

Reaching Out in Peace to Russia

The mainstream U.S. media bristles with hostility toward Russia – fueling a New McCarthyism – but the press finds no space for grassroots American gestures of peace, writes ex-U.S. intelligence analyst Elizabeth Murray.

By Elizabeth Murray

On a sunny afternoon in June 2016, a group of swimsuit-clad men and women raced into the warm waters of the Crimean Black Sea and swam exuberantly toward the horizon, surfacing occasionally to exchange smiles and laughs. They stroked and kicked farther out into the surf before turning around and heading back in toward the Yalta coastline. A few of the swimmers lingered in the inviting waters, conversing haltingly or gesturing to bridge the language barrier that seemed, in the end, to be overcome by sheer good will. This was the first annual Russian-American “Swim for Peace.”

The event brought together members of a U.S. peace delegation sponsored by the Center for Citizen Initiatives (CCI) and Soviet-era Russian World War II veterans. Both groups had gathered around a conference table on the previous day; the Americans heard the WWII vets speak fondly of the period when Russia (the then-Soviet Union) and the U.S. were united as allies against fascism; both sides shared the conviction that a peaceful, productive relationship between both countries could and should exist again.

Before the meeting concluded, the Americans invited the Russian vets to join them in the waters of the Black Sea for a “Swim for Peace.” But when the U.S. side first proposed the idea, it wasn’t clear whether the solemn and dignified Soviet-era officers – some of whom seemed unapproachable in their stiff military uniforms complete with medals, ribbons and other war regalia – would take the invitation to heart.

Nevertheless, on the following afternoon, the war vets turned out in their swimming trunks, enthusiastically plunging into the waves with their U.S. counterparts in a demonstration of true “swimsuit diplomacy.” They were soon joined by other citizens of Yalta – including one of the town’s officials – all of whom seemed to revel in the spirit of goodwill that permeated the event.

Meanwhile, cameras rolled, and the “Swim for Peace” aired on Russian television. However, in the days following the event, there was no pickup of the event seen in U.S. or Western media.

Harsh Sanctions

Despite the existence of punitive U.S. and European Union sanctions on Crimea that have crippled the local tourism industry and harmed local businesses – for example, the Crimean resort town of Yalta normally bustles with European cruise ships in summer, but there were none to be seen last year because of U.S.-imposed travel sanctions – Yalta showed warm hospitality to the American guests: When the swimmers reached shore, they were ushered to an outdoor reception featuring platters of fresh fruit all grown locally in the Crimea including raspberries, strawberries and other delicacies – and glasses were raised to peaceful U.S.-Russia ties with wine made from locally cultivated grapes.

The “Swim for Peace” at Yalta – although a small, localized event – built bridges of friendship and peace between Americans and Russians at a time of heightened tensions that were sparked by the 2014 U.S.-sponsored coup in Ukraine; shaken by the instability engendered by the violent events that transpired in Kiev, Crimeans voted overwhelmingly in a referendum to reunite with Russia (Crimea had been part of Russia until 1957, when then-Soviet Prime Minister Nikita Khrushchev “gifted” the peninsula to Ukraine.)

Despite the U.S. government’s sanctions regimen that has harmed many productive Russian-American exchange programs at the cultural, social, political and diplomatic levels, ordinary Russian people have clearly and strongly expressed the desire to live in peaceful coexistence with the United States – a sentiment that was expressed to the U.S. delegation not only in the Crimea, but in other regions of Russia, as documented by CCI delegation member and former U.S. diplomat Ann Wright.

In gamely joining U.S. citizens in a “Swim for Peace,” the citizens of Yalta demonstrated a level of goodwill and friendship that could be the basis for developing a strong grassroots movement for peace between Russian and U.S. citizens.

It is my sincere hope that the “Swim for Peace” becomes an annual tradition between Russians and Americans – not only in Yalta, but in other Russian and U.S. seaside towns that are willing to welcome delegations of Russians and Americans who believe in the possibility of peace between our two peoples and nations. Small gestures of goodwill can yield lasting results.

On April 22, 2017, the city of Yalta unveiled a bust of Franklin Delano Roosevelt on the city’s Franklin Roosevelt Street to mark the late U.S. President’s historic role in forging postwar peace at the 1945 Yalta conference. Local officials said they hoped the gesture would “help to improve relations between Russia and the United States.”

That Yalta – which suffers disproportionately from the impact of U.S. sanctions

against Russia – has chosen to honor a former U.S. president at a time of stress and tension between Russia and the United States – and which engaged a visiting U.S. delegation in a “Swim for Peace” – should give U.S. citizens pause in the U.S. media’s unrelenting hostility toward Russia.

Has the monument honoring FDR at Yalta and the “Swim for Peace” been reported in U.S. mainstream media? If not, why not? Would a U.S. city ever consider making a similar reciprocal gesture to Russian citizens or a Russian leader?

If Americans could learn about goodwill gestures by Russian people who believe in the possibility of peaceful coexistence, they might be less likely to allow their government to launch a war that could lead to the use of nuclear weapons.

[Photos

from <http://www.ourjourneytosmile.com/blog/2016/07/for-russians-with-love/>]

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Demonstrating America’s Need for Immigrants

President Trump has pushed for the expulsion of millions of undocumented immigrants, but they are pushing back by using May 1 to demonstrate the importance of their hard work, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

The theme of May Day demonstrations in Los Angeles and elsewhere across Donald Trump’s America is what a land without immigrants would be like, says Nativio Lopez, a historian on Mexican-American affairs, from the battles of Pancho Villa to the current political skirmishes between Trump and Mexico’s government.

Lopez, who represents the California Congreso Latino, told me in a recent interview that he is now fighting the upsurge in deportations under the Trump administration as well as issues relating to the environment and efforts to ban the entrance of many Muslims. I spoke to Nativio Lopez in Los Angeles on April 26.

Dennis Bernstein: I want to talk to you about the big picture: What the Trump

policy looks like at the macro [level] and put it into some historical context. We know in the back rooms these guys like [Attorney General Jefferson] Sessions, a life-time racist, [these] white-supremacists, who many believe want to purge as many brown people as possible, in sort of an ethnic-cleansing. Would you talk about that?

Nativo Lopez: Well, I don't have any major differences with that observation. But, I would say that it's not just characteristic of this administration, a Republican administration. The fact of the matter is it's a continuation of what we experienced for eight years under the Obama administration, of the Democratic administration, of the Democratic Party. And so immigrants find themselves caught between a rock and a hard place, between Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum, enforcement quasi-light [and] enforcement heavy under Attorney General Jeff Sessions, and the Trump administration.

But it's truly a continuation of the policies that were enacted and used under the previous administration. It seems like the Trump administration, however, is moving forward on steroids the practices that were pursued under Obama. And this measure alone indicates to us that it's immigration enforcement on steroids. Under the Obama administration there was a 100 mile zone from the southern border into the interior of the United States, that if an individual [was] detained, suspected of not having immigration status, and could not prove up that he had been in the country more than two days, he could basically be detained, and removed from the country without even going before an immigration judge, not having an opportunity to retain an attorney, essentially his due process rights were eliminated.

Under the Trump administration, the executive order that was released... he essentially expanded that 100 mile zone, to coast to coast, border to border, completely in the interior, anywhere in the country, where a person could be detained and would have to prove up, that they had been in the country at least 24 months. And if they couldn't, they could then be detained and removed again, completely eliminating their due process rights. So it truly is enforcement on steroids. That's what we're facing. We call it 100 days of neo-fascism, as that applies to immigrants, 100 days of resistance.

DB: Could you talk about the... you mentioned the Bracero Program. And people don't know history. You say you've seen this before. Could you say a little bit more about that? I know my partner here [on the show], Miguel Gavilan Molina, watched his dad dragged out and beaten in the 50's. Could you explain how there's a continuity here?

NL: Absolutely. The Bracero Program, as it was dubbed back in 1942, an agreement between the United States and Mexico, to provide workers, Mexican workers, to

the United States. Not only to work in agriculture, but to work in an important industry—the railroad industry—throughout the United States. Some 3 million to 4 million Mexican immigrant guest workers, contracted workers, were brought into the United States to work in these industries. And that program lasted from 1942 to 1964.

It was essentially a servitude, labor contracting system that still exists today in much lower numbers. There's approximately 50,000 such workers that are contracted in that manner, on an annual basis, under an H2 [visa] program. And our view is essentially, or our theory, with regard to the kind of enforcement that this administration is conducting is to hit, real hard, on the immigrant community. Particularly the Mexican workers, or Central American workers, and then eventually we will see some type of legislation move through Congress, proposed by Republicans, that would essentially enact a form of guest worker program for massive numbers of workers.

For example, it's estimated that 11 million undocumented workers are in the country today, so our theory is that they will propose that [those] 11 million workers, if they want to regularize their status and obtain permanent residency status, that they would have to be in a guest worker type program, five, seven, ten years after which—and if they have a complete clean record, violated no laws, paid all their taxes—after which they would be invited to leave the United States, apply for permanent residence status, and then return back into the United States after paying a hefty fine of over a thousand dollars, for their sin of having originally entered the United States unlawfully.

If you beat someone up two years running, three years running, and then you turn around and offer them something apparently benign to have temporary status, a work permit, a social security number, the people are obviously going to be apt to jump at that opportunity, after they have been beaten up and terrorized for two or more years.

So, this is my theory of where this administration is headed. Because it absolutely knows that it depends on immigrant labor, cheap immigrant labor, to work in very important segments of the economy of the United States that are producing. Whereas manufacturing is being reduced, service employment is increasing. That's where we find immigrant labor. In agriculture, nobody can deny that it's immigrant labor that plays a vital role of producing a bountiful harvest for California and for the country.

DB: Nativo, I'd like you to address the concept of sanctuary. We're talking about sanctuary cities, sanctuary states. Do you think it's effective, do you support it? How does that come into this, for you?

NL: The concept of sanctuary is basically a religious, a church concept, where someone could be protected on the property of the church. It's based in canon law. But what we came to know of sanctuary status, or sanctuary cities, certainly during the 1980's during the civil war in El Salvador, when many churches opened up their doors to permit Salvadoran refugees to be protected in those areas. They were essentially recognized by the immigration authorities at that time, as areas that they would not seek to enter to detain individuals that didn't have status.

This has now been re-popularized under the Trump administration, although I have to be real honest with you, where was the church or the churches raising this demand under the Obama administration that deported nearly 3 million individuals, doing the very same thing that the Trump administration is doing? So, in that sense, it's somewhat partisan. But let's say, okay, that's fine, at least they're coming out for partisan reasons. But many churches now, and advocacy organizations and legislators and Democratic politicians are calling for cities to declare themselves sanctuaries.

Effectively what it means in the practical sense is that to the full extent of the concept and the theory of sanctuary is that government authorities will not allow policing agencies, or other agencies of the government to cooperate with the Immigration and Customs Enforcement [ICE] arm of the Department of Homeland Security, for the purpose of detaining and deporting individuals, residents of the state of California. In that regard, it is a measure of protection.

However, government authorities at the state level have no power to prevent federal authorities from executing warrants of detention or simply just seeking to detain individuals based on their suspicion that the individual does not have status. In that sense, Hermandad Mexicana, the California Congreso Latino, we support the effort for cities to declare themselves sanctuary.

There's legislation in the legislature of California called SB54 that would essentially declare California, doesn't have the language, but in effect it would declare California a sanctuary state. Because it would prohibit the use of any public funds by any government entity, police, sheriffs, Department of Public Social Service, or any other to cooperate with ICE in the detention and deportation of individuals. It's a buffer, if you will.

There's a lot of opposition to that legislation by the Sheriff's Association of California. And we essentially have called on communities that are facing sheriffs or policing authorities that continue to cooperate with ICE to no longer cooperate with those policing authorities, to no longer be complicit with those policing authorities, as they continue to be complicit or openly cooperate with ICE, in the detention and the deportation of members of our families. So,

in concept, in theory, and as a political demand, sanctuary for all, sanctuary city, sanctuary state is very, very good. It helps rally and bring together people of like-minds that seek to protect immigrants. But, effectively, state authorities cannot prevent federal authorities from executing warrants of detention.

DB: There have been a number of arrests of people who were supposedly safe from being arrested under Obama, or under Trump, for that matter. And they're saying that there's direct retaliation for people who have spoken out for undocumented folks and others who are fighting this good fight, fighting for the rights of brown people, for the people who do some of the hardest work in this country, as you say, put the food on the table. Are you hearing about examples of retaliation for activism? You're no stranger to that, are you?

NL: No, I'm not. I'm not a stranger to that, but I'm still here and I'm still standing. They've never knocked me down. Like Jake LaMotta told Sugar Ray Robinson, "You'll never knock me down Ray, you'll never knock me down." So, we're still here in the fight. Right? And so, we have heard of cases that there have been retaliation by ICE forces throughout the country, not an abundant number of cases.

But with one case, alone, it's sufficient to tag the administration with being retaliatory against those immigrants, immigrants that are in the fight, that have become leaders, have formed organizations, that have been advocates over the last 10 – 15 years, for themselves, for their families. There have been retaliatory actions. And there has been a very, very good response by organizations and individuals reacting to the Trump administration, in conducting those types of retaliatory deportations. These are essentially... there have been people that had already been somehow in a deportation process, and therefore were required to report on an annual basis to immigration authorities. And when they went to their annual appointment, essentially they've been snatched up, and deported from the country. Certainly not given any reasons because of their activism, merely because it was time for them to go, as the administration has argued, as Sessions has argued. But most definitely it's been retaliatory.

But, notwithstanding that, we're calling on all DREAMers that have legal permits to be in the United States, we're calling on all DREAMers and all youth to come out and march on May Day. That the best defense of themselves, as a category, as being granted status because of the overwhelming positive and progressive advocacy of organizations, churches, people throughout the country that they would obtain that status. The best defense to retain that status is to take the offense, and participate in the general organizing that's going on throughout

the country, to defend the rights of immigrants, and to demand a humane and fair immigration policy, practices and eventually reform of the legislative type.

DB: I just have two more questions. One, how do you see the role, the expanding role of private prisons?

NL: Well, we know under the Bush administration that there was a strong movement to privatize the prisons. Put that in the hands for the purpose of detaining and housing, warehousing immigrants. And that, essentially, continued under Obama. The last year they contemplated perhaps bringing those back under, to the government. But that was never done. And under this administration we only see that the private prison system is going to expand.

When you calculate the number of people that they are anticipating detaining and deporting, they want to beat Obama's record. But they don't have sufficient beds to do so. So, what we're looking at is a fight by the Trump administration to get more money to expand the number of beds, to detain as short-term and long-term immigrants that are detained, certainly those that are deported, removed and then return to the United States, those individuals are going to be arrested, charged with a federal felony, and could be detained and jailed for up to five years, in a federal prison, prisons that would be privatized under this concept. A very lucrative contract.

We're also seeing that immigrants that are being detained are fighting back. We saw up in the state of Washington, over 700 immigrants, detainees, on a hunger strike fighting back because of the poor conditions, the food, services, etc. that are being provided by private contractor detention facility in the state of Washington. So, even in detention, our people are resisting.

DB: Finally, back in 2006, Nativos, there was a day without a Mexican, which brought out over 100,000 or was it a million people? Setting a historical record for people's gathering in this country. Do you expect a huge turnout? You're mentioning May Day, your thoughts on that?

NL: Well, people are telling me to scale it down because, if the turnout is not what we anticipate... in 2006 it was estimated at 1.3 million, just in the Los Angeles region alone. Throughout the country it probably exceeded more than 3 million. I can't say with all certainty that the turnout will be that size. But it will be sizable. And one of the things that's driving that is the rhetoric, the ugliness, the hate, emanating out of the Trump administration, out of the White House.

And the fact that organizations in Los Angeles, unified, in a message of unity, repudiating the policies of the Trump administration. And that certainly helps

because people on the ground are clamoring for the leadership to come together. And that essentially was accomplished here in Los Angeles, so we do expect a sizable turnout. I have to say that, just here in California alone, I know for a fact that there will be marches in San Diego, in San Bernardino, in Oxnard, in Fresno and Bakersfield, and San Francisco, Santa Rosa, many other small cities. Our people are taking to the streets on May Day demanding that immigrants be respected. And it's time that we do that because we didn't see that type of reaction and response and activity, during the Obama administration. Trump has shaken people up, like [former California Governor Pete] Wilson shook people up in 1994 with Proposition 187. And on that score that's a good thing.

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Drinking the Russia-gate Kool-Aid

Russia-gate, the Democrats' over-the-top attempt to blame the Kremlin for Hillary Clinton's disastrous campaign, has become the party's go-to excuse to avoid confronting how it lost touch with average Americans, says Norman Solomon.

By Norman Solomon

A new book about Hillary Clinton's last campaign for president – *Shattered* by journalists Jonathan Allen and Amie Parnes – has gotten a lot of publicity since it appeared two weeks ago. But major media have ignored a revealing passage near the end of the book.

Soon after Clinton's defeat, top strategists decided where to place the blame. "Within 24 hours of her concession speech," the authors report, campaign manager Robby Mook and campaign chair John Podesta "assembled her communications team at the Brooklyn headquarters to engineer the case that the election wasn't entirely on the up-and-up. For a couple of hours, with Shake Shack containers littering the room, they went over the script they would pitch to the press and the public. Already, Russian hacking was the centerpiece of the argument."

Six months later, that centerpiece of the argument is rampant – with claims often lurching from unsubstantiated overreach to outright demagoguery. A lavishly-funded example is the "Moscow Project," a mega-spin effort that surfaced in midwinter as a project of the Center for American Progress Action Fund. It's led by Neera Tanden, a self-described "loyal solider" for Clinton who

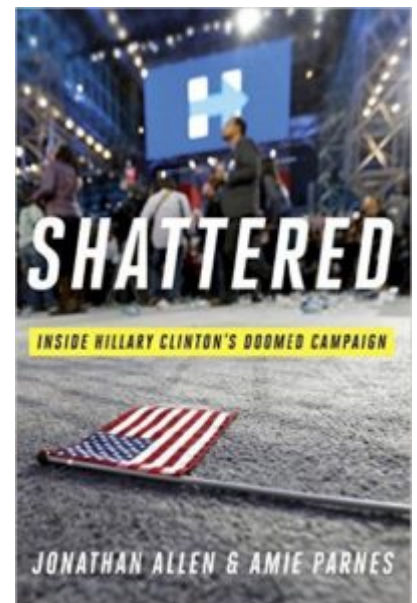
also runs the Center for American Progress (where she succeeded Podesta as president). The Center's board includes several billionaires.

The "Moscow Project" is expressly inclined to go over the top, aiming to help normalize ultra-partisan conjectures as supposedly factual. And so, the homepage of the "Moscow Project" prominently declares: "Given Trump's obedience to Vladimir Putin and the deep ties between his advisers and the Kremlin, Russia's actions are a significant and ongoing cause for concern."

Let's freeze-frame how that sentence begins: "Given Trump's obedience to Vladimir Putin." It's a jaw-dropping claim; a preposterous smear.

Following the Script

Echoes of such tactics can be heard from many Democrats in Congress and from allied media. Along the way, no outlet has been more in sync than MSNBC, and no one on the network has been more promotional of the Russia-runs-Trump meme than Rachel Maddow, tirelessly promoting the line and sometimes connecting dots in Glenn Beck fashion to the point of journalistic malpractice.



Yet last year, notably without success, the Clinton campaign devoted plenty of its messaging to the Trump-Russia theme. As the *Shattered* book notes, "Hillary would raise the issue herself repeatedly in debates" with Trump. For example, in one of those debates she said: "We have 17 – 17 – intelligence agencies, civilian and military, who have all concluded that these espionage attacks, these cyber attacks, come from the highest levels of the Kremlin and they are designed to influence our election."

After Trump's election triumph, the top tier of Clinton strategists quickly moved to seize as much of the narrative as they could, surely mindful of what

George Orwell observed: "Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past." After all, they hardly wanted the public discourse to dwell on Clinton's lack of voter appeal because of her deep ties to Wall Street. Political recriminations would be much better focused on the Russian government.

In early spring, the former communications director of the 2016 Clinton presidential campaign, Jennifer Palmieri, summed up the post-election approach neatly in a *Washington Post* opinion [article](#): "If we make plain that what Russia has done is nothing less than an attack on our republic, the public will be with us. And the more we talk about it, the more they'll be with us."

The inability of top Clinton operatives to identify with the non-wealthy is so tenacious that they still want to assume "the public will be with us" the more they talk about Russia Russia Russia. Imagine sitting at a kitchen table with average-income voters who are worried sick about their financial futures – and explaining to them that the biggest threat they face is from the Kremlin rather than from U.S. government policies that benefit the rich and corporate America at their expense.

Tone deaf hardly describes the severe political impairment of those who insist that denouncing Russia will be key to the Democratic Party's political fortunes in 2018 and 2020. But the top-down pressure for conformity among elected Democrats is enormous and effective.

One of the most promising progressives to arrive in Congress this year, Rep. Jamie Raskin from the Maryland suburbs of D.C., promptly drank what might be called the "Klinton Kremlin Kool-Aid." His official website features an [article](#) about a town-hall meeting that quotes him describing Trump as a "hoax perpetrated by the Russians on the United States of America."

Like hundreds of other Democrats on Capitol Hill, Raskin is on message with talking points from the party leadership. That came across in an email that he recently sent to supporters for a Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee fundraiser. It said: "We pull the curtain back further each day on the Russian Connection, forcing National Security Adviser Michael Flynn to resign, Attorney General Sessions to recuse, and America to reflect on who's calling the shots in Washington."

You might think that Wall Street, big banks, hugely funded lobbyists, fat-check campaign contributors, the fossil fuel industry, insurance companies, military contractors and the like are calling the shots in Washington. Maybe you didn't get the memo.

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The Existential Question of Whom to Trust

Special Report: An existential question facing humankind is whom can be trusted to describe the world and its conflicts, especially since mainstream experts have surrendered to careerism, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The looming threat of World War III, a potential extermination event for the human species, is made more likely because the world's public can't count on supposedly objective experts to ascertain and evaluate facts. Instead, careerism is the order of the day among journalists, intelligence analysts and international monitors – meaning that almost no one who might normally be relied on to tell the truth can be trusted.

The dangerous reality is that this careerism, which often is expressed by a smug certainty about whatever the prevailing groupthink is, pervades not just the political world, where lies seem to be the common currency, but also the worlds of journalism, intelligence and international oversight, including United Nations agencies that are often granted greater credibility because they are perceived as less beholden to specific governments but in reality have become deeply corrupted, too.

In other words, many professionals who are counted on for digging out the facts and speaking truth to power have sold themselves to those same powerful interests in order to keep high-paying jobs and to not get tossed out onto the street. Many of these self-aggrandizing professionals – caught up in the many accouterments of success – don't even seem to recognize how far they've drifted from principled professionalism.

A good example was Saturday night's spectacle of national journalists preening in their tuxedos and gowns at the White House Correspondents Dinner, sporting First Amendment pins as if they were some brave victims of persecution. They seemed oblivious to how removed they are from Middle America and how unlikely

any of them would risk their careers by challenging one of the Establishment's favored groupthinks. Instead, these national journalists take easy shots at President Trump's buffoonish behavior and his serial falsehoods – and count themselves as endangered heroes for the effort.

Foils for Trump

Ironically, though, these pompous journalists gave Trump what was arguably his best moment in his first 100 days by serving as foils for the President as he traveled to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, on Saturday and basked in the adulation of blue-collar Americans who view the mainstream media as just one more appendage of a corrupt ruling elite.

Breaking with tradition by snubbing the annual press gala, Trump delighted the Harrisburg crowd by saying: "A large group of Hollywood celebrities and Washington media are consoling each other in a hotel ballroom" and adding: "I could not possibly be more thrilled than to be more than 100 miles away from [the] Washington swamp ... with much, much better people." The crowd booed references to the elites and cheered Trump's choice to be with the common folk.

Trump's rejection of the dinner and his frequent criticism of the mainstream media brought a defensive response from Jeff Mason, president of the White House Correspondents' Association, who complained: "We are not fake news. We are not failing news organizations. And we are not the enemy of the American people." That brought the black-tie-and-gown gathering to its feet in a standing ovation.

Perhaps the assembled media elite had forgotten that it was the mainstream U.S. media – particularly The Washington Post and The New York Times – that popularized the phrase "fake news" and directed it blunderbuss-style not only at the few Web sites that intentionally invent stories to increase their clicks but at independent-minded journalism outlets that have dared question the elite's groupthinks on issues of war, peace and globalization.

The Black List

Professional journalistic skepticism toward official claims by the U.S. government – what you should expect from reporters – became conflated with "fake news." The Post even gave front-page attention to an anonymous group called PropOrNot that published a black list of 200 Internet sites, including Consortiumnews.com and other independent-minded journalism sites, to be shunned.

But the mainstream media stars didn't like it when Trump began throwing the "fake news" slur back at them. Thus, the First Amendment lapel pins and the standing ovation for Jeff Mason's repudiation of the "fake news" label.

Yet, as the glitzy White House Correspondents Dinner demonstrated, mainstream journalists get the goodies of prestige and money while the real truth-tellers are almost always outspent, outgunned and cast out of the mainstream. Indeed, this dwindling band of honest people who are both knowledgeable and in position to expose unpleasant truths is often under mainstream attack, sometimes for unrelated personal failings and other times just for rubbing the powers-that-be the wrong way.

Perhaps, the clearest case study of this up-is-down rewards-and-punishments reality was the Iraq War's WMD rationale. Nearly across the board, the American political/media system – from U.S. intelligence analysts to the deliberative body of the U.S. Senate to the major U.S. news organizations – failed to ascertain the truth and indeed actively helped disseminate the falsehoods about Iraq hiding WMDs and even suggested nuclear weapons development. (Arguably, the “most trusted” U.S. government official at the time, Secretary of State Colin Powell, played a key role in selling the false allegations as “truth.”)

Not only did the supposed American “gold standard” for assessing information – the U.S. political, media and intelligence structure – fail miserably in the face of fraudulent claims often from self-interested Iraqi opposition figures and their neoconservative American backers, but there was minimal accountability afterwards for the “professionals” who failed to protect the public from lies and deceptions.

Profiting from Failure

Indeed, many of the main culprits remain “respected” members of the journalistic establishment. For instance, The New York Times' Pentagon correspondent Michael R. Gordon, who was the lead writer on the infamous “aluminum tubes for nuclear centrifuges” story which got the ball rolling for the Bush administration's rollout of its invade-Iraq advertising campaign in September 2002, still covers national security for the Times – and still serves as a conveyor belt for U.S. government propaganda.

The Washington Post's editorial page editor Fred Hiatt, who repeatedly informed the Post's readers that Iraq's secret possession of WMD was a “flat-fact,” is still the Post's editorial page editor, one of the most influential positions in American journalism.

Hiatt's editorial page led a years-long assault on the character of former U.S. Ambassador Joseph Wilson for the offense of debunking one of President George W. Bush's claims about Iraq seeking yellowcake uranium from Niger. Wilson had alerted the CIA to the bogus claim before the invasion of Iraq and went public with the news afterwards, but the Post treated Wilson as the real culprit,

dismissing him as “a blowhard” and trivializing the Bush administration’s destruction of his wife’s CIA career by outing her (Valerie Plame) in order to discredit Wilson’s Niger investigation.

At the end of the Post’s savaging of Wilson’s reputation and in the wake of the newspaper’s accessory role in destroying Plame’s career, Wilson and Plame decamped from Washington to New Mexico. Meanwhile, Hiatt never suffered a whit – and remains a “respected” Washington media figure to this day.

Careerist Lesson

The lesson that any careerist would draw from the Iraq case is that there is almost no downside risk in running with the pack on a national security issue. Even if you’re horrifically wrong – even if you contribute to the deaths of some 4,500 U.S. soldiers and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis – your paycheck is almost surely safe.

The same holds true if you work for an international agency that is responsible for monitoring issues like chemical weapons. Again, the Iraq example offers a good case study. In April 2002, as President Bush was clearing away the few obstacles to his Iraq invasion plans, Jose Mauricio Bustani, the head of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons [OPCW], sought to persuade Iraq to join the Chemical Weapons Convention so inspectors could verify Iraq’s claims that it had destroyed its stockpiles.

The Bush administration called that idea an “ill-considered initiative” – after all, it could have stripped away the preferred propaganda rationale for the invasion if the OPCW verified that Iraq had destroyed its chemical weapons. So, Bush’s Undersecretary of State for Arms Control John Bolton, a neocon advocate for the invasion of Iraq, pushed to have Bustani deposed. The Bush administration threatened to withhold dues to the OPCW if Bustani, a Brazilian diplomat, remained.

It now appears obvious that Bush and Bolton viewed Bustani’s real offense as interfering with their invasion scheme, but Bustani was ultimately taken down over accusations of mismanagement, although he was only a year into a new five-year term after having been reelected unanimously. The OPCW member states chose to sacrifice Bustani to save the organization from the loss of U.S. funds, but – in so doing – they compromised its integrity, making it just another agency that would bend to big-power pressure.

“By dismissing me,” Bustani said, “an international precedent will have been established whereby any duly elected head of any international organization would at any point during his or her tenure remain vulnerable to the whims of

one or a few major contributors.” He added that if the United States succeeded in removing him, “genuine multilateralism” would succumb to “unilateralism in a multilateral disguise.”

The Iran Nuclear Scam

Something similar happened regarding the International Atomic Energy Agency in 2009 when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the neocons were lusting for another confrontation with Iran over its alleged plans to build a nuclear bomb.

According to U.S. embassy cables from Vienna, Austria, the site of IAEA’s headquarters, American diplomats in 2009 were cheering the prospect that Japanese diplomat Yukiya Amano would advance U.S. interests in ways that outgoing IAEA Director General Mohamed ElBaradei wouldn’t; Amano credited his election to U.S. government support; Amano signaled he would side with the United States in its confrontation with Iran; and he stuck out his hand for more U.S. money.

In a July 9, 2009, cable, American chargé Geoffrey Pyatt said Amano was thankful for U.S. support of his election. “Amano attributed his election to support from the U.S., Australia and France, and cited U.S. intervention with Argentina as particularly decisive,” the cable said.

The appreciative Amano informed Pyatt that as IAEA director-general, he would take a different “approach on Iran from that of ElBaradei” and he “saw his primary role as implementing safeguards and UNSC [United Nations Security Council] Board resolutions,” i.e. U.S.-driven sanctions and demands against Iran.

Amano also discussed how to restructure the senior ranks of the IAEA, including elimination of one top official and the retention of another. “We wholly agree with Amano’s assessment of these two advisors and see these decisions as positive first signs,” Pyatt commented.

In return, Pyatt made clear that Amano could expect strong U.S. financial assistance, stating that “the United States would do everything possible to support his successful tenure as Director General and, to that end, anticipated that continued U.S. voluntary contributions to the IAEA would be forthcoming. Amano offered that a ‘reasonable increase’ in the regular budget would be helpful.”

What Pyatt made clear in his cable was that one IAEA official who was not onboard with U.S. demands had been fired while another who was onboard kept his job.

Pandering to Israel

Pyatt learned, too, that Amano had consulted with Israeli Ambassador Israel Michaeli “immediately after his appointment” and that Michaeli “was fully confident of the priority Amano accords verification issues.” Michaeli added that he discounted some of Amano’s public remarks about there being “no evidence of Iran pursuing a nuclear weapons capability” as just words that Amano felt he had to say “to persuade those who did not support him about his ‘impartiality.’”

In private, Amano agreed to “consultations” with the head of the Israeli Atomic Energy Commission, Pyatt reported. (It is ironic indeed that Amano would have secret contacts with Israeli officials about Iran’s alleged nuclear weapons program, which never yielded a single bomb, when Israel possesses a large and undeclared nuclear arsenal.)

In a subsequent cable dated Oct. 16, 2009, the U.S. mission in Vienna said Amano “took pains to emphasize his support for U.S. strategic objectives for the Agency. Amano reminded ambassador [Glyn Davies] on several occasions that he was solidly in the U.S. court on every key strategic decision, from high-level personnel appointments to the handling of Iran’s alleged nuclear weapons program.

“More candidly, Amano noted the importance of maintaining a certain ‘constructive ambiguity’ about his plans, at least until he took over for DG ElBaradei in December” 2009.

In other words, Amano was a bureaucrat eager to bend in directions favored by the United States and Israel regarding Iran’s nuclear program. Amano’s behavior surely contrasted with how the more independent-minded ElBaradei resisted some of Bush’s key claims about Iraq’s supposed nuclear weapons program, correctly denouncing some documents as forgeries.

The world’s public got its insight into the Amano scam only because the U.S. embassy cables were among those given to WikiLeaks by Pvt. Bradley (now Chelsea) Manning, for which Manning received a 35-year prison sentence (which was finally commuted by President Obama before leaving office, with Manning now scheduled to be released in May – having served nearly seven years in prison).

It also is significant that Geoffrey Pyatt was rewarded for his work lining up the IAEA behind the anti-Iranian propaganda campaign by being made U.S. ambassador to Ukraine where he helped engineer the Feb. 22, 2014 coup that overthrew elected President Viktor Yanukovich. Pyatt was on the infamous “fuck the E.U.” call with U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland weeks before the coup as Nuland handpicked Ukraine’s new leaders

and Pyatt pondered how “to midwife this thing.”

Rewards and Punishments

The existing rewards-and-punishments system, which punishes truth-tellers and rewards those who deceive the public, has left behind a thoroughly corrupted information structure in the United States and in the West, in general.

Across the mainstream of politics and media, there are no longer the checks and balances that have protected democracy for generations. Those safeguards have been washed away by the flood of careerism.

The situation is made even more dangerous because there also exists a rapidly expanding cadre of skilled propagandists and psychological operations practitioners, sometimes operating under the umbrella of “strategic communications.” Under trendy theories of “smart power,” information has become simply another weapon in the geopolitical arsenal, with “strategic communications” sometimes praised as the preferable option to “hard power,” i.e. military force.

The thinking goes that if the United States can overthrow a troublesome government by exploiting media/propaganda assets, deploying trained activists and spreading selective stories about “corruption” or other misconduct, isn’t that better than sending in the Marines?

While that argument has the superficial appeal of humanitarianism – i.e., the avoidance of armed conflict – it ignores the corrosiveness of lies and smears, hollowing out the foundations of democracy, a structure that rests ultimately on an informed electorate. Plus, the clever use of propaganda to oust disfavored governments often leads to violence and war, as we have seen in targeted countries, such as Iraq, Syria and Ukraine.

Wider War

Regional conflicts also carry the risk of wider war, a danger compounded by the fact that the American public is fed a steady diet of dubious narratives designed to rile up the population and to give politicians an incentive to “do something.” Since these American narratives often deviate far from a reality that is well known to the people in the targeted countries, the contrasting storylines make the finding of common ground almost impossible.

If, for instance, you buy into the Western narrative that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad gleefully gases “beautiful babies,” you would tend to support the “regime change” plans of the neoconservatives and liberal interventionists. If, however, you reject that mainstream narrative – and believe that Al Qaeda

and its friendly regional powers may be staging chemical attacks to bring the U.S. military in on their “regime change” project – you might favor a political settlement that leaves Assad’s fate to the later judgment of the Syrian people.

Similarly, if you accept the West’s storyline about Russia invading Ukraine and subjugating the people of Crimea by force – while also shooting down Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 for no particular reason – you might support aggressive countermoves against “Russian aggression,” even if that means risking nuclear war.

If, on the other hand, you know about the Nuland-Pyatt scheme for ousting Ukraine’s elected president in 2014 and realize that much of the other anti-Russian narrative is propaganda or disinformation – and that MH-17 might well have been shot down by some element of Ukrainian government forces and then blamed on the Russians [see here and here] – you might look for ways to avoid a new and dangerous Cold War.

Who to Trust?

But the question is: whom to trust? And this is no longer some rhetorical or philosophical point about whether one can ever know the complete truth. It is now a very practical question of life or death, not just for us as individuals but as a species and as a planet.

The existential issue before us is whether – blinded by propaganda and disinformation – we will stumble into a nuclear conflict between superpowers that could exterminate all life on earth or perhaps leave behind a radiated hulk of a planet suitable only for cockroaches and other hardy life forms.

You might think that with the stakes so high, the people in positions to head off such a catastrophe would behave more responsibly and professionally. But then there are events like Saturday night’s White House Correspondents Dinner with self-important media stars puffing about with their First Amendment pins. And there’s President Trump’s realization that by launching missiles and talking tough he can buy himself some political space from the Establishment (even as he sells out average Americans and kills some innocent foreigners). Those realities show that seriousness is the farthest thing from the minds of Washington’s insiders.

It’s just too much fun – and too profitable in the short-term – to keep playing the game and hauling in the goodies. If and when the mushroom clouds appear, these careerists can turn to the cameras and blame someone else.

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](#)).

Team Trump Lines Up with Israel

Israel's abuse of the Palestinians remains an open sore in the Middle East even as Israel and Team Trump try to turn everyone's attention to the red herring of Iran, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

By Paul R. Pillar

The United Nations always has had, and rightfully so, a strong role in handling the conflict between Arabs and Jews over land in Palestine. When the Ottoman Empire collapsed after World War I, Britain assumed administration of Palestine under a mandate from the League of Nations.

In the aftermath of World War II, when an overburdened Britain declared that it was ridding itself of the burden of Palestine, and with the League of Nations having died, it was appropriate that the successor international organization, the United Nations, would address the issue. A special committee of the United Nations drew up a partition plan under which Palestine would be divided into a Jewish state and an Arab state. The U.N. General Assembly approved a modified version of the plan in November 1948.

The plan was generous to the Jewish side, as reflected in heavy Zionist lobbying (especially lobbying in the United States) in favor of it, and Arab states voting against the plan in the General Assembly. Although Jews constituted only one-fourth, and Arabs three-fourths, of the population of Palestine at the time, the proposed Jewish state would get over half the land. Subsequent armed combat made the disconnect between population and land even greater. The land controlled by the Jewish state went from 55 percent of Palestine in the original plan of the UN committee, to 61 percent in the modified version that the General Assembly voted on, to 78 percent after the armistice of 1949, to 100 percent after the war that Israel initiated in 1967.

The U.N. partition plan remains Israel's founding document: an international charter for the creation of the State of Israel. This is too easily forgotten among more recent rhetoric about the United Nations being allegedly an anti-Israeli forum. The same partition plan also was a charter for creation of a Palestinian Arab state. With the subsequent events determined by Israel's superior armed might, that part of the charter has gone unrealized. It

represents unfinished business. So members of the United Nations appropriately have remained, as is said in diplomatic parlance, seized of the matter.

Haley's Off-Point Comments

One continuing manifestation of remaining seized of that unfinished business is a quarterly Security Council meeting in which any U.N. member state is allowed to speak and in which the agenda item is "The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question." Palestine has, in fact, been the prime focus of these gatherings.

But in the most recent such meeting, held last week – and with the United States chairing the Security Council this month – U.S. Ambassador Nikki Haley declared that she was going to talk not about Palestine but instead about Iran. Israeli ambassador Danny Danon, even though his country is one of the direct parties to the conflict over Palestine, eagerly devoted most of his speech to attacks on Iran.

The other participants in the debate focused more on the Palestinian problem, in accordance with the unfinished business, with traditional regional concerns, and with the published agenda item. There were, to be sure, some other criticisms of Iran, including from Iran's local rivals in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, but even with them the problem of Palestine was not far from the surface. The Emirati representative, for example, stated that finding a resolution to the Palestinian question was a "fundamental priority" of his government, and that the UAE was deeply concerned about how the absence of a resolution was denying people in the occupied Palestinian territories their inalienable rights.

The current Israeli government repeatedly plays up the idea that with so much other turmoil in the Middle East, it is somehow not appropriate to focus international attention on the unfinished business in Palestine. The Israeli position involves not just a casting of doubt on the ability of diplomats to walk and chew gum at the same time, but also an assertion that most people in the Middle East don't care much any more about the plight of the Palestinians. Many American sympathizers of the Israeli government speak in much the same terms and talk about insufficient ripeness in being able to do anything about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Finding Excuses

This is one of what has been a series of excuses for inaction. At other times the principal excuse may have been that there has been too much disunity on the Palestinian side for that side to produce an effective interlocutor –

conveniently ignoring how Israel has done all it can to foment that disunity, even withholding tax receipts due to the Palestinian Authority when the Fatah-run P.A. has made any moves toward healing the breach with Hamas. Now the regional turmoil excuse, with that turmoil so obvious in Syria and elsewhere, has become the favored excuse *du jour*.

In a note distributed before the Security Council meeting, the United States asked countries to consider, "Who are the regional players that most benefit from chaos in the region?" One honest and accurate answer to that question would be: the Netanyahu government, because of the excuse that chaos provides in deflecting international attention and pressure away from the Israeli occupation and colonization of Palestinian territory.

The assertions about Middle Easterners no longer caring much about the Palestinian problem are simply not true, as evidenced by government statements, temperature-taking among Arab publics, and exploitation of the issue by extremist groups. Although undoubtedly there has been some diversion of attention toward other troubles, the reasons for widespread resonance of the Palestinian issue are still present. These reasons include sympathy with co-ethnics and co-religionists, a more broadly felt sense of injustice, and awareness of the destabilizing potential of letting the problem fester, including especially the extremist exploitation of the issue.

A Dormant Peace Plan

Leaders of the Arab states, in an Arab League summit meeting last month, found time to reaffirm their call for a two-state solution and their commitment to the 15-year-old Saudi-initiated peace plan that offers full and normal relations with Israel in exchange for ending the occupation of lands Israel conquered in the 1967 war. Modifications to the plan have made clear that mutually agreeable land swaps would be acceptable to the Arab governments.

The summit meeting's host, King Abdullah of Jordan, stated, "There can be no peace nor stability in the region without a just and comprehensive solution to the Palestinian cause, the core issue of the Middle East, based on the two-state solution."

In addition to whatever this reaffirmation says about the Arab regimes' walking-and-gum-chewing ability, it also puts the lie both to the notion that the region doesn't care about the Palestinian issue any more and to the notion that the Arabs are unwilling to live in peace and in a normal relationship with Israel. This fresh statement by the Arab League received far too little attention in Washington and by the Trump administration.

Last week's session at the Security Council demonstrated that, despite the efforts of Haley and Danon, people outside of their two governments really do still care a lot about the untenable and destabilizing plight of the Palestinians. The Council session, and the attempt to turn a discussion about Palestine into a discussion about Iran, also demonstrates how much the Trump administration's tortured effort to attribute all malignity in the Middle East to Iran is motivated by the Israeli-originated use of Iran as a grand diversion.

The Israeli government's principal response whenever it begins to feel uncomfortable attention to its occupation is to declare that Iran is the "real problem" in the region and that's what people should be giving their attention to instead. The Trump administration has been following the same script. That script is not an effective way to address either actual issues with Iran or the problem of an occupation that in a few weeks will reach the half-century mark.

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

Risk of Baiting Trump on His 100 Days

As President Trump reaches the 100-day mark, the liberal and mainstream criticism is that he hasn't accomplished much, but that baiting only makes Trump likely to wage more wars and push a more right-wing agenda, says Sam Hussein.

By Sam Hussein

A CNN headline blares before the end of President Trump's "First 100 Days": "Trump's race against the clock to do something." Similarly, "Democracy Now" headlines a segment: "'It Has Not Gone Well': 100 Days of President Trump and No Major Achievements."

It certainly hasn't gone well, but Trump has in fact accomplished a great deal. For one, Neil Gorsuch was put on the Supreme Court using "pro-life" rhetoric and has already facilitated death. Gorsuch provided the deciding vote in denying convicted murderer Ledell Lee's request for a DNA test to prove his innocence because Arkansas' supply of the execution drug midazolam was nearing its expiration date. Gorsuch's ascension to the high court basically consolidates rightwing control over all three branches of government.

Trump also has assembled an incredible cabinet of corporate bosses, Wall Street operators and pro-war apparatchiks. And he has adroitly broken the letter and spirit of virtually any positive promises he made to curtail U.S. interventionism and war-making around the world; to take on Wall Street; to up taxes on the wealthy; etc. He appears to be escalating Obama's war on whistleblowers to a war on publishers by threatening WikiLeaks and its founder Julian Assange.

What are euphemistically called "flip flops" are actually betrayals of the interests of most of the people who actually voted for Trump. This is a phenomenal accomplishment for a politician to have managed in his first 100 days in office.

Like Obama before him, Trump has ensured the continued solidification of an oppressive pro-war and pro-Wall Street establishment that runs at odds to the aspirations and interests of much of the U.S. public, to say nothing of the global public. By putting forward the criticism that Trump has "no major achievements," do alleged opponents of Trump pretend that they are helping prevent further damage by him?

Trump could be carrying out horrific policies but many media outlets would ignore the substance and focus on some dumb Trump comment, such as – stop the presses – the White House misidentified Steven Mnuchin as "commerce secretary" when he's actually treasury secretary. They should identify Mnuchin as a Goldman Sach insider, foreclosure king, or someone whose net financial worth – estimated at \$46 million – is only a fraction of that of Wilbur Ross, the actual commerce secretary, who has \$2.5 billion.

This non-criticism of Trump will actually empower him to do more damage. The problem here is quite similar to how George H. W. Bush was depicted early in his administration by liberals: "A wimp." The sensible media watch group FAIR even ran a piece scrutinizing the Bush administration's attempts to refashion his public image as a "rough rider." But this depiction of Bush as "a wimp" was even more consequential: it helped enable his use of military violence, with the invasion of Panama in 1989 and then the first attack on Iraq in 1990-91.

It's clear that when liberal commentator Van Jones calls Trump "presidential" because the President in an address to Congress exploited the widow of a Special Forces soldier who died in Trump's first hastily authorized military violence (a botched and bloody raid in Yemen), that the praise increased the likelihood of more violence. (Since then, Trump won widespread media praise for his hasty decision to blame Syria for the chemical-weapons incident at Khan Sheikhoun and – without United Nations or Congressional approval – rain 59 Tomahawk missiles down on Syria, reportedly killing nine civilians, including four children.)

As Trump racks up more “accomplishments” – as he and his cabal of corporate bosses cut deals with House Speaker Paul Ryan and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell – the liberal criticism of Trump “not accomplishing anything” will deserve an assist on every one of those “accomplishments.” Mission accomplished?

Sam Hussein is communications director for the Institute for Public Accuracy, a consortium of policy analysts, and founder of VotePact.org, which encourages cooperation between principled progressives and conscientious conservatives.

More NYT ‘Spin’ on the Syria-Sarin Case

Exclusive: The New York Times is at it again with another slanted report on the April 4 chemical weapons incident in Syria, applying ridicule rather than reason to prevent a real evaluation of this war-or-peace moment, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

In blaming Syrian President Bashar al-Assad for the April 4 chemical incident in Khan Sheikoun, The New York Times and other Western news outlets have made a big deal out of discrepancies in the timing and other details provided by the Syrian and Russian governments.

The Times and the others also have chided anyone who notes that Assad had no logical reason to undertake a sarin attack since his forces were making solid gains and he had just learned that the Trump administration was dropping the longstanding U.S. goal of “regime change” in Syria.

To those of us outside the mainstream media bubble, there seemed to be little or no military advantage to be gained. Instead, Assad would be risking more international intervention, which has ripped his country apart for the past six years. But the Times and other major outlets dismissed our logic by arguing that Assad was simply announcing his impunity in some particularly brutal Arab-sort-of-way.

However, neither the value that the Times and others placed on the Russian-Syrian timing discrepancies nor the strange explanation of Assad’s motive made any sense. After all, if Assad were making some bizarre public declaration of his impunity, why would he then deny that his forces were responsible for the chemical attack? Wouldn’t he simply say, “yes, I did it and I don’t care what anyone thinks”? Isn’t that what impunity means: that you do whatever you want knowing that no one can hold you accountable? Instead, Assad has consistently

denied ordering the attack.

The gotcha observation about the time element of the bombings fails the logic test, too. Why would Syria and Russia say Syrian warplanes carried out a conventional attack on Khan Sheikhoun around noon if the actual attack occurred around 6 a.m., as it apparently did? There was nothing to be gained for them by having the timing off by six hours, since the point that Syria and Russia were making was that there were indeed airstrikes but that they were conventional bombs that may have unintentionally struck an Al Qaeda depot holding chemical weapons and thus released them. The timing element was immaterial to that point.

What this apparent timing error suggests is confusion, not “spin,” as the Times insists in a tendentious April 27 video by Malachy Browne, Natalie Reneau and Mark Scheffler, entitled “How Syria and Russia Spun a Chemical Strike.”

The Syrians and Russians appeared perplexed by what had happened. Their officials understood that a conventional airstrike had been carried out and stated what they believed the time was. The time discrepancy either meant the Syrian air-wing commander had dispatched warplanes earlier than expected or that some other entity carried out the 6 a.m. strike. But the Syrians and the Russians would seem to have no reason to lie about this detail.

The Times also makes a big deal out of Assad denying that the attack took place – and the video then shows some bombs exploding. But that is just the Times deceiving people. Assad is not denying that a bombing raid took place; he’s denying his military’s deployment of chemical weapons.

Intervention by Air

Another false assumption pervading the Western accounts on this and other chemical incidents in Syria is that only the Syrian government and its Russian allies have control of the skies. That is clearly not true. Various military forces, including those of the U.S. and its allies, as well as Israel and – to some degree – the rebels have air capabilities in Syria.

According to Syrian accounts, the rebels have captured some government helicopters and apparently used one in what United Nations investigators were told by multiple eyewitnesses was a staged chemical-weapons attack in 2014 with the goal of sticking the blame on the Syrian regime.

Further, the U.S. and its allies have been conducting airstrikes across much of Syria in campaigns against Islamic State and Al Qaeda-linked terror groups, which have been supported by Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar and other Sunni-led sheikdoms. Turkey has been active, too, with strikes against Kurdish forces. And Israel has hit repeatedly at Syrian targets to promote what it regards as its

interests, including destruction of Iranian weapons believed headed to the Lebanese militant group, Hezbollah.

Some – if not all – of these entities had a far stronger motive to create a chemical-weapons incident in Syria on April 4 than the Syrian government did. At the end of March, the Trump administration announced that it was no longer a U.S. priority to overthrow the Assad government, an announcement that upset several of the countries involved in the Syrian conflict, including Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States and Israel.

All of them – having committed resources and prestige to achieve “regime change” in Syria – had motive to overturn President Trump’s pronouncement. (Israel has had “regime change” in Syria at the top of its to-do list since at least the mid-1990s.) How better to keep that hope alive than to stage another chemical-weapons attack and blame it on Assad?(Another sarin attack in August 2013 also now appears to have been a staged incident by Al Qaeda that killed hundreds while almost tricking President Obama into ordering a massive U.S. military strike on government forces.)

Shortly after the incident at Khan Sheikhoun, I was told by an intelligence source that U.S. satellite imagery had picked up what looked like a drone in the vicinity at around the time that the poison gas was released. Despite some technical difficulties in tracking its route, the source said the analysts believed that it may have come from a Saudi-Israeli special operations base in Jordan, used to assist the rebels.

There are also other combinations of factors that should have been carefully evaluated before President Trump jumped to his Assad-did-it conclusion and fired off 59 Tomahawk missiles at a Syrian airbase on April 6, but they weren’t given serious thought in the rush to blame Assad.

For instance, Al Qaeda’s clever propagandists could have again staged a chemical attack on the ground by creating a crater in the road and inserting what was purported to be a chemical-weapons canister. The Times and others have noted that the crater was not visible in earlier satellite images but that observation doesn’t mean the crater had to be created by an aerial bomb; a ground explosion or simple digging could have done the trick – with the crushed canister inserted later.

Dubious Narrative

The canister-in-the-crater story struck MIT’s technology and national security expert Theodore Postol as particularly odd because on-scene photos showed people climbing into the supposedly sarin-saturated crater wearing minimal protection

and not keeling over dead. Postol also said the canister appeared to have been crushed rather than exploded.

There is also the possibility that some third party with access to sarin or other powerful chemical weapons could have delivered the poison gas by air – possibly from that drone – with the rebels either coordinating with that delivery before the fact or reacting to the opportunity after the fact.

The hard truth is that intelligence services from a number of countries could fit the bill in terms of producing sarin or some similar substance that could mimic what Syria once had in its arsenal, although those chemical weapons were supposedly destroyed in 2014 as part of an agreement hammered out by Russia and the United States.

And there are plenty of ruthless intelligence operatives on all sides who would have found the deaths of 80 or so people acceptable collateral damage to advance a geopolitical priority. The timing, so close to the Trump administration's major announcement that Assad no longer had to go, would have represented a logical motive for such a ruse.

The other problem in assessing what has or hasn't happened in Syria over the past six years is that all sides, but particularly those seeking "regime change," have deployed sophisticated propaganda operations to the combat zone.

Anti-regime activists – financed and supplied by the West and the Gulf States – understand the emotional value of showing dying children. These propagandists have regular and uncritical access to major Western media outlets, from the hipsters at VICE to the neocons and liberal-interventionists at The New York Times.

In other words, what is still desperately needed in this latest chapter of the Syrian tragedy is some honest broker who could conduct a serious investigation that isn't contaminated by all the previous propaganda-infused narratives. But the chances of finding that person or group are slim to none.

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](#)).

Intel Vets Voice Doubts on Syrian Crisis

Two dozen former U.S. intelligence professionals are urging the American people to demand clear evidence that the Syrian government was behind the April 4 chemical incident before President Trump dives deeper into another war.

AN OPEN MEMORANDUM FOR THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

From: Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS)

Subject: Mattis 'No Doubt' Stance on Alleged Syrian CW Smacks of Politicized Intelligence

Donald Trump's new Secretary of Defense, retired Marine General James "Mad Dog" Mattis, during a recent trip to Israel, commented on the issue of Syria's retention and use of chemical weapons in violation of its obligations to dispose of the totality of its declared chemical weapons capability in accordance with the provisions of both the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and relevant U.N. Security Council resolutions.

"There can be no doubt," Secretary Mattis said during a April 21, 2017 joint news conference with his Israeli counterpart, Minister of Defense Avigdor Lieberman, "in the international community's mind that Syria has retained chemical weapons in violation of its agreement and its statement that it had removed them all." To the contrary, Mattis noted, "I can say authoritatively they have retained some."

Lieberman joined Mattis in his assessment, noting that Israel had "100 percent information that [the] Assad regime used chemical weapons against [Syrian] rebels."

Both Mattis and Lieberman seemed to be channeling assessments offered to reporters two days prior, on April 19, 2017, by anonymous Israeli defense officials that the April 4, 2017 chemical weapons attack on the Syrian village of Khan Shaykhun was ordered by Syrian military commanders, with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's personal knowledge, and that Syria retained a stock of "between one and three tons" of chemical weapons.

The Israeli intelligence followed on the heels of an April 13, 2017 speech given by CIA Director Mike Pompeo, who told an audience at the Center for Strategic and International Studies that, once information had come in about a chemical attack on Khan Shaykhun, the CIA had been able to "develop several hypothesis around that, and then to begin to develop fact patterns which either supported or suggested that the hypothesis wasn't right." The CIA, Pompeo said, was "in

relatively short order able to deliver to [President Trump] a high-confidence assessment that, in fact, it was the Syrian regime that had launched chemical strikes against its own people in [Khan Shaykhun.]”

The speed in which this assessment was made is of some concern. Both Director Pompeo, during his CSIS remarks, and National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, during comments to the press on April 6, 2017, note that President Trump turned to the intelligence community early on in the crisis to understand better “the circumstances of the attack and who was responsible.” McMaster indicated that the U.S. Intelligence Community, working with allied partners, was able to determine with “a very high degree of confidence” where the attack originated.

Both McMaster and Pompeo spoke of the importance of open source imagery in confirming that a chemical attack had taken place, along with evidence collected from the victims themselves – presumably blood samples – that confirmed the type of agent that was used in the attack. This initial assessment drove the decision to use military force – McMaster goes on to discuss a series of National Security Council meetings where military options were discussed and decided upon; the discussion about the intelligence underpinning the decision to strike Syria was over.

The danger of this rush toward an intelligence decision by Director Pompeo and National Security Advisor McMaster is that once the President and his top national security advisors have endorsed an intelligence-based conclusion, and authorized military action based upon that conclusion, it becomes virtually impossible for that conclusion to change. Intelligence assessments from that point forward will embrace facts that sustain this conclusion, and reject those that don't; it is the definition of politicized intelligence, even if those involved disagree.

A similar “no doubt” moment had occurred nearly 15 years ago when, in August 2002, Vice President Cheney delivered a speech before the Veterans of Foreign Wars. “There is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction,” Cheney declared. “There is no doubt he is amassing them to use against our friends, against our allies and against us.” The message Cheney was sending to the Intelligence Community was clear: Saddam Hussein had WMD; there was no need to answer that question anymore.

The CIA vehemently denies that either Vice President Cheney or anyone at the White House put pressure on its analysts to alter their assessments. This may very well be true, but if it is, then the record of certainty – and arrogance – that existed in the mindset of senior intelligence managers and analysts only further erodes public confidence in the assessments produced by the CIA, especially when, as is the case with Iraq and Weapons of Mass Destruction – the

agency was found so lacking. Stuart Cohen, a veteran CIA intelligence analyst who served as the acting Chairman of the National Intelligence Council, oversaw the production of the 2002 Iraq National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) that was used to make case for Iraq possessing WMD that was used to justify war.

According to Mr. Cohen, he had four National Intelligence Officers with “over 100 years’ collective work experience on weapons of mass destruction issues” backed up by hundreds of analysts with “thousands of man-years invested in studying these issues.”

On the basis of this commitment of talent alone, Mr. Cohen assessed that “no reasonable person could have viewed the totality of the information that the Intelligence Community had at its disposal ... and reached any conclusion or alternative views that were profoundly different from those that we reached,” namely that – judged with high confidence – “Iraq had chemical and biological weapons as well as missiles with ranges in excess of the 150 kilometer limit imposed by the UN Security Council.”

Two facts emerge from this expression of intellectual hubris. First, the U.S. Intelligence Community was, in fact, wrong in its estimate on Iraq’s WMD capability, throwing into question the standards used to assign “high confidence” ratings to official assessments. Second, the “reasonable person” standard cited by Cohen must be reassessed, perhaps based upon a benchmark derived from a history of analytical accuracy rather than time spent behind a desk.

The major lesson learned here, however, is that the U.S. Intelligence Community, and in particular the CIA, more often than not hides behind self-generated platitudes (“high confidence”, “reasonable person”) to disguise a process of intelligence analysis that has long ago been subordinated to domestic politics.

It is important to point out the fact that Israel, too, was wrong about Iraq’s WMD. According to Shlomo Brom, a retired Israeli Intelligence Officer, Israeli intelligence seriously overplayed the threat posed by Iraqi WMD in the lead up to the 2003 Iraq War, including a 2002 briefing to NATO provided by Efraim Halevy, who at the time headed the Israeli Mossad, or intelligence service, that Israel had “clear indications” that Iraq had reconstituted its WMD programs after U.N. weapons inspectors left Iraq in 1998.

The Israeli intelligence assessments on Iraq, Mr. Brom concluded, were most likely colored by political considerations, such as the desire for regime change in Iraq. In this light, neither the presence of Avigdor Lieberman, nor the anonymous background briefings provided by Israel about Syria’s chemical weapons capabilities, should be used to provide any credence to Secretary Mattis’s

embrace of the “no doubt” standard when it comes to Syria’s alleged possession of chemical weapons.

The intelligence data that has been used to back up the allegations of Syrian chemical weapons use has been far from conclusive. Allusions to intercepted Syrian communications have been offered as “proof”, but the Iraq experience – in particular former Secretary of State Colin Powell’s unfortunate experience before the U.N. Security Council – show how easily such intelligence can be misunderstood and misused.

Inconsistencies in the publicly available imagery which the White House (and CIA) have so heavily relied upon have raised legitimate questions about the veracity of any conclusions drawn from these sources (and begs the question as to where the CIA’s own Open Source Intelligence Center was in this episode.) The blood samples used to back up claims of the presence of nerve agent among the victims was collected void of any verifiable chain of custody, making their sourcing impossible to verify, and as such invalidates any conclusions based upon their analysis.

In the end, the conclusions CIA Director Pompeo provided to the President was driven by a fundamental rethinking of the CIA’s analysts when it came to Syria and chemical weapons that took place in 2014. Initial CIA assessments in the aftermath of the disarmament of Syria’s chemical weapons seemed to support the Syrian government’s stance that it had declared the totality of its holding of chemical weapons, and had turned everything over to the OPCW for disposal. However, in 2014, OPCW inspectors had detected traces of Sarin and VX nerve agent precursors at sites where the Syrians had indicated no chemical weapons activity had taken place; other samples showed the presence of weaponized Sarin nerve agent.

The Syrian explanation that the samples detected were caused by cross-contamination brought on by the emergency evacuation of chemical precursors and equipment used to handle chemical weapons necessitated by the ongoing Civil War was not accepted by the inspectors, and this doubt made its way into the minds of the CIA analysts, who closely followed the work of the OPCW inspectors in Syria.

One would think that the CIA would operate using the adage of “once bitten, twice shy” when assessing inspector-driven doubt; U.N. inspectors in Iraq, driven by a combination of the positive sampling combined with unverifiable Iraqi explanations, created an atmosphere of doubt about the veracity of Iraqi declarations that all chemical weapons had been destroyed. The CIA embraced the U.N. inspectors’ conclusions, and discounted the Iraqi version of events; as it turned out, Iraq was telling the truth.

While the jury is still out about whether or not Syria is, like Iraq, telling the truth, or whether the suspicions of inspectors are well founded, one thing is clear: a reasonable person would do well to withhold final judgment until all the facts are in. (Note: The U.S. proclivity for endorsing the findings of U.N. inspectors appears not to include the Khan Shaykhun attack; while both Syria and Russia have asked the OPCW to conduct a thorough investigation of the April 4, 2017 incident, the OPCW has been blocked from doing so by the United States and its allies.)

CIA Director Pompeo's job is not to make policy – the intelligence his agency provides simply informs policy. It is not known if the U.S. Intelligence Community will be producing a formal National Intelligence Estimate addressing the Syrian chemical weapons issue, although the fact that the United States has undertaken military action under the premise that these weapons exist more than underscores the need for such a document, especially in light of repeated threats made by the Trump administration that follow-on strikes might be necessary.

Making policy is, however, the job of Secretary of Defense Mattis. At the end of the day, Secretary of Defense Mattis will need to make his own mind up as to the veracity of any intelligence used to justify military action. Mattis's new job requires that he does more than simply advise the President on military options; he needs to ensure that the employment of these options is justified by the facts.

In the case of Syria, the "no doubt" standard Mattis has employed does not meet the "reasonable man" standard. Given the consequences that are attached to his every word, Secretary Mattis would be well advised not to commit to a "no doubt" standard until there is, literally, no doubt.

For the Steering Group, Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity

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Trump's Next Most Dangerous Possibility

Assuming President Trump doesn't blunder into World War III, the next greatest harm he may do is reverse the modest U.S. steps toward fighting global warming, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

By Paul R. Pillar

With the wide path of destruction that Donald Trump has been cutting – in which the damage is affecting matters ranging from principles of nondiscrimination to ethical integrity of government officials to reliable health care for Americans – it is easy to lose sight of what ultimately would be the most consequential destruction of all: the damage to a habitable planet.

The consequences may not be as immediately apparent, during the first 100 days or even during four years, as some of the other carnage, but the importance to humanity is even greater. As with many other Trump policies, it is not yet clear exactly what the administration will do regarding a specific initiative such as the Paris accord on climate change, but the overall thrust of opposing any serious effort to retard global warming is all too obvious.

The recent demonstrations known as the march for science, although ostensibly not aimed at any one leader, were a salutary expression of concern, given that denial of climate change and the associated opposition against efforts to slow global warming represent one of the most glaring rejections of science, right along with the Seventeenth Century inquisition of Galileo. The rejection is of a piece with Trump's contempt for truth on most any topic.

It is hard to know what goes through the minds of the climate change deniers and skeptics that Trump has installed in his administration. Most likely they are smart enough to know better but are playing out an appallingly selfish, politically narrow-minded, and short-sighted approach toward what sort of world will be left to their children and grandchildren. This is suggested by some of their contrived verbal formulations.

For example, Scott Pruitt, to whom Trump has given the job of presiding over the evisceration of the Environmental Protection Agency, says, "I think that measuring with precision human activity on the climate is something very challenging to do..." Who's talking about "precision"? That's a false standard.

The overwhelming scientific consensus is that human activity is a major, and

probably the major, contributor to what is highly consequential global warming, even if the exact effects cannot be measured or predicted with “precision.”

The posture assumed on this issue by the likes of Trump and Pruitt is highly irresponsible. The *Washington Post* editorial page puts it aptly: “Children studying [Trump’s] presidency will ask, ‘How could anyone have done this?’ ”

The Why of Climate Denial

Contempt and disdain are proper attitudes to adopt toward the climate change deniers, including the ones in the current administration. They should be shamed either for displaying such inexcusable ignorance or, what is even worse, for displaying selfishness and short-sightedness despite knowing better.

But that is not enough. And the problem goes far beyond Donald Trump. It extends to much of the Republican Party. As the *Post* editorialists observe, the GOP is “a once-great American political party embracing rank reality-denial.” James Inhofe was throwing snowballs in the Senate well before Trump was elected.

A savvy response to the deniers is to point out some of the more immediately visible economic and political consequences of the destructive approach toward climate change that the current administration has embraced. One should point out how not being in the forefront of developing renewable energy sources represents regression, not progress, for the U.S. economy, no matter how much false hope is given to Appalachian coal miners about getting jobs back. Former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg is a prominent political leader who commendably is adding his influential voice to this subject.

One also should point out how the Trump administration’s degenerate posture on energy and climate change isolates the United States internationally. The posture makes the United States an object of disdain for taking a Dark Ages approach toward an issue in which, more than any other, everyone in the world has a stake. Anyone in the United States who professes to care about U.S. leadership in the world ought to be concerned about this, regardless of attitudes about atmospheric science.

The loss of U.S. leadership is especially evident in comparison with the other of the two biggest emitters of greenhouse gases: China. Although several years ago China had a backward view of the issue of climate change, seeing it as a Western excuse for trying to retard China’s economy – a notion that Donald Trump would later adopt in the reverse direction by describing climate change as a Chinese “hoax” – Beijing is now making a concerted effort to do something about the problem.

China may have already passed, as of four years ago, its peak use of coal. There

are no signs that the Trump administration's back-sliding on the issue has lessened China's commitment to take a progressive and responsible path on the matter.

Besides revamping its own energy structure, China has become a global leader on the issue. And besides being persuaded by the scientific research that describes how vulnerable China is to damage from climate change, Beijing also sees its progressive posture on the subject as a further way to exercise soft power in the sense of international influence.

Trump's retrograde attitude toward many aspects of the international order that have served the United States well has already meant surrendering much global leadership to China. His backward attitude on climate change means surrendering still more.

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

France Circles Back to Status Quo

Though the names are different, the French election is playing out much like the last one when a candidate who might have brought change was brought down by scandal, opening the way for the same-ol' policies, writes Gilbert Doctorow.

By Gilbert Doctorow

The vast majority of commentary in U.S. and West European media about the first round of voting in the French presidential election on April 23 concurred that the vote represented an unprecedented repudiation of the political establishment. After all, neither of the two top vote-getters, Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen, belonged to the major center-right or center-left parties, the Republicans and the Socialists respectively. The ugly character assassination pervading the campaign was also noted.

And yet, in many ways, the French first-round outcome was precisely "precedented" within French experience if we look back just five years to the election that brought Francois Hollande to power and, still more, within the U.S. experience if we look back over the several "bait and switch" presidential elections of the past quarter century.

In 2012, the French presidential candidate best prepared by experience and knowledge to lead France out of its economic and social woes was Dominique Strauss-Kahn, at the time Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund. He was widely expected to receive the nomination of the Socialist Party, but was brought down by a sex scandal that many believed at the time was an entrapment arranged by his enemies, including those in the United States where Strauss-Kahn's sexual profligacy led to his indictment for sexual assault although the charges were later dropped.

Because of Strauss-Kahn's legal troubles, the majority of French who had their fill of President Nicolas Sarkozy were left with the Socialists' poor second choice, Francois Hollande, who proved over the last five years that he was witless and utterly lacking in substance. During his tenure, France has limped along and played a supporting role to the Continent's hegemon, Germany.

In 2016, the presidential candidate best prepared by experience and knowledge to lead France was Francois Fillon. He offered both domestic and foreign policies that would mark a significant departure from the wishy-washy and ineffectual programs of Hollande and of Sarkozy before him. Perhaps most unorthodox of these policies within the Center-Right, from which he came, was his advocacy of good, constructive relations with Russia.

But Fillon was brought down by a concerted campaign of character assassination. Yes, he was likely guilty of abusing the hiring privileges of his office to assign state compensation to his wife and sons. But that has been a very widespread abuse in the French political establishment and represents institutionalized corruption that did not begin with and will not end with Fillon.

Democratic politics is not for Boy Scouts. It has always and will always have rough edges – and candidates will not be perfect men and women. The question, which should count above all others, is whether the candidate has the programs that will change people's lives for the better and the force of will and political skills to realize them.

The Macron Muddle

Meanwhile, the administrative resources of the French government and the media have been used to promote the candidacy of a total nonentity, Emanuel Macron, whose main virtue is that he is NOT the National Front's Marine Le Pen, the great nightmare candidate for the French establishment and beyond its borders for the European Union establishment, as well as for supporters of globalism around the world.

Macron's second featured attribute is his youth. At 39, he will be the Fifth Republic's youngest ever President. In this sense his candidacy parallels electoral politics in the United States, where being a black or being a woman has been used to draw votes to candidates who otherwise do not stand up to scrutiny.

Macron's taking the lead position in the first round has been greeted with jubilation by world stock markets. The Nasdaq finally broke through the 6,000 level. European bank shares soared in reaction to the prospect of France being run by a former investment banker.

However, if he wins the second round, Macron will come to office without an organization to govern, with only the slightest chance of achieving a parliamentary majority in the upcoming National Assembly elections in June. He will be obliged to cobble together a ruling coalition, meaning there will be little coherence in his government and its policies. Coalitions are formed to share the spoils of office, not to get things done.

We may expect France to muddle along and to continue to be subservient to Berlin, the capital of European powerhouse Germany, and Brussels, the home of the European Union's bureaucracy. This will be a setback for those who had hoped France would break the stultifying consensus over austerity, over migrants, over sanctions on Russia – issues that are destroying the European Union from within. But the biggest loser may well be the French nation.

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