed forces and their military-industrial complex.

The bottom line is that the rise of populists in Russia may bring in more hard-liners on foreign policy just when – if Trump were to prevail – the rise of populists in the United States may bring in doves.

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Getting Fooled on Iraq, Libya, Now Russia

Exclusive: After the British report exposing falsehoods to justify invading Iraq in 2003, a new U.K. inquiry found similar misconduct in the 2011 attack on Libya, but no lessons are learned for the West's new propaganda about Russia, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

A British parliamentary inquiry into the Libyan fiasco has reported what should have been apparent from the start in 2011 – and was to some of us – that the West's military intervention to "protect" civilians in Benghazi was a cover for what became another disastrous "regime change" operation.

The report from the U.K.'s Foreign Affairs Committee confirms that the U.S. and other Western governments exaggerated the human rights threat posed by Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi and then quickly morphed the "humanitarian" mission into a military invasion that overthrew and killed Gaddafi, leaving behind political and social chaos.

The report's significance is that it shows how little was learned from the Iraq War fiasco in which George W. Bush's administration hyped and falsified intelligence to justify invading Iraq and killing its leader, Saddam Hussein. In both cases, U.K. leaders tagged along and the West's mainstream news media mostly served as unprofessional propaganda conduits, not as diligent watchdogs for the public.

Today, we are seeing an even more dangerous repetition of this pattern: demonizing Russian President Vladimir Putin, destabilizing the Russian economy and pressing for "regime change" in Moscow. Amid the latest propaganda orgy against Putin, virtually no one in the mainstream is exercising any restraint or finding any cautionary lessons from the Iraqi and Libyan examples.

Yet, with Russia, the risks are orders of magnitude greater than even the cases of Iraq and Libya – and one might toss in the messy "regime change" projects in Ukraine and Syria. The prospect of political chaos in Moscow – with extremists battling for power and control of the nuclear codes – should finally inject some sense of responsibility in the West's politicians and media, but doesn't.

When it comes to Putin and Russia, it's the same ole hyperbole and falsehood

that so disinformed the public regarding the “threats” from Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi. Just as President George W. Bush deceptively painted Hussein’s supposed WMD as a danger to Americans and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton dishonestly portrayed Gaddafi as “genocidal,” U.S. officials and pundits are depicting Putin as some cartoonish villain or some new Hitler.

And, just as The New York Times, Washington Post and other mainstream media outlets amplified the Iraq and Libyan propaganda to the American people – rather than questioning and challenging it – these supposedly journalistic entities are performing the same function regarding Russia. The chief difference is that now we’re talking about the potential for nuclear annihilation. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“The Existential Madness of Putin-Bashing.”](#)]

According to the new U.K. report on Libya, Britain’s military intervention – alongside the U.S. and France – was based on “erroneous assumptions and an incomplete understanding” of the reality inside Libya, which included a lack of appreciation about the role of Islamic extremists in spearheading the opposition to Gaddafi.

In other words, Gaddafi was telling the truth when he accused the rebels around Benghazi of being penetrated by Islamic terrorists. The West, including the U.S. news media, took Gaddafi’s vow to wipe out this element and distorted it into a claim that he intended to slaughter the region’s civilians, thus stampeding the United Nations Security Council into approving an operation to protect them.

That mandate was then twisted into an excuse to decimate Libya’s army and clear the way for anti-Gaddafi rebels to seize the capital of Tripoli and eventually hunt down, torture and murder Gaddafi.

Ignored Terror Evidence

Yet, there was evidence before this “regime change” occurred regarding the extremist nature of the anti-Gaddafi rebels as well as those seeking to overthrow Bashar al-Assad in Syria. As analysts Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman wrote in a pre-Libya-war report for West Point’s Combating Terrorism Center, “the Syrian and Libyan governments share the United States’ concerns about violent salafist/jihadi ideology and the violence perpetrated by its adherents.”

In the report entitled [“Al-Qaeda’s Foreign Fighters in Iraq,”](#) Felter and Fishman also analyzed Al Qaeda’s documents captured in 2007 showing personnel records of militants who flocked to Iraq for the war. The documents revealed that eastern Libya (the base of the anti-Gaddafi rebellion) was a hotbed for suicide bombers traveling to Iraq to kill American troops.

Felter and Fishman wrote that these so-called Sinjar Records disclosed that

while Saudis comprised the largest number of foreign fighters in Iraq, Libyans represented the largest per-capita contingent by far. Those Libyans came overwhelmingly from towns and cities in the east.

“The vast majority of Libyan fighters that included their hometown in the Sinjar Records resided in the country’s Northeast, particularly the coastal cities of Darnah 60.2% (53) and Benghazi 23.9% (21),” Felter and Fishman wrote, adding:

“Both Darnah and Benghazi have long been associated with Islamic militancy in Libya, in particular for an uprising by Islamist organizations in the mid-1990s. ... One group – the Libyan Fighting Group ... – claimed to have Afghan veterans in its ranks,” a reference to mujahedeen who took part in the CIA-backed anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan in the 1980s, as did Al Qaeda founder, Osama bin Laden, a Saudi.

“The Libyan uprisings [in the 1990s] became extraordinarily violent,” Felter and Fishman wrote. “Qadhafi used helicopter gunships in Benghazi, cut telephone, electricity, and water supplies to Darnah and famously claimed that the militants ‘deserve to die without trial, like dogs,’”

Some important Al Qaeda leaders operating in Pakistan’s tribal regions also were believed to have come from Libya. For instance, “Atiyah,” who was guiding the anti-U.S. war strategy in Iraq, was identified as a Libyan named Atiyah Abd al-Rahman.

It was Atiyah who urged a strategy of creating a quagmire for U.S. forces in Iraq, buying time for Al Qaeda’s headquarters to rebuild its strength in Pakistan. “Prolonging the war [in Iraq] is in our interest,” Atiyah said in a letter that upbraided Jordanian terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi for his hasty and reckless actions in Iraq.

The Atiyah letter was discovered by the U.S. military after Zarqawi was killed by an airstrike in June 2006. [To view the “prolonging the war” excerpt in a translation published by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, [click here](#). To read the entire letter, [click here](#).]

Hidden Motives

This reality was known by U.S. officials prior to the West’s military intervention in Libya in 2011, yet opportunistic politicians, including Secretary of State Clinton, saw Libya as a stage to play out their desires to create muscular foreign policy legacies or achieve other aims.

Some of Clinton’s now-public emails show that France’s President Nicolas Sarkozy appeared to be more interested in protecting France’s financial dominance of its

former African colonies as well as getting a bigger stake in Libya's oil wealth than in the well-being of the Libyan people.

An April 2, 2011 email from Clinton's personal adviser Sidney Blumenthal explained that Gaddafi had plans to use his stockpile of gold "to establish a pan-African currency" and thus "to provide the Francophone African Countries with an alternative to the French franc."

Blumenthal added, "French intelligence officers discovered this plan shortly after the current rebellion began, and this was one of the factors that influenced President Nicolas Sarkozy's decision to commit France to the attack on Libya." Another key factor, according to the email, was Sarkozy's "desire to gain a greater share of Libya oil production."

For Clinton, a prime motive for pushing the Libyan "regime change" was to demonstrate her mastery of what she and her advisers called "smart power," i.e., the use of U.S. aerial bombing and other coercive means, such as economic and legal sanctions, to impose U.S. dictates on other nations.

Her State Department email exchanges revealed that her aides saw the Libyan war as a chance to pronounce a "Clinton doctrine," but that plan fell through when President Obama seized the spotlight after Gaddafi's government fell in August 2011.

But Clinton didn't miss a second chance to take credit on Oct. 20, 2011, after militants captured Gaddafi, sodomized him with a knife and then murdered him. Appearing on a TV interview, Clinton celebrated Gaddafi's demise with the quip, "we came; we saw; he died."

Clinton's euphoria was not long-lasting, however, as chaos enveloped Libya. With Gaddafi and his largely secular regime out of the way, Islamic militants expanded their power over the country. Some were terrorists, just as Gaddafi and the West Point analysts had warned.

One Islamic terror group attacked the U.S. consulate in Benghazi on Sept. 11, 2012, killing U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other American personnel, an incident that Clinton called the worst moment of her four-year tenure as Secretary of State.

As the violence spread, the United States and other Western countries abandoned their embassies in Tripoli. Once prosperous with many social services, Libya descended into the category of failed state with rival militias battling over oil and territory while the Islamic State took advantage of the power vacuum to establish a foothold around Sirte.

Though Clinton prefers to describe Libya as a “work in progress,” rather than another “regime change failure,” U.S. and U.N. efforts to impose a new “unity government” on Libya have met with staunch resistance from many Libyan factions. Since April, the so-called Government of National Accord has maintained only a fragile presence in Tripoli, in Libya’s west, and has been rejected by Libya’s House of Representatives (HOR), which functions from the eastern city of Tobruk.

Over the past few days, military forces loyal to Gen. Khalifa Haftar, who is associated with HOR in the east, seized control of several oil facilities despite angry protests from Western nations, including the U.S., U.K., and France. But Western nations have little credibility left inside Libya, which not only faced colonization in the past but has watched as the U.S.-U.K.-French military intervention in 2011 has led to widespread poverty, suffering and death.

Inept Intervention

The U.K. report only underscores how deceptive and inept that intervention was. As described by the U.K. Guardian newspaper, then-Prime Minister “David Cameron’s intervention in Libya was carried out with no proper intelligence analysis, drifted into an unannounced goal of regime change and shirked its moral responsibility to help reconstruct the country following the fall of Muammar Gaddafi, according to a scathing report by the foreign affairs select committee.

“The failures led to the country becoming a failed state on the verge of all-out civil war, the report adds. The report, the product of a parliamentary equivalent of the Chilcot inquiry into the Iraq war, closely echoes the criticisms widely made of [then-Prime Minister] Tony Blair’s intervention in Iraq, and may yet come to be as damaging to Cameron’s foreign policy legacy.”

Earlier this year, Cameron stepped down as prime minister following the approval of the “Brexit” referendum calling on the U.K. to leave the European Union, a position that Cameron opposed. This week, Cameron also resigned his seat in Parliament.

Though Blair and Cameron have at least faced personal disgrace over their roles in these two failed “regime change” invasions, there has been less accountability in the United States, where there were no comprehensive examinations of the policy failures that led to the wars in Iraq and Libya (although studies were undertaken regarding Bush’s false claims about Iraq’s WMD and the Obama administration’s failure to adequately protect the U.S. consulate in Benghazi).

There has been even less accountability in the mainstream U.S. news media, where, for instance, The Washington Post's editorial page editor Fred Hiatt, who repeatedly reported Iraq's non-existent WMD as flat fact remains in the same job today pushing similar over-the-top propaganda regarding Russia.

A New Cold War

As with the fiascos in Iraq and Libya, U.S. policymakers continue to ignore or sideline American intelligence analysts who possess information that would cast doubt on the escalation of hostilities with Russia.

Even as the Obama administration has charted this new Cold War with Russia over the past two years – a prospect that could cost U.S. taxpayers trillions of dollars and carries the risk of thermonuclear war – there has been no National Intelligence Estimate getting a consensus judgment from America's 16 intelligence agencies about how real the Russian threat is, according to intelligence sources.

One source said a key reason why an NIE had not been done was that U.S. policymakers wanted a more alarmist report than the intelligence analysts were willing to produce. "They call [the alarm about Russia] political, not factual," the source said. "They weren't going to do one, period. They can't lie."

The source added that the analysts would have to acknowledge how helpful Putin has been in a number of sensitive and strategic areas, such as securing Syria's agreement to surrender its chemical weapons and convincing Iran to accept tight limits on its nuclear program.

"Israel has nuclear weapons and a crazy leader," the source said about Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. "If not for Putin, the guy may have used it [a nuclear bomb] in Iran. He [Putin] calmed things down in Syria. They [CIA analysts] aren't that stupid. To tell the truth, you have to say he [Putin] saved the Middle East a lot of trouble."

U.S. intelligence analysts also might have had to include their assessments regarding whether Syrian rebels – not Assad's military – deployed sarin gas outside Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013, and whether an element of the Ukrainian military – not ethnic Russian rebels – shot down Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over eastern Ukraine on July 17, 2014.

Those two propaganda themes blaming Syria and Russia, respectively, were promoted heavily by mainstream Western media and various Internet-based information warriors. The two themes have been central to the Western-backed "regime change" project in Syria and to the new Cold War with Russia. If U.S. intelligence analysts knocked down those themes in an NIE, valuable propaganda

assets would be exposed and discredited.

Also, in the wake of the two British government reports undermining the propaganda that was used to justify “regime change” in Iraq and Libya, the blow to Western “credibility” if there were similar admissions about falsehoods regarding Syria and Russia could be devastating.

Instead, the hope of Official Washington is that the American public won’t catch on to the pattern of deception and that the people will continue to ignore the famous warning that President George W. Bush infamously garbled: “fool me once, shame on ... shame on you; fool me – you can’t get fooled again.”

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

Al Qaeda’s Ties to US-Backed Syrian Rebels

Exclusive: The U.S. is demanding the grounding of Syria’s air force but is resisting Russian demands that U.S.-armed rebels separate from Al Qaeda, a possible fatal flaw in the new cease-fire, writes Gareth Porter.

By Gareth Porter

The new ceasefire agreement between Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, which went into effect at noon Monday, has a new central compromise absent from the earlier ceasefire agreement that the same two men negotiated last February. But it isn’t clear that it will produce markedly different results.

The new agreement incorporates a U.S.-Russian bargain: the Syrian air force is prohibited from operating except under very specific circumstances in return for U.S.-Russian military cooperation against Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, also known as Daesh, ISIS or ISIL. That compromise could be a much stronger basis for an effective ceasefire, provided there is sufficient motivation to carry it out fully.

The question, however, is whether the Obama administration is willing to do what would certainly be necessary for the agreement to establish a longer-term ceasefire at the expense of Daesh and Al Qaeda.

In return for ending the Syrian air force's operations, generally regarded as indiscriminate, and lifting the siege on the rebel-controlled sectors of Aleppo, the United States is supposed to ensure the end of the close military collaboration between the armed groups it supports and Al Qaeda, and join with Russian forces in weakening Al Qaeda.

The new bargain is actually a variant of a provision in the Feb. 27 ceasefire agreement: in return for Russian and Syrian restraints on bombing operations, the United States would prevail on its clients to separate themselves from their erstwhile Al Qaeda allies.

But that never happened. Instead the U.S.-supported groups not only declared publicly that they would not honor a "partial ceasefire" that excluded areas controlled by Al Qaeda's affiliate, then known as Nusra Front, but joined with Nusra Front and its close ally, Ahrar al Sham, in a major open violation of the ceasefire by seizing strategic terrain south of Aleppo in early April.

As the Kerry-Lavrov negotiations on a ceasefire continued, Kerry's State Department hinted that the U.S. was linking its willingness to pressure its Syrian military clients to separate themselves from Al Qaeda's forces in the northwest to an unspecified Russian concession on the ceasefire that was still being negotiated.

It is now clear that what Kerry was pushing for was what the Obama administration characterized as the "grounding" of the Syrian air force in the current agreement.

Al Qaeda's Ties

Now that it has gotten that concession from the Russians, the crucial question is what the Obama administration intends to do about the ties between its own military clients and Al Qaeda in Aleppo and elsewhere in the northwest.

Thus far the primary evidence available for answering that question is two letters from U.S. envoy to the Syrian opposition Michael Ratney to opposition groups backed by the United States. The first letter, sent on Sept. 3, after most of the Kerry-Lavrov agreement had already been hammered out, appears to have been aimed primarily at reassuring those Syrian armed groups.

As translated by al-Monitor, it asserted, "Russia will prevent regime planes from flying, and this means there will not be bombing by the regime of areas controlled by the opposition, regardless of who is present in the area, including areas in which Jabhat Fateh al Sham [the new name adopted by Al Qaeda's Nusra Front] has a presence alongside other opposition factions."

Ratney confirmed that the U.S. would in return “offer Russia coordination from our side to weaken al Qaeda.” But he also assured U.S. clients that their interests would be protected under the new agreement.

“[W]e believe this ceasefire should be stronger,” he wrote, “because it should prevent Russia and the regime from bombing the opposition and civilians under the pretext that its striking Jabhat al Nusra.”

The Ratney letter makes no reference to any requirement for the armed opposition to move away from their Al Qaeda allies or even terminate their military relationships, and thus implied that they need not do so.

But in a follow-up letter, undated but apparently sent on Sept. 10, following the completion of the new Kerry-Lavrov agreement, Ratney wrote, “We urge the rebels to distance themselves and cut all ties with Fateh of Sham, formerly Nusra Front, or there will be severe consequences.”

The difference between the two messages is obviously dramatic. That suggests that one of the last concessions made by Kerry in the Sept. 9 meeting with Lavrov may have been that a message would be sent to U.S. military clients with precisely such language.

The totality of the two letters from Ratney underlines the reluctance of the United States to present an ultimatum to its Syrian clients, no matter how clearly they are implicated in Al Qaeda operations against the ceasefire. Last spring, the State Department never publicly commented on the participation by the U.S.-supported armed groups in the Nusra Front offensive in violation of the ceasefire agreement, effectively providing political cover for it.

The decision by U.S.-supported armed groups in March to defy the ceasefire was taken in the knowledge that Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia had agreed to resupply the Nusra Front-led commands in the northwest and had even provided shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles to Nusra’s close ally Ahrar al Sham.

Turkey’s Dubious Role

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s recent shift in policy toward rapprochement with Russia and his talk of ending the war in Syria are fueled by determination to prevent Syrian Kurds from establishing a unified Kurdistan along the Turkish border.

The Wilson Center’s Henry Barkey, a leading specialist on Turkey, told a meeting sponsored by the Middle East Institute last week that Erdogan’s Syria policy is “90 percent about the Kurds.”

But Erdogan does not appear ready to pull the rug out from under Turkey's client groups in Syria. In fact, Turkey suddenly dialed back its rhetorical shift on Syria in July just when the newly renamed Jabhat Fateh al Sham revealed for the first time that it was about to launch its major offensive for Aleppo.

The domestic political context of U.S. Syrian policy remains strongly hostile to any joint U.S. operations with Russia that could affect U.S.-supported anti-Assad clients, even though it is now generally acknowledged that those forces are "marbled" with troops of Al Qaeda's franchise, especially in Aleppo.

During the spring and summer, Reuters, The Washington Post and other media outlets reported a string of complaints from the Pentagon and the CIA about Obama's plans to reach an agreement with Russia on Syria that would commit the United States to cooperate against Al Qaeda's Syrian franchise. These complaints argued that the Russians could not be trusted and that they intended to target U.S -supported groups in a proxy war.

The real reasons for these attacks on the negotiations with Russia, however, were more parochial. The Pentagon is determined to maintain the line that Russia is a dangerous threat and should be firmly opposed everywhere. The CIA's clandestine service has long wanted a more aggressive program of military assistance for its Syrian clients, which would be a major CIA covert operation.

Thus, even though the new agreement calls for U.S. "coordination" with Russia of air strikes against Al Qaeda forces, the Obama administration can be expected to raise objections whenever it sees that a proposed operation would come too close to targets associated with its clients. Otherwise, more leaks from opponents of the agreement in the Pentagon and CIA – or even in the State Department – would surely follow.

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Post-9/11's Self-Inflicted Wounds

The damage done to U.S. foreign policy in the wake of the 9/11 attacks was largely self-inflicted, a case of wildly overreacting to Al Qaeda's bloody provocation, writes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

In thinking about the significance and consequences, a decade and a half later, of the terrorist attacks known as 9/11, it is best to begin with what the attacks did *not* mean – despite what voluminous commentary ever since the event might lead one to believe.

The attacks did not mark a major change in security threats faced by the United States or anyone else. Americans were not suddenly more in danger on Sept. 12, 2001 than they had been on Sept. 10, even though the reactions of many Americans would suggest that they were.

Nor was one spectacular, lethal and lucky shot to be equated with a larger threat that can be thought of in strategic terms, or with sudden revelation of such a threat. Those whose job was to assess such things, including those in U.S. officialdom, had communicated prior to 9/11 their clear understanding of the strategic threat represented by Bin Laden's variety of international terrorism.

September 2001 did not mark the advent of a substantially greater vulnerability of the U.S. homeland, and certainly not an existential one. The techniques involved were not at all comparable in that regard to the introduction of the long-range bomber and the intercontinental ballistic missile.

Nor did September 2001 mark the beginning of serious counterterrorist efforts by the United States, notwithstanding the larger amount of resources thrown at the problem in the wake of 9/11. There was a lot of counterterrorism going on before, especially in the 1980s and continuing into the 1990s.

The available tools and elements of counterterrorism have remained essentially unchanged from those earlier periods, apart from a few technological developments such as those involving unmanned aerial vehicles.

The biggest changes brought about by 9/11 instead involved public perceptions and emotions, and consequently the political treatment of subjects that those perceptions and emotions involved. The politics riding on public fears have been far more consequential than any external reality about what terrorist groups are up to. And much of the public perceptions have been inaccurate, as indicated by the way those perceptions about terrorist threats changed from Sept. 10 to Sept. 12.

Even the public perceptions about terrorism have not been a one-way progression. There has been some of the same swinging of the pendulum of public preferences as seen after previous major terrorist incidents. Although the swing after 9/11 was substantially higher than usual, we have already seen some of the pendulum's return in the opposite direction.

Criminal Behavior

Some measures taken and quietly accepted by Congressional overseers in the name of counterterrorism in the earliest years after 9/11, including bulk collection of electronic data by government agencies and torture of captives, later became subjects of controversy or condemnation.

The shock effect of 9/11 suddenly made the American public much more militant and more willing than before to assume costs and take risks in the name of national security. This was an emotional response, little diverted or contained by more sober calculation of what really would enhance national security, and with little attention to how some could exploit the emotions for other purposes.

The single most consequential result of all of this was the launching in 2003 of the war in Iraq. Although Iraq had nothing to do with 9/11, the surge in public militancy made it politically possible for the first time for neoconservatives to implement this longstanding item on their agenda.

The damage, including to matters related to U.S. national security, has been vast, including trillions in expenditures, the igniting of a continuing civil war in a major Middle Eastern state, the stoking of region-wide sectarian conflict, and – as far as terrorism is concerned – giving birth to the group now known as ISIS.

U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan was another legacy of 9/11, of course. Unlike Iraq, it was related to 9/11 with regard to Al Qaeda's presence in Afghanistan under the Taliban. But years ago, the intervention morphed from a counterterrorism operation into more of a nation-building operation. And now it has become America's longest war.

Concepts offered by the intelligentsia, and not just emotions felt by the public, have been substantially affected by 9/11. After much groping since the end of the Cold War for ways to characterize, in a satisfyingly simple manner, both an era and a global U.S. mission, the fight against terrorism finally seemed to fill the bill.

The unfortunate "war on terror" metaphor much affected policy discourse and thus policy itself. Counterterrorism came to be thought of in chiefly military terms, and conceiving of a war against a tactic meant a war without either geographic or temporal limits.

The aforementioned responses and effects will have more lasting consequences than the enhanced investigative powers, such as those in the Patriot Act, that have received much attention. There is natural resistance in American tradition and habits of thought to such enhancement. There is not comparable resistance to

fighting endlessly a foreign menace, even a menace defined as a tactic.

The main legacy of 9/11 has been less anything that terrorists have done to us than what we have done to ourselves, and to others, in response. On balance the legacy has not been beneficial.

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China and Russia Press Ahead, Together

The G20 summit in China marked a possible tectonic shift in global economic power, with China's President Xi pushing for a new model based on physical connectivity, like "One Belt, One Road," writes ex-British diplomat Alastair Crooke.

By Alastair Crooke

This time the G20 *was different*. Intentionally so. The Chinese had prepared it and planned it to be so. Yet, as always, with the G20 meetings, there was little that is tangible to show for it all. No big solutions. No "in the margins" progress on Syria, Ukraine, Yemen or on a supposed ploy to manage the oil market. Just the usual, pre-cooked, bland communiqué about the need for growth.

Mostly, participants rehearsed their familiar stances (this was so for the Syria and Ukraine discussions: Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Francois Hollande had a case of cold feet about talking to Russia's Vladimir Putin without Ukraine's Petro Poroshenko being present – as had originally been scheduled).

So, how was this G20 different? Well, if one listens carefully, one might just detect the footsteps of change – of a new "order" readying itself to step onto the stage (at the apposite moment). The sound of these footsteps was intentionally "softened" – designed to allow for a peaceful rise of a new global leadership. The watchword here was "change without upheaval."

What was different was that it was distinctly *China's G20*. China did not simply *host* the G20 for America to sweep in, give its "leadership" and stamp to proceedings, and then to fly off. China, at this G20, made it very plain that it was leading, and to make it clearer still, it made sure that the world

should see that the guest of honor was the Russian President, and not the American President (who regrettably experienced some technical difficulties that marred his ceremonial arrival). There was a deeper purpose here: to underline strategic co-ordination with Russia in the context of the display of Chinese leadership.

Lest this careful G20 choreography pass unnoticed in the West, President Xi had telegraphed the essence of his G20 message when he addressed the Chinese Communist Party on the anniversary of its founding, a month or so earlier.

On that anniversary, President Xi told the party that: “The world is on the brink of radical changes. We see how the E.U. is gradually crumbling, and the U.S. economy is collapsing. This will end in a new world order.”

‘Critical Juncture’

Xi said it again at the G20, when he told heads of state that the world was at a “critical juncture” owing to sluggish demand, volatile financial markets and feeble trade and investment levels. He warned against the current trend towards protectionism, and said that the threat derived from highly leveraged markets is grave.

He also did two further things: he suggested that globalization be defined more in a physical way, rather than in a Western financialized way. And he also proposed that the rules of trade should not be the prerogative of the U.S. alone, but agreed by the G20 Trade Ministers jointly (a task which they began by trying to agree nine key principles).

Additionally, Xi successfully pressed for the G20 to set out the necessary reforms for international financial institutions – in essence pressing for a more just distribution of power and status in international financial organizations.

In short, as conventional monetary measures (such as “quantitative easing” or QE) and unconventional measures such bond purchases by Central Banks have proved so ineffective in stimulating growth (as noted explicitly by China’s deputy Finance Minister), and since growth drivers from previous rounds of technical progress have faded too, then China’s recipe of creating physical connectivity through the *OBOR (One Belt, One Road)* initiative would seem to be the more promising way to re-ignite global growth, Xi proposed.

This, together with new trade rules, and reform of the financial order (currently aligned to American and E.U. interests), might make “change without upheaval” possible – i.e. this was the best prospect for change without financial collapse and economic shock (China and Russia hope). Left unsaid is

the corollary that without such policy realignments, both states foresee the inevitability of a further “shock,” similar to that of 2008.

Just to be clear – although softly said, both China and Russia are deprecating to the point of dire warnings of imminent crisis, the West’s mismanagement of the financial system, and of its over-reliance on further debt-driven financialized responses.

China is looking to physical investment, innovation and connectivity (maritime, rail, pipeline and electronic) to become the future drivers of growth, rather than more NIRP (negative interest rate policy), QE and bond purchasing. The West may not wholly disagree with Xi’s adverse diagnosis, but the latter has painted itself into a corner from which there is no obvious exit that does not risk triggering the very crisis that the West is seeking to kick further along the road. It sees “no alternative” (called “TINA” for “there is no alternative”).

And to be clear again, China is aligning the G20 against the American-claimed prerogative to set the rules of trade (through the TIPP and the TPP), and the ‘rules’ of the financial “system.” It seems that the G20 went along with both these Chinese proposals – Western “leadership” was an eroded asset at this G20.

Not Deferring to America

President Xi, therefore, has presented himself as a global leader who intends to take a lead, at least in economic matters, and not simply defer to the “indispensable nation” to hold the floor to itself.

Dmitry Kosyrev, a political analyst specializing on the Far East at the Russian news agency *RIA Novosti*, commenting on the summit in Hangzhou, wrote: “The whole idea of the peaceful rise of China is that this rise is not directed against any other country,” and this is reflected in the language: no fireworks, no harsh accusations.

But the soft language notwithstanding, “Xi’s G20” nonetheless amounts to a seismic shift in terms of Chinese policy (even if there is no “bang”): It represents the end for Deng Xiaoping’s maxim for China: that it should never take the lead, never reveal its true potential, and never overreach its potential. One could argue that Xi has just broken the maxim, on all three counts. China is taking a lead, reveling in its potential, and reaching ambitiously, with *OBOR* – One Belt, One Road.

So, what is one to make of this? The first point is that it is unlikely that the West is open to any such economic advice, and it is unlikely in any case, that it could extricate itself from its monetary policy “corner” – even if it wanted

so to do. The West is more intent on preserving the *status quo*, rather than in changing it.

Secondly, China itself faces the complications of decades of debt and easy-money driven growth, plus the urgent (and difficult) need to transition away from its old manufacturing base. China's own internal economic frailties may yet come to channel attention away from Xi's macro-reform perspective; or, worse, China may yet find itself at the eye of the next financial crisis.

Thirdly, *OBOR* faces quite some resistance from states who fear being cast in China's economic shadow. This may slow the unfolding of the *OBOR* project. Finally, America will never willingly yield its hold over the financial system – at least this side of a new global financial crisis.

But does this mean that "Xi's G20" was of little consequence for the West? No, Chinese officials likely understand their own constraints very well. They probably recognize too that the *OBOR* might be a touch utopian. In short, the comments from Xi about the Western economy – a view also shared in senior quarters in Moscow, incidentally – suggest that both see some further economic or credit "shock" as inexorable.

President Xi very courteously and politely simply has pointed out that the West is wearing no clothes (its monetary tools are broken drums), and that a new order will arise as a consequence. Its standard was struck at Hangzhou, and it seems that much of the G20 are gathering to its banner.

What may emerge in more concrete terms – it is too early to say – is the second strand to President Xi's global vision. In his address to the *Chinese Communist Party*, Xi said that relations of Russia and China should *not* be confined solely to economic relations, but rather, these two states should create an alternative military alliance: "we are now witnessing the aggressive actions by the United States against Russia and China. I believe that Russia and China may form an alliance before which NATO will be powerless," Xi said.

Military Partnership

In effect, Xi offered Russia a military partnership with China, and predicted that Russia and China together might be the leading lights of the new global order. Countering Western coercion through its multi-dimensional tools of today's hybrid warfare, in short, might be requisite to bringing the "new global order" into being – this seemed to be the thrust of Xi's message.

It is to Russia, however, that one must look to for a preliminary outline of thinking for the post-financialized world. On July 25, President Putin, as William Engdahl has highlighted: "mandated that an economic group called

the *Stolypin Club* prepare their proposals to spur a growth revival, to be presented to the government by the Fourth Quarter of this year. In doing so, Putin has rejected two influential liberal or neo-liberal economic factions [that associated with Alexei Kudrin, the former Finance Minister, and the Central Bank of Russia's monetarist governor, Elvira Nabiullina], which had brought Russia into a politically and economically dangerous recession."

The *Stolypin Club* was created by a group of Russian national economists in 2012 (named after Pyotr Arkadyevich Stolypin, Czar Nicholas II's reformist PM) to draft comprehensive alternative strategies to lessen Russia's dependence on the dollar world and to boost growth of the real economy. Engdahl writes:

"The Stolypin Group in many ways harkens back to the genius behind the German 'economic miracle' after 1871 ... Friederich List, the developer of the basic model of national economic development ... List's national economy historical-based approach was in direct counter-position to the then-dominant British Adam Smith free trade school.

"List's views were increasingly integrated into the German Reich economic strategy beginning under the Zollverein or German Customs Union in 1834, that unified one German internal domestic market. It created the basis by the 1870's for the most colossal emergence of Germany as an economic rival, exceeding Great Britain in every area by 1914."

A broad indication of this thinking centers around building on Russia's traditional economic strengths – even if this requires a certain amount of initial tariff protection for those industries and government-directed low-cost loans. Sergei Glazyev's (a prominent member of the *Stolypin Club*) 2015 plan, presented to the Russian Security Council, proposed to use Central Bank resources to provide targeted lending for businesses and industries by providing them with low subsidized interest rates, between 1-4 percent.

'On-shoring' Industries

The program also suggested that the state support private business through the creation of "reciprocal obligations" for the purchase of products and services at agreed-upon prices. In short, it emphasized greater economic autonomy, aimed at lessening Russia's vulnerability to external economic shock, or to geo-financial warfare. It is, in a word, all about "on-shoring" of industry and assets.

It is also about moving toward a sovereign monetary policy. As Engdahl has written, Glazyev proposed that the Ruble build up its strength as an alternative to the dollar system by buying gold as currency backing. He proposed that the

Central Bank be mandated to buy all gold production of Russian mines at a given price, in order to increase the ruble gold backing. (Russia today is the world's second largest gold producer.)

Earlier, this May, President Putin, speaking at the *Economic Council* Presidium, said as guidance to the Council: "The current dynamic shows us that the reserves and resources that served as driving forces for our economy at the start of the 2000's no longer produce the effects they used to. I have said in the past, and want to stress this point again now, *economic growth does not get underway again all on its own*. If we do not find new growth sources, we will see GDP growth of around zero, and then our possibilities in the social sector, national defense and security, and in other areas, will be considerably lower than what is needed for us to really develop the country and make progress."

It is not hard to perceive the deep convergence between Putin's mandate to the Economic Council, and the message from President Xi to the G20. What is particularly interesting, is that Putin seems to be leaning toward a national economic model – despite all the understandable Russian shying away from anything smacking of a return to Soviet Gosplan central planning.

But the key phrase surely is: "I have said in the past, and want to stress this point again now, economic growth does not get underway again all on its own."

Xi is saying the same. This is the direction in which the new wind is blowing: a different economics, global de-financialization coupled with (real economy) trading inter-connectivity.

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<http://www.conflictsforum.org/2016/xis-g20-and-a-world-on-the-brink-of-radical-change/>.

The Existential Madness of Putin-Bashing

Exclusive: Official Washington loves its Putin-bashing but demonizing the Russian leader stops a rational debate about U.S.-Russia relations and pushes the two nuclear powers toward an existential brink, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Arguably, the nuttiest neoconservative idea – among a long list of nutty ideas – has been to destabilize nuclear-armed Russia by weakening its economy, isolating it from Europe, pushing NATO up to its borders, demonizing its leadership, and sponsoring anti-government political activists inside Russia to promote “regime change.”

This breathtakingly dangerous strategy has been formulated and implemented with little serious debate inside the United States as the major mainstream news media and the neocons’ liberal-interventionist sidekicks have fallen in line much as they did during the run-up to the disastrous invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Except with Russia, the risks are even greater – conceivably, a nuclear war that could exterminate life on the planet. Yet, despite those stakes, there has been a cavalier – even goofy – attitude in the U.S. political/media mainstream about undertaking this new “regime change” project aimed at Moscow.

There is also little appreciation of how lucky the world was when the Soviet Union fell apart in 1991 without some Russian extremists seizing control of the nuclear codes and taking humanity to the brink of extinction. Back then, there was a mix of luck and restrained leadership, especially on the Soviet side.

Plus, there were at least verbal assurances from George H.W. Bush’s administration that the Soviet retreat from East Germany and Eastern Europe would not be exploited by NATO and that a new era of cooperation with the West could follow the break-up of the Soviet Union.

Instead, the United States dispatched financial “experts” – many from Harvard Business School – who arrived in Moscow with neoliberal plans for “shock therapy” to “privatize” Russia’s resources, which turned a handful of corrupt insiders into powerful billionaires, known as “oligarchs,” and the “Harvard Boys” into well-rewarded consultants.

But the result for the average Russian was horrific as the population experienced a drop in life expectancy unprecedented in a country not at war. While a Russian could expect to live to be almost 70 in the mid-1980s, that expectation had dropped to less than 65 by the mid-1990s.

The “Harvard Boys” were living the high-life with beautiful women, caviar and champagne in the lavish enclaves of Moscow – as the U.S.-favored President Boris Yeltsin drank himself into stupors – but there were reports of starvation in villages in the Russian heartland and organized crime murdered people on the street with near impunity.

Meanwhile, Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush cast aside any restraint regarding Russia’s national pride and historic fears by expanding NATO across

Eastern Europe, including the incorporation of former Soviet republics.

In the 1990s, the “triumphalist” neocons formulated a doctrine for permanent U.S. global dominance with their thinking reaching its most belligerent form during George W. Bush’s presidency, which asserted the virtually unlimited right for the United States to intervene militarily anywhere in the world regardless of international law and treaties.

How Despair Led to Putin

Without recognizing the desperation and despair of the Russian people during the Yeltsin era – and the soaring American arrogance in the 1990s – it is hard to comprehend the political rise and enduring popularity of Vladimir Putin, who became president after Yeltsin abruptly resigned on New Year’s Eve 1999. (In declining health, Yeltsin died on April 23, 2007).

Putin, a former KGB officer with a strong devotion to his native land, began to put Russia’s house back in order. Though he collaborated with some oligarchs, he reined in others by putting them in jail for corruption or forcing them into exile.

Putin cracked down on crime and terrorism, often employing harsh means to restore order, including smashing Islamist rebels seeking to take Chechnya out of the Russian Federation.

Gradually, Russia regained its economic footing and the condition of the average Russian improved. By 2012, Russian life expectancy had rebounded to more than 70 years. Putin also won praise from many Russians for reestablishing the country’s national pride and reasserting its position on the world stage.

Though a resurgent Russia created friction with the neocon designs for permanent U.S. world domination, Putin represented a side of Russian politics that favored cooperation with the West. He particularly hoped that he could work closely with President Barack Obama, who likewise indicated his desire to team up with Russia to make progress on thorny international issues.

In 2012, Obama was overheard on an open mike telling Putin’s close political ally, then-President Dmitri Medvedev, that “after my election, I have more flexibility,” suggesting greater cooperation with Russia. (Because of the Russian constitution barring someone from serving more than two consecutive terms as president, Medvedev, who had been prime minister, essentially swapped jobs with Putin for four years.)

Obama’s promise was not entirely an empty one. His relationship with the Russian leadership warmed as the two powers confronted common concerns over security

issues, such as convincing Syria to surrender its chemical-weapons arsenal in 2013 and persuading Iran to accept tight limitations on its nuclear program in 2014.

In an extraordinary op-ed in The New York Times on Sept. 11, 2013, Putin described his relationship with Obama as one of “growing trust” while disagreeing with the notion of “American “exceptionalism.” In the key last section that he supposedly wrote himself, Putin said:

“My working and personal relationship with President Obama is marked by growing trust. I appreciate this. I carefully studied his address to the nation on Tuesday. And I would rather disagree with a case he made on American exceptionalism, stating that the United States’ policy is ‘what makes America different. It’s what makes us exceptional.’

“It is extremely dangerous to encourage people to see themselves as exceptional, whatever the motivation. There are big countries and small countries, rich and poor, those with long democratic traditions and those still finding their way to democracy. Their policies differ, too. We are all different, but when we ask for the Lord’s blessings, we must not forget that God created us equal.”

Offending the Neocons

Though Putin may have thought he was simply contributing to a worthy international debate in the spirit of the U.S. Declaration of Independence’s assertion that “all men are created equal,” his objection to “American exceptionalism” represented fighting words to America’s neocons.

Instead of engaging in mushy multilateral diplomacy, muscular neocons saw America as above the law and lusted for bombing campaigns against Syria and Iran – with the goal of notching two more “regime change” solutions on their belts.

Thus, the neocons and their liberal-interventionist fellow-travelers came to see Putin as a major and unwelcome obstacle to their dreams of permanent U.S. dominance over the planet, which they would promote through what amounted to permanent warfare. (The main distinction between neocons and liberal interventionists is that the former cites “democracy promotion” as its rationale and the latter justifies war under the mantle of “humanitarianism.”)

Barely two weeks after Putin’s op-ed in the Times, a prominent neocon, Carl Gershman, the longtime president of the U.S.-government-funded National Endowment for Democracy, issued what amounted to a rejoinder in The Washington Post on Sept. 26, 2013.

Gershman’s op-ed made clear that U.S. policy should take aim at Ukraine, a

historically and strategically sensitive country on Russia's doorstep where the Russian nation made a stand against the Tatars in the 1600s and where the Nazis launched Operation Barbarossa, the devastating 1941 invasion which killed some 4 million Soviet soldiers and led to some 26 million Soviet dead total.

In the Post, Gershman wrote that "Ukraine is the biggest prize," but made clear that Putin was the ultimate target: "Ukraine's choice to join Europe will accelerate the demise of the ideology of Russian imperialism that Putin represents. Russians, too, face a choice, and Putin may find himself on the losing end not just in the near abroad but within Russia itself."

To advance this cause, NED alone was funding scores of projects that funneled hundreds of thousands of dollars to Ukrainian political activists and media outlets, creating what amounted to a shadow political structure that could help stir up unrest when the Ukrainian government didn't act as desired, i.e., when elected President Viktor Yanukovich balked at a European economic plan that included cuts in pensions and heat subsidies as demanded by the International Monetary Fund.

When Yanukovich sought more time to negotiate a less onerous deal, U.S.-backed protests swept into Kiev's Maidan square. Though representing genuine sentiment among many western Ukrainians for increased ties to Europe, neo-Nazi and ultra-nationalist street fighters gained control of the uprising and began firebombing police.

Despite the mounting violence, the protests were cheered on by neocon Sen. John McCain, U.S. Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt and Assistant Secretary of State for Europe Victoria Nuland, the wife of neocon stalwart Robert Kagan, a co-founder of the Project for the New American Century, which was a major promoter of the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

In a speech to Ukrainian business leaders on Dec. 13, 2013, Nuland reminded them that the United States had invested \$5 billion in their "European aspirations." By early February 2014, in an intercepted phone call, she was discussing with Pyatt who should lead a new government – "Yats is the guy," she declared referring to Arseniy Yatsenyuk. Nuland and Pyatt continued the conversation with exchanges about how to "glue this thing" or "midwife this thing," respectively.

A Western-backed Putsch

The violence worsened on Feb. 20, 2014, when mysterious snipers opened fire on police and demonstrators sparking clashes that killed scores, including police officers and protesters. Though later evidence suggested that the shootings were a provocation by the neo-Nazis, the immediate reaction in the mainstream Western

media was to blame Yanukovych.

Though Yanukovych agreed to a compromise on Feb. 21 that would reduce his powers and speed up new elections so he could be voted out of office, he was still painted as a tyrannical villain. As neo-Nazi and other rightists chased him and his government from power on Feb. 22, the West hailed the unconstitutional putsch as “legitimate” and a victory for “democracy.”

The coup, however, prompted resistance from ethnic Russian areas of Ukraine, particularly in the east and south. With the aid of Russian troops who were stationed at the Russian naval base in Sevastopol, the Crimeans held a referendum and voted by 96 percent to leave Ukraine and rejoin the Russian Federation, a move accepted by Putin and the Kremlin.

However, the West’s mainstream media called the referendum a “sham” and Crimea’s secession from Ukraine became Putin’s “invasion” – although the Russian troops were already in Crimea as part of the basing agreement and the referendum, though hastily organized, clearly represented the overwhelming will of the Crimean people, a judgment corroborated by a variety of subsequent polls.

Ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine also rose up against the new regime in Kiev, prompting more accusations in the West about “Russian aggression.” Anyone who raised the possibility that these areas, Yanukovych’s political strongholds, might simply be rejecting what they saw as an illegal political coup in Kiev was dismissed as a “Putin apologist” or a “Moscow stooge.”

While Official Washington and its mainstream media rallied the world in outrage against Putin and Russia, the new authorities in Kiev slipped Nuland’s choice, Yatsenyuk, into the post of prime minister where he pushed through the onerous IMF “reforms,” making the already hard lives of Ukrainians even harder. (The unpopular Yatsenyuk eventually resigned his position.)

Despite the obvious risks of supporting a putsch on Russia’s border, the neocons achieved their political goal of driving a huge wedge between Putin and Obama, whose quiet cooperation had been so troublesome for the neocon plan for violent “regime change” in Syria and Iran.

The successful neocon play in Ukraine also preempted possible U.S.-Russian cooperation in trying to impose an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement that would have established a Palestinian state and would have stymied Israel’s plans for gobbling up Palestinian territory by expanding Jewish settlements and creating an apartheid-style future for the indigenous Arabs, confining them to a few cantons surrounded by de facto Israeli territory.

Obama’s timid failure to explain and defend his productive collaboration with

Putin enabled the neocons to achieve another goal of making Putin an untouchable, a demonized foreign leader routinely mocked and smeared by the mainstream Western news media. Along with Putin's demonization, the neocons have sparked a new Cold War that will not only extend today's "permanent warfare" indefinitely but dramatically increase its budgetary costs with massive new investments in strategic weapons.

Upping the Nuclear Ante

By targeting Putin and Russia, the neocons have upped the ante when it comes to their "regime change" agenda. No longer satisfied with inflicting "regime change" in countries deemed hostile to Israel – Iraq, Syria, Libya, Iran, etc. – the neocons have raised their sights on Russia.

In that devil-may-care approach, the neocons are joined by prominent "liberal interventionists," such as billionaire currency speculator George Soros, who pulls the strings of many "liberal" organizations that he bankrolls.

In February 2015, Soros laid out his "Russia-regime-change" vision in the liberal New York Review of Books with an alarmist call for Europe "to wake up and recognize that it is under attack from Russia" – despite the fact that it has been NATO encroaching on Russia's borders, not the other way around.

But Soros's hysteria amounted to a clarion call to his many dependents among supposedly independent "non-governmental organizations" to take up the goal of destabilizing Russia and driving Putin from office. As a currency speculator, Soros recognizes the value of inflicting economic pain as well as military punishment on a target country.

"The financial crisis in Russia and the body bags [of supposedly Russian soldiers] from Ukraine have made President Putin politically vulnerable," Soros wrote, urging Europe to keep up the economic pressure on Russia while working to transform Ukraine into an economic/political success story, saying:

"...if Europe rose to the challenge and helped Ukraine not only to defend itself but to become a land of promise, Putin could not blame Russia's troubles on the Western powers. He would be clearly responsible and he would either have to change course or try to stay in power by brutal repression, cowing people into submission. If he fell from power, an economic and political reformer would be likely to succeed him."

But Soros recognized the other possibility: that a Western-driven destabilization of Russia and a failed state in Ukraine could either bolster Putin or lead to his replacement by an extreme Russian nationalist, someone far-harder-line than Putin.

With Ukraine's continued failure, Soros wrote, "President Putin could convincingly argue that Russia's problems are due to the hostility of the Western powers. Even if he fell from power, an even more hardline leader like Igor Sechin or a nationalist demagogue would succeed him."

Yet, Soros fails to appreciate how dangerous his schemes could be to make Russia's economy scream so loudly that Putin would be swept aside by some political upheaval. As Soros suggests, the Russian people could turn to an extreme nationalist, not to some pliable Western-approved politician.

Protecting Mother Russia

Especially after suffering the depravations of the Yeltsin years, the Russian people might favor an extremist who would take a tough stance against the West and might see brandishing the nuclear arsenal as the only way to protect Mother Russia.

Still, Official Washington can't get enough of demonizing Putin. A year ago, Obama's White House – presumably to show how much the President disdains Putin, too – made fun of how Putin sits with his legs apart.

White House spokesman Josh Earnest cited a photo of the Russian president sitting next to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. "President Putin was striking a now-familiar pose of less-than-perfect posture and unbuttoned jacket and, you know, knees spread far apart to convey a particular image," Earnest said, while ignoring the fact that Netanyahu was sitting with his legs wide apart, too.

Amid this anything-goes Putin-bashing, The New York Times, The Washington Post and now Hillary Clinton's campaign have escalated their anti-Putin rhetoric, especially since Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump has offered some praise of Putin as a "strong" leader.

Despite the barrage of cheap insults emanating from U.S. political and media circles, Putin has remained remarkably cool-headed, refusing to react in kind. Oddly, as much as the American political/media establishment treats Putin as a madman, Official Washington actually counts on his even-temper to avoid a genuine existential crisis for the world.

If Putin were what the U.S. mainstream media and politicians describe – a dangerous lunatic – the endless baiting of Putin would be even more irresponsible. Yet, even with many people privately realizing that Putin is a much more calculating leader than their negative propaganda makes him out to be, there still could be a limit to Putin's patience.

Or the neocons and liberal hawks might succeed in provoking a violent uprising in Moscow that ousts Putin. However, if that were to happen, the odds – as even Soros acknowledges – might favor a Russian nationalist coming out on top and thus in control of the nuclear codes.

In many ways, it's not Putin who should worry Americans but the guy that might follow Putin.

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

Pushing NATO to Russia's Southern Flank

Exclusive: In pursuit of a new Cold War with Russia, Official Washington wants to expand NATO into the ex-Soviet republic of Georgia, creating the potential for nuclear war to protect a sometimes reckless “ally,” writes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

A Republican leader calling for a new military base in Georgia is hardly newsworthy – the state already has more than a dozen such installations. But when it's the speaker of parliament in the country of Georgia, who belongs to that nation's Republican Party [calling](#) for a U.S. military base on Russia's southern border, and for a constitutional amendment to guarantee his country's commitment to NATO, that should raise some eyebrows.

Although major U.S. papers didn't report that news this month, it reflects another escalation of NATO's [dangerous confrontation](#) with Moscow. Eight years ago, Georgia's intense campaign to join NATO – combined with its reckless [aggression](#) against the breakaway territory of South Ossetia – helped [spark](#) a brief but bloody war with Vladimir Putin's Russia.

Today, the U.S.-led military alliance is once again promoting its [expansion plans](#) in Georgia and other countries on Russia's periphery as if the Cold War had never ended.

On Sept. 7, ambassadors from all the NATO countries drove along George W. Bush Avenue to downtown Tbilisi, Georgia's capital, to meet with Georgian leaders about [security cooperation](#) and progress toward the country's full integration

into NATO.

At the end of the two-day visit, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg declared “the bonds between NATO and Georgia are stronger than ever.” His news release noted that “the Alliance is committed to helping Georgia move towards NATO membership,” and that “NATO experts in Georgia are providing advice on defense planning, education and cyber security, while Allies have increased joint training and exercises with Georgian troops.”

Just days earlier, the U.S. Marine Corps announced that it had joined “NATO allies and partners from the Baltics and Black Sea regions” in the Republic of Georgia to conduct live-fire military exercises with heavy tanks, armored vehicles, and anti-armor TOW missiles. And in July, Secretary of State John Kerry visited Georgia before joining President Obama at a NATO meeting in Poland to sign a new security cooperation agreement with Georgia.

All of these moves followed President Obama’s request to Congress in February to quadruple U.S. military spending in Europe next year, including military equipment to help Georgia in “countering Russian aggression.” Days later, NATO dispatched ships and sailors to Georgia for joint naval exercises in the Black Sea.

Moscow’s ambassador to NATO complained, “NATO is trying to draw us into a state of Cold War by inflating the myth about the threat from the East and justifying the necessity to deter Russia.”

NATO and the Roots of Conflict

NATO’s relentless expansion toward Russia – in violation of promises by Western leaders a quarter century ago – is a major cause of recent dangerous military escalation by the world’s major nuclear powers. In 2008, NATO extended membership invitations to both Georgia and Ukraine – two countries on Russia’s direct borders. George Friedman, CEO of the private intelligence firm Stratfor, explained that year why Moscow reacted with such hostility:

“US Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton had promised the Russians that NATO would not expand into the former Soviet empire. That promise had already been broken in 1998 by NATO’s expansion to Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic – and again in the 2004 expansion, which included not only the rest of the former Soviet satellites in what is now Central Europe, but also the three Baltic states, which had been components of the Soviet Union.

“The Russians had tolerated all that, but the discussion of including Ukraine in NATO represented to them a fundamental threat to Russia’s national security. It would, in their calculations, have rendered Russia indefensible and threatened

to destabilize the Russian Federation itself. When the United States went so far as to suggest that Georgia be included as well, bringing NATO deeper into the Caucasus, the Russian conclusion – publicly stated – was that the United States in particular intended to encircle and break Russia.”

Conflict with Russia ensued that August when, according to official E.U. investigators, Georgia’s authoritarian president, Mikheil Saakashvili, ordered the shelling of the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali, massacring civilians (and Russian peacekeepers) with cluster munitions. The resulting five-day war with Russia killed 850 people and displaced 100,000.

South Ossetia and nearby Abkhazia had broken away from Georgia in the early 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Their inhabitants were alarmed by the fanatical nationalism of Georgia’s thuggish first president, who declared that subversive minorities “should be chopped up [and] burned out with a red-hot iron from the Georgian nation.” South Ossetia alone lost more than one percent of its population to Georgian arms in 1991 and 1992.

President Saakashvili’s attempt to retake that territory in 2008 reflected his understandable overestimation of Washington’s willingness to back him up. Perhaps he listened too much to his paid lobbyist Randy Scheunemann, a neoconservative leader and chief foreign policy adviser to U.S. presidential candidate John McCain. Hardly had the war begun than McCain and other hawks rushed to blame Russia as the aggressor. The Arizona senator declared, “we are all Georgians.”

In addition, the New York Times observed just days after the war broke out, “The United States took a series of steps that emboldened Georgia: sending advisers to build up the Georgian military, including an exercise last month with more than 1,000 American troops; pressing hard to bring Georgia into the NATO orbit; championing Georgia’s fledgling democracy along Russia’s southern border; and loudly proclaiming its support for Georgia’s territorial integrity in the battle with Russia over Georgia’s separatist enclaves.”

Saakashvilli may also have calculated that Israel, a major arms supplier to Georgia, would use its political clout to get Washington to intervene against Russia. Georgia’s defense minister, a former Israeli, said “We are now in a fight against the great Russia, and our hope is to receive assistance from the White House because Georgia cannot survive on its own.”

The Bush administration airlifted 1,800 Georgian troops from Iraq and guarded Tbilisi airport against Russian attack but did not save invading Georgian forces from defeat.

Fueling a New Cold War

Although Russia came out ahead, some Russian analysts concluded that their failure to teach Georgian leaders enough of a lesson in 2008 contributed to the recent conflict in Ukraine, where a violent putsch in 2014 installed an anti-Russian regime bent on joining NATO. As one Russian expert at Moscow State University observed last year:

“The Saakashvili regime survived, it was not punished. What is happening in Ukraine is a direct result of the fact that in 2008 we did not pursue things in Georgia to the end. The junta in Kiev feels that it has absolute impunity, it is confident that Russia will not overthrow and punish it. That is why it is so brazen. And the West, seeing that Russia did not stick it out to the end, decided that it can do what it wants in Ukraine.”

(Lending support to that view, former President Saakashvili decamped last year for Ukraine, after being charged at home with a variety of offenses including embezzlement, violent crackdowns on opposition protests and the illegal seizure of a critical TV channel. The Kiev regime appointed him governor of the Odessa region and he has since become a major national political figure.)

In the West, the 2008 war fueled more anti-Russian sentiment, despite the consensus of most authorities that Georgia initiated the conflict. NATO roundly condemned Russia for recognizing South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states, setting the stage for continued tension for Moscow. In 2009, the newly elected President Obama began a training program for Georgian military forces.

In 2011, McCain’s buddy, South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham, engineered a unanimous voice vote of the U.S. Senate to condemn Russia for recognizing the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia (a vote that scandalized not only Moscow but conservative commentator Patrick Buchanan).

The same year, Hollywood actors Andy Garcia (playing Saakashvili), Val Kilmer and Heather Graham starred in the movie bomb “5 Days of War,” co-produced by a Georgian minister, about “a small country fighting for independence and freedom.”

Meanwhile, the neo-conservative opinion editors of the *Washington Post* have stoked the fires by running columns championing Georgia’s “enthusiastic embrace of Westernization,” its key role as a bulwark against Russian “domination” and “hegemony,” and the importance of hastening its entry into NATO.

The *Post* even ran a column by Saakashvili brazenly accusing Putin of trying to conquer Georgia in 2008, citing parallels with Nazi Germany’s occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1938. The paper’s own editorial writers call for “tougher

sanctions” against Russia to “deter Mr. Putin from taking further aggressive action” against Georgia and other neighboring countries.

Georgia’s ability to glean so much fawning attention becomes less mysterious in light of the fact that it is one of the top 10 foreign spenders on lobbying in the United States, including a \$50,000 monthly retainer to the uber-lobbying firm, Podesta Group.

Among the few dissenters are foreign policy “realists” like the CATO Institute’s Ted Galen Carpenter, who have the temerity to question the rationale for NATO in the post-Soviet age. Citing the cost and danger of growing U.S. commitments to that alliance, he wrote last month, *a propos* of countries like Georgia:

“The only thing worse than committing the United States to defend a small, weak, largely useless ally is doing so when that ally is highly vulnerable to another major power. . . Alliances with such client states are perfect transmission belts to transform a local, limited conflict into a global showdown between nuclear-armed powers.”

His words have gone largely unheeded. America’s dangerous commitment to Georgia is taking place nominally in public but far below the radar of most voters. So let me propose a serious question for the next presidential debate: “What would you do, if you were elected, about Tbilisi?”

Jonathan Marshall is author or co-author of five books on international affairs, including The Lebanese Connection: Corruption, Civil War and the International Drug Traffic (Stanford University Press, 2012). Some of his previous articles for Consortiumnews were “Risky Blowback from Russian Sanctions”; “Neocons Want Regime Change in Iran”; “Saudi Cash Wins France’s Favor”; “The Saudis’ Hurt Feelings”; “Saudi Arabia’s Nuclear Bluster”; “The US Hand in the Syrian Mess”; and “Hidden Origins of Syria’s Civil War.”]

How Israel Stole the Bomb

Exclusive: When Israel launched a covert scheme to steal material and secrets to build a nuclear bomb, U.S. officials looked the other way and obstructed investigations, as described in a book reviewed by James DiEugenio.

By James DiEugenio

In 1968, CIA Director Richard Helms was presented with a disturbing National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) stating that Israel had obtained atomic weapons, a

dangerous development that occurred earlier than the CIA had anticipated.

It was particularly dangerous because just the year before, the Six Day War had marked the beginning of open hostilities between the Israelis and Arab nation states. To prevail, Israel had launched preemptive air attacks against Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Iraq at the start of the conflict. Considering that violent backdrop, Helms immediately arranged a meeting with President Lyndon Johnson to inform him of this troubling milestone.

The man who had prepared the NIE and gave it to Helms was the CIA's chief science and technology officer, Carl Duckett. After Helms met with Johnson, the CIA Director told Duckett about the President's rather odd reaction. LBJ did not get upset, and he did not order an investigation into how it happened. Further, he did not tell Helms to let both the Defense Department and State Department know about it so they could establish intelligence inquiries or consider sanctions.

Instead, Johnson did the opposite. He told Helms to keep the news secret and specifically told the Director *not* to let the secretaries of State or Defense know about it.

Helms obeyed the orders of his Commander in Chief, but he decided to talk to the FBI about how this development had occurred earlier than expected. Thus begins Roger Mattson's *Stealing the Atom Bomb: How Denial and Deception Armed Israel*, the riveting story of duplicity, betrayal, cover-ups and deceit.

As the book shows, the cover-ups and duplicity did not just come from Israel and its agents in America. The deceit also came from men inside the American government who, for whatever reasons, decided to cast a blind eye on what was really happening under their jurisdiction, even after they had been alerted to it.

What Mattson reveals is no less than an atomic heist – one that could have been prevented if men in high positions had done their duty.

Highly Enriched Uranium

After Johnson told Helms not to tell State or Defense, the CIA Director called Attorney General Ramsey Clark, because what made this news even more ominous – and a potential crime – was what the CIA had discovered when it conducted a chemical test around the Israeli nuclear reactor at Dimona, in the Negev desert.

Duckett had concluded that Israel had something that they should not have possessed at that time: HEU, or highly enriched uranium, which could only be produced by one of the five major powers that already had nuclear weapons.

But the test had also revealed characteristics that showed the material had originated in the United States. (Mattson, p. 97) Specifically, the HEU came from Portsmouth, Ohio and then was further processed at a plant in Apollo, Pennsylvania.

The importance of this information was that the HEU was processed to such a degree – well over 90 percent U 235 – that it was classified as weapons grade uranium. The technical term for it is the acronym SNM, or Special Nuclear Material, meaning that it is fissile: it can easily be split with neutrons. Although the Portsmouth plant is shut down today, beginning in 1956 it did produce weapons-grade uranium.

It was in Apollo, Pennsylvania, that the trail of the SNM and the crime of its diversion becomes exceedingly suspect. The plant that did the further processing of HEU, and the ultimate shipping, was named Nuclear Materials and Equipment Corporation, or NUMEC, and there were a number of reasons why suspicion had centered on NUMEC even before Helms called Clark.

First, NUMEC had a rather unreliable record when it came to keeping track of HEU and other materials that had been given to it through the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC). The way the system worked is that the particular company would forward its business requests – from either private or governmental agencies – to the AEC. The AEC would then estimate how much nuclear material NUMEC would need to fulfill the contract. If a company was using up more material than the AEC properly estimated, that company would be fined quite a lot of money. If the shortages persisted, the AEC and the FBI could then open up an investigation.

With CIA's discoveries, the possibility presented itself that a diversion of the nuclear material could be taking place. Either someone from the outside was stealing the material, or someone on the inside was embezzling it.

As Mattson shows with charts, graphs and testimony, NUMEC had an extraordinarily bad record in this regard. The company was eventually fined over \$2 million for missing materials, which, with inflation factored in, would be about \$15 million today. Mattson adduces that from 1959 to 1977, about 345 kilograms of HEU went missing from NUMEC, which translates to well over 700 pounds. (ibid, p. 286)

Explaining the Deficits

In just one year, there was a loss of over 56 kilograms (or about 123 pounds). The company made up all sorts of rationales as to why this much HEU was missing, including losses during the mechanical processing. But as the author points out, there are two problems with this accounting.

First, no other plant in America reported losses of this magnitude. The AEC

concluded that the losses at Apollo were more than double what they were at any other comparably sized atomic plant in the U.S. (ibid, p. 65)

Secondly, even if one chalks up some of the missing HEU to a processing loss, that still does not account for the entire record of NUMEC. Mattson figures that, even giving the company the benefit of the doubt, it still leaves about 200 pounds of missing HEU. (ibid, p. 67) That's enough for about six atomic bombs, larger than the one used on Hiroshima.

As Mattson reports, what makes NUMEC an even more intriguing suspect is the fact that the company had some legitimate business transactions with Israel, concerning the irradiation of plants. And these legitimate packages were sent at about the time the HEU went missing. Further, the inventory records at NUMEC were extremely sloppy and some appear to have been destroyed in direct violation of the AEC code, meaning NUMEC should have been cited, but wasn't. (ibid, p. 75)

That brings us to the founders of the NUMEC plant in Apollo, Pennsylvania, a small town of approximately 1,600 people that lies about 30 miles northeast of Pittsburgh. In 1955, the Apollo Steel Plant was purchased by David Lowenthal. Two years later, Lowenthal and Zalman Shapiro cooperated in forming NUMEC.

Shapiro, a very accomplished metallurgist who lived next door to Lowenthal, had been employed for a number of years at the nearby Bettis Atomic Power Laboratory, which supported the AEC's Office of Naval Reactors.

In May 1958, Lowenthal merged Apollo Steel with the San Toy Mining Company in Maine. San Toy then changed its name to Apollo Industries, with the main operating officers of this new corporation Morton Chatkin, Ivan Novick and Lowenthal. (ibid, p. 43)

The board comprised these three men plus Shapiro, and later others. In the early 1960s, the steel plant's name was changed to Raychord Steel, but with the decline of the steel industry, Raychord became a subsidiary company to Apollo.

Ties to Zionist Groups

Novick, one of Apollo's officers, later served as national president of the Zionist Organization of America, in which Chatkin, another officer, also held a leadership role. The ZOA was a member group of the American Zionist Council, which later became the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, which today is considered to be the leading lobbying group for Israel and one of the most powerful lobbying groups in Washington.

Novick also later served as a personal liaison between Ronald Reagan's White House and the administration of Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin.

Lowenthal, who was born in Poland in 1921, came to America in 1932 and served in the American armed forces in World War II, eventually becoming a citizen in 1945. After the war, he worked with the Haganah, the Jewish paramilitary force inside Palestine, on the Zionist mission to ferry Jews into Palestine in 1947 on board the boat SS Exodus.

Since almost none of the passengers had legal immigration certificates to enter Palestine, the British Royal Navy, which ran the Palestinian Mandate, seized the ship and deported its passengers back to Europe. Lowenthal's mission was a practical failure, but a tremendous propaganda success for the Zionist cause. The event was novelized by author Leon Uris in the number-one best-selling book *Exodus*, which was published in 1958 and was made into a movie two years later by director Otto Preminger, starring Paul Newman.

Lowenthal later served on board the ship Pan York, which also attempted to evade the British quarantine but was captured in Cyprus with the crew arrested, including Lowenthal. He escaped and fled to Palestine where he served with the Haganah during the war that broke out there in 1948 after the British abandoned the mandate early. (ibid, p. 44)

Lowenthal ended up serving under the legendary Meir Amit, the leading intelligence officer in Israel during the 1960s. Lowenthal was also personally acquainted with future prime ministers David Ben Gurion and Golda Meir.

Nuclear Experience

Shapiro, who had advanced degrees in chemistry and metallurgy from Johns Hopkins, worked for Westinghouse and the Navy on the nuclear reactor that powered America's first atomic submarine, the Nautilus. Shapiro also helped develop the fuel for the first commercial nuclear reactor, the Shippingport Atomic Power Station in Pennsylvania.

Like Lowenthal, Novick and Chatkin, Shapiro also was active in supporting Israeli causes, although his activities had a slightly educational tone. He was a member of the Technion Society, which supported advances in Israeli science and technology. Indeed, he became an Honorary Life Member of the group.

He also was a Director of Hillel, an international organization that tries to acquaint Jewish students with each other on campuses and organize student trips to Israel. Like Novick and Chatkin, he was a member of the Zionist Organization of America. Many years later, it was discovered that Shapiro was on the Board of Governors of the Israeli Intelligence Center, which honors spies for Israel who clandestinely advanced the interests of the state. (Mattson, p. 84)

Beyond the individual backgrounds of these four men, there was also something

else which should have attracted the U.S. intelligence community's attention prior to Helms's meeting with President Johnson. While running NUMEC, both men – Shapiro and Lowenthal – were taking trips to Israel and had contacts with high officials of Israeli intelligence as well as Israel's version of the AEC.

Further, NUMEC had a guest worker, an Israeli metallurgist, in its plant, as part of an agreement NUMEC had with Israel to serve as a training consultancy which resulted in the formation of a joint company with Israel called ISORAD that initially was to deal with irradiation of citrus fruits through gamma rays. But the FBI later discovered that NUMEC also had contracts with Israel for the development of plutonium oxide as fuel elements in nuclear reactors. (Mattson, pgs. 80-81)

Since Lowenthal had so many acquaintances in high positions, he often visited Israel, including a most curious instance at about the time he purchased Apollo Steel in 1956. It was at this time that Israel was making decisions about foreign sourcing for nuclear materials and technology.

A year later, NUMEC was formed and Shapiro immediately applied for a license from the AEC to process uranium fuel in a building formerly occupied by Apollo Steel. John Hadden, CIA station chief in Tel Aviv, later noted the unusual coincidence of these events on two continents. (ibid, p. 45)

Israeli Visits

But declassified FBI files reveal that the visitations were not just one way, i.e. from Apollo, Pennsylvania, to Israel. There were also visits and meetings of Israeli officials who went to Apollo.

At the time of those meetings, there were four main branches of Israeli intelligence. The Shin Bet corresponded with the Federal Bureau of Investigation; the Mossad with the Central Intelligence Agency; the Aman roughly with the Defense Intelligence Agency; and the LAKAM, which was responsible for security at Dimona and for procuring scientific and technological data from Western sources. (Mattson, p. 108)

In the mid-1960s, France started scaling back its support for the Dimona reactor, which was supposedly a research facility. With France's pullback, LAKAM began seeking out and purchasing parts and supplies from other sources to complete the project.

LAKAM's job included concealing the reactor's true function – the development of a nuclear bomb – from American inspections. (ibid) During an American inspection in 1964, LAKAM even created a "Potemkin village" control room to deceive the visitors.

Unlike American intelligence, Israel also had a special operations unit that served all branches. Established in 1957, it was run by Rafi Eitan and his deputy, Avraham Bendor. (In the 1980s, Eitan became notorious for the Jonathan Pollard spy case, in which Pollard, a navy intelligence employee, was paid tens of thousands of dollars to spy for Israel in the United States with Eitan his ultimate control agent.)

In September 1968, the AEC told the FBI that they were giving permission to NUMEC for a visit by four Israelis, including Eitan and Bendor. However, in the application to the AEC, the occupations of the two were disguised. Eitan was said to be a chemist in the Defense Ministry; Bendor supposedly worked for the electronics division. (ibid, p. 110)

The other two men were Avraham Hermoni, who was billed as a Scientific Counselor in the Israeli Embassy in Washington, and Dr. Ephraim Biegun, described as working in the Division of Electronics for Defense. Again, this was misleading. Hermoni did, at times, work out of Washington's Israeli Embassy, but his prime and most important function was overseeing and planning Israel's nuclear weapons program, which he did from 1959-69. Biegun was actually head of the technical division of the Mossad from 1960-70.

CIA Suspicions

After the visit, NUMEC reported that the four men were in Apollo to buy thermo-electrical generator systems. (ibid, p. 119) Why Eitan and Bendor had to be there for that purpose is not readily apparent.

CIA officer John Hadden thought the real reason for the visit was that Shapiro was divulging top-secret technical information about plutonium manufacture – and that he was aided in this by the visiting Israeli scientist working at NUMEC. The FBI later came to agree that this was most likely the true reason for the visit. (ibid, p. 120)

Hermoni revisited Shapiro in November 1968, but the capstone to the visits to Apollo came later that month. As noted previously, France had cut back on its support for Dimona in the mid-1960s, halting the supply of uranium fuel in 1967.

In late November 1968, the Mossad arranged a covert operation called Operation Plumbat, which employed a front company in West Germany to purchase 200 tons of uranium yellowcake from Belgium. The transaction was approved by Euratom, the European organization controlling such transactions, but once the transport ship set sail for the port of Genoa, Italy, it was intercepted by another ship used by the Mossad. When the original ship reached port, the hull was empty.

The timing of this operation, on the heels of the mysterious visits by Israeli

intelligence agents to Apollo, seems to constitute powerful circumstantial evidence of Israeli intentions.

Then, right after the completion of the Plumbat mission, who arrived in Israel? None other than Zalman Shapiro. The FBI discovered that in November 1968, in addition to the personal visits, Shapiro was in frequent phone contact with a number of Israeli intelligence agents, including Hermoni. (Mattson, p. 126)

A Longstanding Goal

Israel's long trail of subterfuge and duplicity was part of a longstanding goal. As early as 1948, David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, stated that what Einstein, Teller and Oppenheimer did for America, they could easily do for Israel, since they were all Jews. In fact, he offered Einstein Israeli citizenship, which the great man declined. (ibid, p. 22) Ben-Gurion then had two meetings with Oppenheimer and numerous ones with Teller.

Ultimately, Israel settled on David Bergmann, a brilliant chemist whom Ben-Gurion appointed first chief of the Israel Atomic Energy Commission in 1952. By 1955, Bergmann was essentially running the day-to-day operations of Israel's atomic program.

In a conversation with the American ambassador, Bergmann said the Israeli science education program was adequate in physics and chemistry but weak in engineering and non-existent in metallurgy. He also revealed that the design he had laid out for a reactor was the same as the one at Shippingport, Pennsylvania, an intriguing clue because Shapiro was a metallurgist and had worked on the Shippingport power station.

Indeed, Shapiro eventually met Bergmann and the two became close friends and colleagues, serving on the board of ISORAD, which was a joint venture of NUMEC and the IAEC. Bergmann made his first visit to America for IAEC in 1956, the year before Lowenthal turned Apollo Steel into NUMEC.

There were two significant investigations of Shapiro and NUMEC. The first was instigated by Dick Helms's call to Ramsey Clark in 1968 and the discovery of the highly enriched uranium at Dimona. (Mattson, p. 99) The second began in 1976 when Jim Conran, a whistleblower at the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, voiced complaints about the background and actions of Shapiro. Conran was a security officer and his warnings eventually got the attention of the White House. (ibid, p. 161)

During the first investigation, the FBI could not find enough evidence to justify a violation by Shapiro of the Foreign Agents Registration Act, which mandates that any person in the U.S. who is representing a foreign country's

interests has to register with the Justice Department. But the FBI did recommend cancelling Shapiro's security clearances, based on wiretaps that revealed Shapiro in close contact with Israeli intelligence officials and with members of the IAEC. (ibid, p. 138)

During these calls Shapiro reportedly said he would help Israel in any way that he could. He also expressed frustration with the new ownership at NUMEC, which had been purchased by ARCO. But his Israeli contacts said he was too valuable to leave and encouraged him to stay there. (ibid, p. 139)

FBI Surveillance

One of the most curious episodes that the FBI surveillance revealed was a meeting between Shapiro and a man named Jeruham Kafkafi, a suspected Mossad officer working under diplomatic cover. He had left Washington by air on the morning of June 20, 1969, and met Shapiro at the Pittsburgh airport for about an hour. He then left and flew back to Washington.

As a result of that surveillance, Shapiro was interviewed by the AEC in August 1969, with some of Shapiro's answers to questions rather dubious. For instance, he said he did not know Hermoni was in charge of the Israeli nuclear development program and thought he was a university professor. Shapiro said his discussions in September and October 1968 with the Israeli officers were about water contamination, saboteur detection and military activities.

When asked why the Israelis could not have talked to the Defense Department about those topics, Shapiro had no answer. The interviewer wrote in his summary that Shapiro was cool and calm throughout except when the Kafkafi meeting was brought up. At first, Shapiro said he could not recall it, even though it happened just two months earlier. He then said he did remember it, claiming it was about an overdue invoice and a power supply resource. (p. 142)

The AEC investigators did not find the last reply credible, since it did not seem to justify an airline flight from Washington to Pittsburgh and back. Shapiro adjusted his answer by saying that there was some discussion of an investigator whom he knew from America who was going to visit Israel. He also added the figure of \$32,000 as to how much Israel owed NUMEC. As Mattson notes, again, this explanation does not seem to justify an air flight and an hour-long meeting with a clandestine Mossad officer.

Closing the Inquiry

The man who ultimately decided to close this initial inquiry was Glenn Seaborg, head of the AEC. Not only did he not see any civil or criminal charges as being viable, but when President Richard Nixon's Attorney General John Mitchell

recommended revoking Shapiro's security clearances, Seaborg balked at that also.

Mattson clearly sees Seaborg as being a villain in the piece. Late in the book, he explicitly accuses him of running a cover-up. (see p. 297) And, there is evidence to back up this charge. It was later discovered, during the second inquiry, that Seaborg had a close personal friendship with Shapiro. (ibid p. 268)

Earle Hightower, assistant director of safeguards at AEC, explicitly stated that the whole case regarding NUMEC was rigged because it was known that Seaborg would not take action. Little more than three years after Seaborg left the AEC, it was dissolved in 1975 and was replaced by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, in part, because critics accused the AEC of an insufficiently aggressive regulatory program.

The second, much longer, and more vigorous inquiry into NUMEC and Shapiro came about at the creation of the NRC when Jim Conran was tasked with reviewing the record of how safeguards had worked previously for the AEC so they could be strengthened in the future. In that review process, he came across the case of Shapiro and NUMEC.

When Conran asked to see more files on both, he was denied access, causing him to go up the NRC ladder to Chairman William Anders, who was briefed by, among others, Carl Duckett of the CIA. Since Anders was about to leave for a diplomatic post, he took his concerns to James Connor at President Gerald Ford's White House.

In March 1976, the CIA's Duckett addressed an informal gathering of pilots and astronauts, saying there was little doubt Israel had about 20 nuclear warheads. Although this was supposed to be off the record, the information leaked. In April 1976, *Time* reported that this claim was accurate, except the newsmagazine put the size of the arsenal at 13 bombs and added that the warheads could be delivered by Phantom jets or Jericho missiles.

Duckett wrote a memo to CIA Director George Bush in which he said he suspected that the Israeli program was jumpstarted by a diversion of enriched uranium from the NUMEC plant. (p. 165) He attached various appendices to the memo to show the results of previous inquiries into NUMEC and explain why his belief was justified.

One of the appendices consisted of a paper by John Hadden in which he expressed the suspicion that NUMEC was actually a shell company the Israeli government had set up for the express purpose of diverting materials, technology and information that Israel needed to speed up and facilitate its longstanding quest

for atomic weapons. (ibid, p. 166)

A New Investigation

Attorney General Edward Levi was then sent a summary of the FBI's previous investigation of NUMEC. Levi alerted Ford that he thought NUMEC was culpable for several crimes and, with Ford's permission, he wished to begin a criminal inquiry. Since Ford's close adviser James Connor was also disturbed by these findings, the President approved the investigation.

What followed was a tedious bureaucratic battle between the CIA and FBI. The FBI felt it did not have direct proof that a diversion had taken place, while the CIA had the proof – the chemical tests at Dimona – but was reluctant to reveal the intelligence to the FBI. Also, the CIA did not want to furnish the FBI with technical experts to help educate the investigating agents so they could effectively cross-examine important witnesses. Thus, the FBI's inquiry dragged on through three presidents: Ford, Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan.

But even with these obstructions, the FBI did eventually find witnesses to a diversion from the Apollo plant. It turned out that the FBI did not do enough interviews of plant employees in its initial inquiry because there were at least four of them willing to talk. Those witnesses form the climax of Mattson's book.

In 1980, one witness said that when he read newspaper accounts about the losses of enriched uranium at Apollo, he had to chuckle to himself. When asked why, he replied that in 1965 or 1966, he was walking near the loading dock at Apollo and saw people loading containers – the dimensions that were used for HEU packets – into equipment boxes. He noticed that the shipping papers for the boxes revealed that the packages were destined for Israel. This witness then suggested some other workers at the plant who had seen similar activity. (Ibid, p. 272)

Suspicion Shipment

One of these witnesses saw a flatbed truck backed up into the loading dock area with Shapiro pacing around the area while the driver was loading "stove pipes" into a cabinet on the truck. This struck the witness as odd because the plant had regularly assigned workers for loading duties during the day but this shipment was being prepared in the evening. He explained that "stove pipes" were cylindrical containers that the plant used to pack enriched uranium inside. Each stove pipe usually contained three or four packets of HEU.

When he glanced at the clipboard resting on a package, he saw the destination was Israel. The clipboard then was yanked away and an armed guard escorted him off the dock. He also said it was unusual to see Shapiro in this area of the plant, and further, that Shapiro was very seldom there at night. (ibid, p. 275)

There were two other witnesses who told the FBI about similar events. The FBI also interviewed an NRC inspector named James Devlin, who told the agents that, contrary to what Shapiro had said, the security at the Apollo plant was below par and that NUMEC did not employ a professional security force. The company had one regular armed guard and Devlin happened to know who he was, since he was also a deputy for the township. The only other guards were unarmed and non-uniformed. (ibid, pgs. 272-73)

By this time, the FBI did not want to continue the investigation, believing that nothing would come of it, although the Justice Department urged the investigators on. But the FBI was correct since, as Mattson notes more than once in his book, the last president who really wanted to stop Israel from becoming a nuclear power was John F. Kennedy. (See pgs. 38-40, p. 256)

Richard Helms's conversation with a disinterested President Johnson underscores how that attitude changed after Kennedy's death. As Mattson further notes, opposition to Israel's nuclear-weapons program was more or less negated by President Richard Nixon's meeting with Prime Minister Golda Meir in 1969 when he agreed that the U.S. would not make any public statements revealing Israel's nuclear arsenal nor demand that it sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty, as long as Israel did no testing and made no public threats.

Even that policy was probably violated in 1979 with the Vela Incident: a suspected Israeli nuclear test done in the Indian Ocean.

Author Roger Mattson was part of the inquiry about the illegal transfer of atomic secrets to Israel, working in the NRC's safeguards department when Conran first voiced his fears about a diversion at NUMEC. Thus, Mattson became part of an internal review of the Shapiro case, seeing firsthand how certain intelligence agencies were, by accident or design, obstructing the investigation.

Mattson concludes his important book by stating that this policy of casting a deliberate blind eye towards a nuclear heist by Israel places the U.S. in a compromised position when trying to enforce a policy of non-proliferation on other nations because of the obvious double standards.

To point out one paradox, the U.S. government executed Julius and Ethel Rosenberg for purportedly supplying nuclear secrets to the Soviet Union with less evidence. Plus, the tinder box of the Middle East is probably the last place where America should have allowed atomic weapons to proliferate, but it did.

Because of that, the U.S. has little or no moral authority on the issue today.

James DiEugenio is a researcher and writer on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and other mysteries of that era. His most recent book is *Reclaiming Parkland*.

The Earlier 9/11 Acts of Terror

From the Archive: Americans feel a special sadness about the terrible loss of life on Sept. 11, 2001, but the 9/11 date has other meanings in other countries, reflecting a U.S. hypocrisy on terrorism, wrote Jonathan Marshall in 2014.

By Jonathan Marshall (Originally published on Sept. 10, 2014)

Americans collectively woke up to the threat of domestic terrorism on the morning of Sept. 11, 2001. Nearly 3,000 people died in the fiery destruction of the Twin Towers in New York City, the attack on the Pentagon and related airplane hijackings.

Twenty-eight years earlier, Chileans had their own deadly wake-up call on Sept. 11, 1973, when coup plotters overthrew the democratic government of Salvador Allende after blasting the presidential palace with bombs and heavy artillery. The military junta went on to kill more than 3,000 people, imprison and torture tens of thousands of political victims, and send tens of thousands more into exile.

Though largely forgotten today, blowback from the U.S.-backed Chilean coup came to haunt North Americans in the form of deadly terrorist attacks, including a number falling in September and even on the forbidding date of Sept. 11 in years predating the al-Qaeda atrocity. In those cases, the perpetrators were not Islamic militants, nor were they angry Marxists intent on avenging Washington's complicity in the Chilean military's crimes. Instead, the killers were right-wing extremists bent on carrying their cause to U.S. soil.

The most shocking such case of blowback terrorism was the car bombing of former Chilean government minister Orlando Letelier and a young colleague on the streets of Washington D.C. on Sept. 26, 1976, just past the third anniversary of the coup.

Until 2001, it was the worst act of international terrorism committed in the United States. FBI investigators eventually determined that the remote-controlled bomb had been set off by members of the fascist Cuban Nationalist Movement (CNM), directed by an American-born agent of the Chilean secret police.

Attacks at the UN

Few Americans remember the Letelier murder, but how many ever knew of the related creation of one of America's longest-running terrorist organizations on Sept. 11, 1974? How many know of that group's brazen murder of a Cuban diplomat, the first case of terrorist violence against a United Nations diplomat, on the streets of New York on Sept. 11, 1980? Or of the same group's coordinated attacks against the Mexican consulates in New York City and Miami, and the Miami office of a noted magazine, all on Sept. 11, 1981?

The terror group's name was Omega 7. Its founder was a fanatical anti-Castro Cuban exile named Eduardo Arocena, who used the nom-de-guerre "Omar" to take credit for the group's two assassinations and more than 30 bombings over a span of almost nine years as the group eluded police and FBI investigators.

One Justice Department official called Arocena "probably the most dedicated patriot in the Cuban field that the law enforcement community has ever experienced in seven years of bombings and murders." (Imagine a U.S. official calling Osama Bin Laden "the most dedicated patriot in the Islamist field that the law enforcement community has ever experienced.")

As the FBI reported in 1993, "The main areas of operation for the Omega 7 were the New York, New Jersey, and Miami, Florida, areas. Its primary targets were representatives of the Cuban Government or any individual, organization, facility, or business that dealt with or supported in any way, the communist government of Fidel Castro.

"The majority of Omega 7 attacks were bombings, shootings, and assassinations. Its terrorist attacks were usually well-planned and flawlessly executed. Many of the Omega 7 members were veterans of the Bay of Pigs invasion who were trained in demolition, intelligence, and commando techniques. Their expertise, combined with the financial resources available to them through the exiled Cuban community, gave the Omega 7 an almost unlimited potential for terrorist activity."

Not a Stereotype

Short and pudgy, with a fondness for three-piece suits and classical music, Arocena did not fit any usual stereotype of a terrorist mastermind, but he committed his adult life to violence. "I am obsessed by Communism, which has held my country prisoner," he explained years later.

Arocena was born in Cuba in 1943. He left school when Fidel Castro took power in 1959. After a stint loading sugar at his hometown port of Caibarien, followed by national success as a welter-weight wrestler, Arocena secretly began fighting

Communism. As he would testify years later, he joined a clandestine group to “burn cane fields, burn down industrial development places, to keep our eyes on the regime. . . . We carried out intelligence work, which [was] then passed on to foreign agencies.”

Fearing capture, he stowed away on a ship bound for Morocco in 1965 and made his way to New Jersey the next year. Safe on American soil, he quickly found that his passion for fighting Castro was shared by tens of thousands of fellow exiles and at least some Washington officials. In early 1969, with hundreds of compatriots, he received training by unnamed “American agents” in demolitions techniques at camp in the Florida Everglades. To his bitter regret, the group was disbanded after the promised invasion of Cuba came to nothing.

Eager for action, he grew close to members of the radical CNM, founded by the fascist ideologue Felipe Rivero in 1960. After joining the CIA’s ill-fated landing at the Bay of Pigs in 1961, Rivero went his own way. In 1964 he called for a worldwide campaign of terrorism against Cuban targets, which the group initiated with a bazooka attack against the United Nations building, where Ernesto “Che” Guevara was giving a speech. Years later, the CNM was among the first and most ardent anti-Castro Cuban groups to ally with the Chilean military regime and its secret police after the Sept. 11, 1973 coup.

Founding a Terror Cell

Celebration of the Chilean coup likely explains Arocena’s decision to found his own terrorist group, Omega 7, on its one-year anniversary. Omega 7 drew support from the CNM to the point where authorities for many years believed, incorrectly, that the two organizations were identical.

Omega 7 committed its first act of terrorism on Feb. 1, 1975, setting off a bomb at the Venezuelan consulate on 51st Street in New York City to protest that government’s recent resumption of diplomatic relations with Cuba. In June 1976, it set off a bomb at the Cuban Mission to the United Nations.

Then, on Sept. 16, 1976, the group bombed a Soviet cargo ship docked in Port Elizabeth, New Jersey, where Arocena worked as a longshoreman. Arocena himself swam out to plant the bomb on the ship’s hull with magnets. He built the device with help from the CNM’s Chilean-trained demolition expert Virgilio Paz. Only days later, Paz would travel from Union City to Washington to help carry out the Chilean regime’s plot to assassinate Orlando Letelier. The Omega 7 job explains why the Chilean agent in charge of the Letelier mission would report that his assignment had to wait several days because “the CNM was engaged in some other operation which required their immediate attention.”

Many other acts of terror would follow. One day after Christmas in 1977, Omega 7 bombed the Venezuelan Mission to the United Nations, to protest Venezuela's imprisonment of Cuban exile Orlando Bosch on charges of blowing up 73 passengers aboard a Cubana Airlines jet the previous year. The next year, Omega 7 bombed the Cuban Mission to the U.N. for the third and fourth times, the Mexican Consulate in New York, and Avery Fisher Hall in Lincoln Center, to protest a performance by a Cuban orchestra.

In 1979, among other attacks, it bombed the Cuban Mission a fifth and sixth time (injuring two policemen), set off high explosives at the Soviet Mission to the U.N. (injuring four policemen and two mission employees), tried to assassinate Fidel Castro during his visit to the U.N. General Assembly in October, and murdered moderate exile Eulalio Jose Negrin in front of his son with a silenced MAC-10 machine gun to punish his "traitorous" parleys with Havana that led to the release of 3,000 political prisoners. The group also tried to plant a suitcase bomb on a TWA flight from New York to Los Angeles, but it exploded prematurely before being loaded.

Hard to Crack

With the attack on the Soviet mission, the FBI finally moved Omega 7 to its highest priority target list. The tight-knit organization proved impossible to crack, however. In March 1980, only a fluke accident saved Cuba's ambassador to the United Nations from being incinerated when his car bumped another and a powerful remote-controlled bomb fell off its gas tank to the ground. Arocena had built the bomb using military-grade explosives supplied to the CNM by the Chilean secret police.

An attache with the Cuban Mission, Felix Garcia, was not so lucky. On Sept. 11, 1980, the seventh anniversary of the Chilean coup and the sixth anniversary of Omega 7's founding, the group murdered him while he was driving to work from his apartment in Queens. Arocena's partner Pedro Remon cut Garcia down with a burst from a MAC-10. Arocena drove the hit car.

As the Cuban newspaper Granma described the reaction, "UN diplomats were in uproar. For the first time ever, terrorists had used violence against the legitimate representative of a UN member country. . . . Three times on the following day, UN Secretary General Kurt Waldheim expressed his horror at the crime. He communicated with the U.S. representative at the United Nations, demanding that full measures be taken to guarantee the safety of all the Cuban personnel in New York, and insisted that the tragic event be thoroughly investigated. . . .

"Secretary of State Ed Muskie called it a reprehensible act and asked for all

the relevant federal agencies as well as the New York police department to cooperate in the investigation. . . . Donald McHenry, Washington's ambassador to the UN called the crime a blot on the United States. Nevertheless, both Muskie and McHenry refrained from specifically condemning the anti-Cuban terrorism . . .

"At the UN, Cuban ambassador Raul Roa Kouri affirmed with total clarity: 'these groups of professional killers have various locations in the country that hosts our international organization. Their members and leaders make public statements to New York's Spanish-language press and hold public meetings on the streets, crudely boasting of their criminal intentions.'"

The Unraveling

The Sept. 11, 1980 murder of Cuba's diplomat began the undoing of Omega 7. A joint FBI-New York Police Department terrorism task force eventually tracked a rental car ticketed across from the Cuban Mission that day to Arocena. Toll records also connected Arocena in the period of the murder to his key compatriots in Omega 7, giving investigators their first clear glimpse of the organization's membership.

Omega 7 was far from spent, however. One year after its assassination of Garcia, the organization unleashed a wave of new attacks. On Sept. 11, 1981, it fire-bombed the Miami offices of *Replica* magazine, which had called for normalizing relations between Havana and Washington. It also bombed the Mexican consulates in Miami and New York that day to protest that government's warm relations with Cuba, causing more than \$2 million in damage to the Miami building alone.

Where did Omega 7 get the resources to pull off so many meticulous operations? An FBI report in 1993 noted: "Although current information is incomplete, it appears that some Cuban exile businessmen in the Union City, New Jersey, area clandestinely funded Omega 7 and other Cuban anti-Castro groups. The businessmen established a network which would collect money in the form of 'taxes' from all segments of the Cuban community who were able to contribute and then divide the money between the various groups they supported. . . . Current reporting, although fragmented, suggests that the businessmen, who may still be active in funding anti-Castro groups, were involved in the flow of over \$100,000 to the various groups."

Additionally, the FBI learned that Arocena and Omega 7 received about \$150,000 from a major marijuana trafficker who asked the organization to collect money owed him by other Cuban exiles and business associates in the drug trade. (Arocena agreed to murder one such associate who had stolen 40,000 pounds of marijuana, but dropped the assignment when he learned that his target was in

jail.) Omega 7 members also received legal defense funds from at least two drug-connected Cuban exiles.

A grand jury investigation of Omega 7 from 1979 to 1982 went nowhere, but an ideological split in Omega 7's ranks finally gave the FBI a huge break. Fearing for his life at the hands of Pedro Remón and other disaffected associates, Arocena began talking with surprising candor to Special Agent Larry Wack about the history and operations of the organization. Arocena then went underground in Miami but continued their dialog through calls from pay phones. Their talks, all recorded, built an impeccable case against the man who called himself "Omar" and his terrorist associates.

Belated Roundup

On Oct. 2, 1982, federal agents finally arrested three key members of Omega 7 in New Jersey and Arocena's chief triggerman turned nemesis, Remón, in Miami. They were charged with transporting explosives used in the attempted assassination of the Cuban ambassador in March 1980.

Not until July 22, 1983, was Arocena finally arrested in Miami, with an arsenal of machine guns, pistols, rifles, knives, disguises, and a remote-control transmitter. A jury would find him guilty the following year on 25 charges of murder, conspiracy to murder, transporting explosives, possession of bombs and perjury. He received a sentence of life plus 35 additional years. A year later, a Miami judge added another 20 years to his sentence after a separate conviction for bombing seven businesses and consulates in that city from 1979 to 1983.

Arocena's sentence was a rare exception to the mild fate of most Cuban exile terrorists. The Miami Herald's Juan Tamayo noted in 1998, "Amid reports that Cuban exile leaders financed bombings in Havana, conspirators, cops and prosecutors agree that anti-Castro plotting in South Florida is not only common but almost tolerated."

"Other than an occasional federal gun charge," two reporters for Salon observed in 2008, "Nothing much seems to happen to most of these would-be revolutionaries. They are allowed to train nearly unimpeded despite making explicit plans to violate the 70-year-old U.S. Neutrality Act and overthrow a sovereign country's government. Though separate anti-terror laws passed in 1994 and 1996 would seem to apply directly to their activities, no one has ever been charged for anti-Cuban terrorism under those laws. And 9/11 [2001] seems to have changed nothing. . . ."

"The federal government has even failed to extradite to other countries militants who are credibly accused of acts of murder. Among the most notorious

is Luis Posada Carriles, wanted for bombing a Cuban jet in 1976 and Havana hotels in 1997. It is, perhaps, a testament to the power of South Florida's crucial Cuban-American voting bloc – and the political allegiances of the current president [George W. Bush].”

Fitting this mold was the fate of Arocena's chief partner in crime, Remon, who pleaded guilty and received a sentence of only 10 years (less than many Guantanamo inmates have served without a conviction). After his release, he teamed up with Posada, who had been trained in demolition by the CIA and carried on its payroll for many years.

Despite evidence of his role in the 1976 Cubana Airlines bombing and his admitted campaign to bomb hotels and restaurants in Cuba in 1997, Posada told a New York Times reporter in 1998 that American authorities never attempted to question him. “As you can see,” he said, “the F.B.I. and the C.I.A. don't bother me, and I am neutral with them.”

Tolerating Foreign Attacks

Why did Posada fare so much better than Arocena? His close connection to the CIA undoubtedly helped. Just as important, he played by the rules, terrorizing Cuba from abroad, not at home. The FBI's Larry Wack explained to Arocena that his only crime was committing terrorism *inside* the United States:

“Whatever you people have going outside the United States in Communist countries, we decided amongst us a long time ago that you were not going to tell us about it. And we were not gonna push the issue because it did not concern any, anything inside the United States. . . . Because that is out of our jurisdiction, we told you we were not going to try to interfere with anything that you guys were doing out of the country, and we have stuck to that.”

Wack's view of official U.S. policy was confirmed just a few years after Panamanian police arrested Posada, along with Omega 7's Pedro Remon and the CNM's Guillermo Novo, in 2000 for plotting to assassinate Fidel Castro during a visit to that country. Pardoned in 2004, Remon and Novo returned as free men to the United States, with less hassle than some hapless traveler who ticks off an airport security officer. Posada also returned, and after a battle over his immigration status, not terrorism, he, too, retired to Miami. (Orlando Bosch, now dead, had a street named after him in Miami, where he was treated as a hero.)

As we pause on this 9/11 to remind ourselves of the horrible killing of innocents committed by a gang of extremists 13 years ago, we should reserve some anger for policymakers and law enforcement officers who discredit the cause of

justice by ignoring or even protecting other terrorists in our midst depending on their politics. These more obscure bombers and assassins may have called themselves freedom fighters, but their crimes were as evil, and deserve the same punishment, as the mass murders of Sept. 11, 2001.

Jonathan Marshall is author or co-author of five books on international affairs, including *The Lebanese Connection: Corruption, Civil War and the International Drug Traffic* (Stanford University Press, 2012). Some of his previous articles for Consortiumnews were "Risky Blowback from Russian Sanctions"; "Neocons Want Regime Change in Iran"; "Saudi Cash Wins France's Favor"; "The Saudis' Hurt Feelings"; "Saudi Arabia's Nuclear Bluster"; "The US Hand in the Syrian Mess"; and "Hidden Origins of Syria's Civil War."]

North Korea's Understandable Fears

Official Washington is in full-throated fury over a new North Korean nuclear test, but fails to note that North Koreans face a vast array of U.S./South Korean military might, including potential U.S. nuclear weapons, writes James Bradley.

By James Bradley

North Korea carried out its fifth nuclear test on Friday, drawing condemnation from President Obama and a charge from the Pentagon that the test was a "serious provocation." Ho-hum, here we go again.

Every year, America pays its vassal-state South Korea huge sums of U.S. taxpayer money to mount 300,000-man-strong military "games" that threaten North Korea. North Koreans view images that never seem to make it to U.S. kitchen tables: hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of U.S. armaments swarming in from the sea, hundreds of tanks and thousands of troops – their turrets and rifles pointed north – and nuclear-capable U.S. warplanes screaming overhead.

But when a young dictator straight out of central casting responds to U.S. threats with an underground test on North Korea's founding day, it's the number-one story on the front page of the *New York Times*.

Let's connect some dots. Washington and their note takers in the American press constantly tell us that crazies in Pyongyang and Tehran are nuclear threats. The

misplaced, but easily sold, fears of the “North Korean missile threat” and the “Iran missile threat” allows the Pentagon to install “defensive” missile systems in South Korea and Eastern Europe which actually amount to offensive systems targeting Beijing and Moscow (by making first strikes against China and Russia more feasible).

We need to look beyond the simplistic, race-based cartoon-like scaremongering to see that far more reality-based and frightening is the nuclear threat posed by the United States.

President Obama – the Nobel Prize winner who pledged to lead a nuclear-free world – has committed over \$1 trillion dollars to modernize America’s nuclear arsenal. Almost unreported by the press, we have been spending a bundle to make nukes “usable,” by miniaturizing them. And to top it off, Obama has maintained a “first use” option for the U.S. nuclear arsenal.

Forget the tin-pot dictator with a bad crew-cut who leads an impoverished country. Here’s for some really scary reading:

Obama’s Trillion-Dollar Nuclear-Arms Train Wreck

Obama plans to retain first-use nuclear option

New U.S. Nuclear Bomb Moves Closer to Full-Scale Production

THAAD: A Major Security Risk for the ROK

James Bradley is author of several bestsellers including *Flyboys* and *Flags of Our Fathers*. His most recent book is *The China Mirage: The Hidden History of American Disaster in Asia*.
