

Fear and Misunderstanding of Russia

Much of America's recent demonization of Russia relates to deep cultural and even religious differences between the two countries, requiring a deeper understanding of the other's strengths and weaknesses, writes Paul Grenier.

By Paul Grenier

Given the recent near-hysteria over Russia's alleged hacking of U.S. political email traffic, it is difficult to imagine a U.S. -Russia relationship established upon a peaceful footing – or, to put it another way, a relationship so stable and constructive that it no longer would depend on the vagaries of changing political personalities.

Let's look at it first through the prism of realism. If we are realists, we throw America's habitual moralism out the window and offer the Russians a deal. The "normalization" negotiations between a realist America and the regional power of Russia might unfold along lines something like this:

The United States would propose a provisional alliance with Russia to thwart a rising China, which continues to grow inexorably in wealth and power. China's ascendance naturally makes U.S. policymakers nervous, and thus does the United States (in the realist view) have a vested interest in a U.S.-Russian alliance.

According to this realist playbook, Russia would be flattered by these attentions but would want to know precisely what kind of *provisional* alliance the United States had in mind. Given that realists always seek to be open and honest, this particular realist government would explain that its attention is focused on China's apparent expansionist ambitions in the South China Sea. After all, according to the realist outlook, nation-states not only usually *do* pursue constant expansion of their power whenever and wherever possible, as China seems to be doing now, but *should* pursue such hegemonic expansion whenever possible because, in an anarchic world, that is the way to survive.

Would Russia accept such an offer? It might. But if it did, it would be with a certain sense of bad faith to match that surrounding the U.S. proposition. It would not be a friendship but an alliance based on mutual interest. If circumstances were to change, as inevitably they would at some point, the underlying sentiments of national interest might well evaporate – as they should.

But such conditionality wouldn't contradict the realist conception of international relations. Under the realist model, there simply is no basis for

a *good faith* long-term settlement. It is excluded by the power-political assumptions of the realist model, as is frankly acknowledged in such foundational realist texts, for example, as John Mearsheimer's *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.

And realists are correct, no doubt, in arguing that Americans should stop moralizing about Russia taking actions to defend its vital interests in its own neighborhood in exactly the same manner as the United States does in defense of its vital interests in its own region.

And yet realism's dismissive attitude toward the moral dimension – as historian Matthew Dal Santo recently pointed out – contains a flaw. It requires that the United States renounce certain moral concerns that are foundational to what America is. Would a coldly rational America still be *America*? And would Russia itself ultimately even welcome such a “partner”?

The prominent Russian political philosopher Boris Mezhuev, in a recent essay (in Russian) about the history of the America First movement, mused that an isolationist United States during World War II would not at all have been welcomed, first and foremost by Russia itself. It might have led to the annihilation of Russia at the hands of the Nazi war machine. Mezhuev's point is that it is not the rejection of universal ideals that we should seek in international relations, but the finding of the right ideal.

Stop Being Russia

According to the outlook that might be described as the democracy-idealism/neoconservative-interventionist school, the only way to achieve a lasting settlement is for Russia to cease being what it is at the moment and to become instead much more like the United States. Russia should become a liberal democracy. Only then – because, as many Wilsonian idealists have argued, “liberal democracies don't fight one another” – can the relationship be stabilized for the long term.

The theory is not entirely implausible. There are indeed forces within Russia that strongly identify with American liberal democratic values. American diplomats and journalists frequently run into people who hold such sentiments. They pop up among one's well-traveled Russian-intelligentsia friends and are widely quoted in the articles written by prominent journalists who happen to be imbued themselves with the Wilsonian sensibility.

The problem with this line of thought – aside from the impossibility of imposing it from the outside – is that the Russian version of liberal democracy differs fundamentally from the American version.

The fact is that Russia today is already in many ways liberal. But its liberalism is of a peculiarly Russian sort. It does not deny rights and freedom, but it grounds them not negatively (in terms of what government shall not do), as does the Enlightenment liberalism of Locke and Hobbes, but rather in terms of Eastern Christianity's image of what man is. As a result, there is no Russian liberalism, or Russian politics of any other sort – including its standard semi-authoritarianism – that separates the state from religion in the way that the United States does today.

An authentically *Russian* liberalism, in other words, is hardly less starkly different from our secular, liberationist order than is Russia's present political arrangement under Vladimir Putin. The fact is that there simply is not available to Russia a political order that is aligned with the present-day American version of secular liberal democracy. Both its history and its mores exclude it. And if we try to impose it anyway, in defiance of Russian history and self-understanding, then we will find ourselves repulsed in the same way Napoleon was.

As Henry Kissinger wrote, "No power will submit to a settlement, however well-balanced and however 'secure,' which seems totally to deny its vision of itself."

So where does that leave us? It leaves us precisely in the relationship in which the two countries currently languish. The realists, in such meager numbers as they exist, have little to offer beyond a temporary reprieve. As for the democracy idealists, they have witnessed Russia's rejection of U.S.-style liberal democracy and secularism, and they have drawn the only possible conclusion: Russia is incorrigibly evil.

To prove their point, the idealists and neoconservatives point to Russian acts of violence, such as its bombardments in Syria or Chechnya or its support for the separatists in Eastern Ukraine. The Russians, for their part, cast back at America and its Western allies the West's own acts of aggression and accompanying untruths.

Rejecting Lectures

It's instructive, in this regard, to recall British Foreign Secretary David Miliband's famous phone conversation with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, in which the latter, after pointedly reminding the former about the Anglo-U.S. invasion of Iraq, demanded of Miliband, "Who are you to f***ing lecture me?"

Critics of Russia likewise point to various lies that Russian politicians have told in defense of their foreign-policy aims. But telling lies is in the very

nature of international relations and certainly the waging of wars, as is reflected in the familiar accusation that “the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy.”

And yet, though nations often tell lies as part of their self-defense, it doesn't follow that what they are defending is therefore essentially a lie. It may be in some cases – Nazi Germany, for example, or ISIS. But such cases are rare.

In short, both the United States and Russia have used lots of violence against their enemies. In both cases, this violence has no doubt exceeded ethical norms. Both have told lies. So which side is the more evil? How does one prove such a thing?

Robert Kaplan, who generally belongs to America's democracy-idealist camp, suggested in a recent essay that we can answer this question by means of a close reading of Russian literature.

Kaplan's “The Real War of Ideas,” published in *The National Interest* in September, stakes its claim about Russia by reference to Anton Chekhov's fictional *My Life: A Provincial's Story*. A careful reading of this work, Kaplan tells us, allows us to “realiz[e] the utter impossibility of any good ever coming out of Russia.”

This remarkable story, Kaplan believes, holds the key to understanding Russia as a whole. “[E]verything from the czar, to Lenin and Stalin, to Putin, is connected in some indirect way to the Russian social reality” described by Chekhov. Here, for Kaplan, is the story's money quote:

“They [the peasant *muzhiks*] were mostly nervous, irritated, insulted people; they were people of suppressed imagination, ignorant, with a poor, dull outlook, with ever the same thoughts about the gray earth, gray days, black bread, people who were sly but, like birds, only hid their heads behind a tree – who didn't know how to count. They wouldn't go to your haymaking for twenty roubles, but they would go for a half-bucket of vodka, though for twenty roubles they could buy four buckets. ... [As for their masters, their money] had been acquired by a whole series of brazen, shameless deceptions.”

Here's an interesting question: why, out of all the tremendous variety of Russian literature, has Kaplan chosen precisely this short story focusing on ignorant peasants, instead of, say, *War and Peace*? Answer: to demonstrate that Chekhov's Russia is the same as Putin's Russia – in the double sense that Russia has never successfully become modern and liberal and, for Kaplan, never will.

The peasantry symbolizes what is pre-modern and illiberal. These particular

peasants, furthermore, are incapable of acting as a rational liberal should – maximizing their own advantage and thereby increasing wealth for society as a whole. Chekhov's peasants cannot even properly calculate how to maximize their consumption of vodka!

The Chekhov passage has, furthermore, far-going implications for Russia's place within the international order. If Russia were smart enough to become part of the Western order, if it played according to American rules, Russia would earn more than it does now! And yet Russia stubbornly, stupidly, and in contradiction of its own interest refuses this reasonable tradeoff. Russia's rulers and oligarchs of today, like its peasant masters of yesteryear, prefer to practice deceit, because such is their nature. That, for Kaplan, is what Chekhov's story tells us.

Selective Reading

Kaplan's reading of the Chekhov story, however, is incomplete. On the very same page of Chekhov's text, between the word "buckets" and the closing words about the masters' "brazen, shameless deceptions," there are the following lines:

"In fact, there was filth, and drunkenness, and stupidity, and deceit, but with all that you could feel, nevertheless, that the muzhiks' life was generally upheld by some strong, healthy core. However much the muzhik looks like a clumsy beast as he follows his plow, and however much he befuddles himself with vodka, still, on looking closer, you feel that there is in him something necessary and very important that is lacking, for instance, in Masha and the doctor – namely, he believes that the chief thing on earth is truth [*pravda*], and that his salvation and that of all people lies in truth alone, and therefore he loves justice more than anything else in the world."

Had he quoted the Russian author in full, I would be in agreement with Mr. Kaplan about the importance of this story for understanding Russia. To be sure, modern Russia, with its impeccable metro systems and fashionable cafes, has little in common with the peasant world here described (though in the provinces, something of that peasant world – fortunately to my mind – still remains). Modern Russians, furthermore, know how to count very well.

What then remains constant? First, the centrality of truth and justice. We have already, above, briefly discussed the role of lies. They are, sadly, something of a constant in foreign relations. What needs stressing here is something else. The attempt to lure or to force Russia into a world that requires that it "deny its vision of itself" by forcing it to be liberal – and thereby to interpret everything exclusively in terms of advantage, rights, losses, and profits – will not work.

This is confirmed not only by Russian behavior but also by the explicit words of its foreign minister, who in a recent interview insisted that “Russia’s only role in the world is to stand up for the truth [*pravda*] together with other powers, but exclusively on equal terms.”

The second constant is Christianity. The text’s reference to “salvation” and the word *pravda* itself have clearly Christian overtones. Russian Christianity differs from American Christianity. American Protestant Christianity embraces individualism and is open to change; in many ways, it has hitched its cart to the modernization project.

Russian Orthodox Christianity uses virtually the same liturgy today as it has for hundreds of years. Its standard of perfection in iconography is the same as it has been for hundreds of years. Russian spirituality is oriented to what is timeless and to beauty. American spirituality is oriented to the future and to rights. Both Russia and America can be very tough. But that toughness defends two very different ideals.

Kaplan’s selective quotation of the Chekhov story quite likely was unintentional. He may genuinely have found unimportant the passage about truth and justice and salvation, because these things fall outside the realm of modern American liberalism. His inability to notice the good in Russia when that good falls outside of the specifically liberal framework is something very common in recent Western reporting on Russia.

No Junior Partner

An accommodation with Russia will never be reached by ignoring what Russia is, still less by attempting to transform it into a junior United States. Nor is there any need to do so. An accommodation between Russia and the United States can be reached by applying what is healthy in the realist and idealist traditions, and jettisoning what is false.

Realism is right to the extent that it teaches that one’s own nation’s ideals do not necessarily embrace the whole of the human good. It teaches a salutary humility. Realism is wrong, however, when it dismisses moral considerations altogether, among other reasons because such a dismissal eliminates the only possible foundation of long-term trust.

The idealist school clings to the United States’ longstanding vision of itself as a force for good in the world. There is no need for the United States to abandon this vision. All that is needed is for the United States to expand its notion of the good.

For my money, a good place to start would be with the writings of Semyon Frank,

one of the most respected Russian philosophers in Russia today. “In all that is human as such,” Frank wrote, “... there is nothing sacred; ‘the will of the people’ can be just as stupid and criminal as the will of an individual man. Neither the rights of man nor the will of the people are sacred in themselves. Only the *truth* as such, only the absolute good which is independent of man, is primordially sacred.”

Russia, for its part, needs to guard against the temptation of identifying this good, this *absolute*, with Russia itself.

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Risks of Trump’s ‘Winning’ Obsession

Donald Trump’s more pragmatic approach to foreign policy may be an improvement over the recent ideological obsessions but his own obsession with “winning” could cause trouble, says ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

A slogan from the sports world—“winning isn’t everything; it’s the only thing” — which usually is associated with Vince Lombardi, although he probably got it from another football coach, has always had a vacuous quality. It sounds like an attempt to make a contrast where there isn’t really a contrast. What meaningful difference is there between “everything” and “only thing”?

But if there is any semantic substance to the phrase, maybe it has to do with winning as a pure, abstract value in its own right, separate from anything about the specific endeavor that was the vehicle for one contestant winning and another one losing. Winning per se is seen as the only thing that matters because everything else about the game that was played and won doesn’t matter. And in the sports world, this begins to make sense; the activity *is* just a game, and it really doesn’t matter in the larger course of human events.

Apply this frame of mind to more consequential endeavors, however, and the implications are more disturbing. In this regard, consider the incoming U.S. president and what we know, and don’t know, about his outlook on foreign policy.

Despite the earnest and usually sincere efforts by many commentators to discern pattern, direction, and purpose amid Donald Trump's tweets and other utterances, the dominant picture is still one of inconsistencies, contradictions, slogans, and lack of a record. We are, late in the transition period, still mostly flying blind regarding the actual future foreign policy of this new presidency. We have little idea of what Trump really cares about in the substance of U.S. foreign policy, as distinct from rhetoric that has worked in a campaign and that helps in his effort to portray himself as a populist.

We do know, however, that Trump cares a lot about winning – or more precisely, about being seen as a winner. He constantly returns to the framework of “winners” and “losers” as his way of identifying what is good and bad and what matters to him. His repeated stress on associating himself with the biggest or best or most successful whatever is part of making sure that he is always seen as a winner. And on November 8th he registered the biggest win that any individual could. The slogan about winning being the only thing that does appear to apply to Donald Trump and to what drives him.

The Drawback of ‘Winning’

There are many drawbacks in applying to foreign policy an outlook that is more appropriate to sports, but one set of drawbacks is suggested in a perceptive piece by Mark Katz about prospects for U.S.-Russian relations in the Trump administration. Katz observes that the principal demands that Vladimir Putin is likely to make as conditions for an improved relationship are ones that Trump would have good reason to agree to.

Accept the Russian annexation of Crimea? It's a fait accompli that is not going to be reversed anyway. Lift Ukraine-related sanctions on Russia? The sanctions are bad for business. Promise that none of the former Soviet republics apart from the Baltic states will join NATO or the European Union? The Europeans don't want them as members. Accept continuation of a Russian-allied Assad regime in Damascus? The jihadist alternatives are even worse.

Although Katz doesn't say so, these are valid reasons and low-cost ways for not just Trump but *any* U.S. president to accept much of what Putin wants in the interest of a better relationship that would have benefits for the United States. The problem, as Katz points out, is that Trump cannot be perceived as caving in to Putin. He has to be seen instead as having wrung concessions from Putin, and preferably as having gotten the better of him. Katz emphasizes that Trump especially must be seen doing so in the eyes of a domestic audience that includes hawkish, anti-Russian Congressional Republicans. Trump has the added baggage of the alleged Russian hacking and interference in the U.S. election; any favorable move he makes toward Putin risks being interpreted as payback for

election favors.

On top of this is Trump's personal fixation about winning. He will feel a need to get Putin to back down on some of his demands not only to satisfy John McCain and Lindsey Graham but to satisfy himself that he can tout himself as having "won" a negotiation. The result may be that potential trades and understandings that could serve both U.S. and Russian interests will be forgone.

The general point that Trump is ill-disposed to understand and accept is that what best serves U.S. interests is not always easily recognized or defined as a "win". The most effective diplomacy yields agreements that both sides can honestly describe as successes. The sort of foreign government behavior most likely to serve U.S. interests over the long term is what the foreign government perceives to serve its own long-term interests, rather than being a concession that was wrung out of it and that it will seek the first opportunity to reverse.

Complications for Trump

The issues of election interference and Trump's professed admiration for Putin make relations with Russia an especially delicate case, but the impulse to win is likely to complicate other negotiations and relationships as well. This may be the case with China, as suggested by Trump already trying to put the one-China policy in play.

Most of this mistake probably can be attributed to naïveté, and specifically to a failure to understand how the Taiwan issue figures in Chinese thinking, regardless of how justified or unjustified that thinking is to us. But it may also be an early indication, along with Trump's mercantilist approach to trade and outdated perceptions of such things as currency manipulation and job losses, of approaching the entire U.S.-Chinese relationship in win-loss terms.

Another case is Iran, where there already is a recent important deal in the form of the agreement that limits Iran's nuclear program. Here Trump's self-promoted image as the man who can reach better deals than anyone else fits with the existing Republican Party mantra that we should have gotten a "better deal" with Iran.

All of this ignores the long and laborious negotiating history of this agreement, what the Iranians have given up, and the nonproliferation objectives achieved. A quixotic attempt to reach some alternative that could better be described as a "win" – even though it would not move Iran any farther away from a nuclear weapon than it already is, nor advance any other U.S. interests – risks destroying the very important benefits of the existing agreement.

Notwithstanding Trump's trumpeting of his skills as a deal-maker, and

notwithstanding all that has been said and written about the “transactional” approach this businessman is likely to take toward foreign policy, a man with his mindset is not about to operate in his new job the way he did in his old one. As head of a privately-owned business, profits and losses could be kept private – and with his refusal to make his tax returns public, they are largely staying that way. The public side of the business could be limited to his promotion of himself and his brand, with bragging about having the most luxurious buildings or the best golf courses.

Now the game has changed for him. The public perception of gains and losses is different. If Trump really were to approach foreign relations in a pragmatic, businesslike way, that in general would be good for U.S. interests. But probably his need to be seen to “win” will get in the way. When winning is the only thing for the chief executive, that is not so good for the country.

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New McCarthyism Targets Trump

Official Washington’s New McCarthyism is painting President-elect Trump as almost a “traitor” for seeking détente with Russia, a moment when peace-oriented Americans face a complex choice, says John V. Walsh.

By John V. Walsh

When President Obama expelled Russian diplomats over the hysterical and unproven accusation of Russia “hacking the election,” Russian President Vladimir Putin refused to be drawn into a petty squabble, saying he would delay any response until Donald Trump assumed office. Instead Putin invited American diplomats and their families in Moscow to join the official holiday celebrations in the Kremlin.

Then came the shock that shook Official Washington: President-elect Trump, in the form of a tweet heard round the world, wrote: “Great move on delay (by V. Putin) – I always knew he was very smart!”

And just to be sure that everyone saw it, Trump “pinned” the tweet which means it is the first thing seen by viewers of his account. This was a first use of

“pinning” for Trump. And to be doubly sure, he posted it on Instagram as well. This was no spontaneous midnight outburst but a very deliberate action taken on Friday noon, Dec. 30, the day after Obama had issued his retaliation order.

The implications of this move are, arguably, breathtaking. Trump treated Putin as his ally, not as a hated adversary. And he treated Obama and the bipartisan foreign policy elite of Washington as his adversaries, not his allies – a move that makes perfect sense if Trump’s desire is to rein in the War Party’s New Cold War and to strive for a New Détente with Russia.

If the main enemy is those who are stoking the New Cold War and risking worse, then Trump has placed himself squarely against these war hawks. And stop to consider for a moment who these folks are. Besides President Obama and Hillary Clinton, they represent a full-blown armchair army: neocons, liberal interventionists, the mainstream media, various Soros-funded “non-governmental organizations,” virtually all the important think tanks, the leadership of both major parties, and the CIA and the other U.S. intelligence agencies. This array of Official Washington’s power elite has been working 24/7 at demonizing Putin and stoking tensions with nuclear-armed Russia. Trump took on all of them on with his tweet!

Putin as Ally Against the War Party

As Trump looks for new allies in pursuit of a New Détente and a relaxation of U.S.-Russian tensions, Putin is foremost among them. Thus, in the struggle for peace, Trump has drawn new lines, and they cross national borders. Not since Ronald Reagan embraced Mikhail Gorbachev or Richard Nixon went to China have we seen a development like this. In this new battle to reduce tensions between nuclear powers, Trump has shown considerable courage, taking on a wide range of attackers.

Later that afternoon, Maya Kosoff writing for Vanity Fair put out an article entitled “Twitter Melts Down over ‘Treason’ After Trump Praises Putin.” The first batch of such tweets came from “journalists and other foreign policy experts,” the next from Evan McMullin, the former CIA officer who tried to draw off Republican votes from Trump in the general election, who tweeted: “To be clear, @realDonaldTrump is siding with America’s greatest adversary even as it attacks our democracy. Never grow desensitized to this.”

Finally came the predictable rash of tweets calling Trump’s words “treasonous” or “seditious.” In response, Team Trump refused to issue a “clarification,” saying instead that Trump’s words spoke for themselves.

As stunning as Trump’s tweet was in many ways, it was in other ways entirely

predictable. Despite the mainstream media's scorn and Hillary Clinton's mocking him as Putin's "puppet," Trump has held firm to his promise that he will seek peace with Russia and look for areas of cooperation such as fighting terrorism.

So, even when Trump's Russia comments appeared to cost him politically, he stuck with them, suggesting that he believes that this détente is important. The rule of thumb is that if a politician says something that will win votes, you do not know whether it is conviction or opportunism. But if a politician says something that should lose her or him votes, then you can bet it is heartfelt.

Trump was bashed over his resistance to the New Cold War both during the Republican primaries when many GOP leaders were extremely hawkish on Russia and during the general election when the Clinton campaign sought to paint him as some sort of Manchurian Candidate. Even his vice presidential candidate Mike Pence staked out a more hawkish position than Trump.

Trump stood by his more dovish attitude though it presented few electoral advantages and many negatives. By that test, he appears to be sincere. So, his latest opening to Putin was entirely predictable.

A Choice of Peace or War

What is troubling, however, is that some Americans who favor peace hate Trump so much that they recoil from speaking out in his defense over his "treasonous" tweet though they may privately agree with it. Some progressives are uncomfortable with the mainstream's descent into crude McCarthyism but don't want to say anything favorable about Trump.

After all, a vote for President is either thumbs up or thumbs down – nothing in between – though voters may like or dislike some policy prescriptions of one candidate and other positions of another candidate. And progressives could list many reasons to not vote for Trump.

But a presidential administration is multi-issued – not all or none. One can disagree with a president on some issues and agree on others. For instance, many progressives are outraged over Trump's harsh immigration policies but agree with him on scrapping the TPP trade deal.

In other words, there is no reason why those who claim to be for peace should not back Trump on his more peaceful approach toward Putin and Russia, even if they disdain his tough talk about fighting terrorism. That is the reality of politics.

What I've discovered is that many progressives – as well as many on the Right – who oppose endless war and disdain empire will tell you in whispers that they do

support Trump's attempt at Détente 2.0, though they doubt he will succeed. In the meantime, they are keeping their heads down and staying quiet.

But clearly Trump's success depends on how much support he gets – as weighed against how much grief he gets. By lacking the courage to defend Trump's "treasonous tweet," those who want to rein in the warmongers may be missing a rare opportunity. If those who agree with Trump on this issue stay silent, it may be a lost opportunity as well.

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Anti-Trump Coalition Shows Cracks

When national Democrats are not blaming Vladimir Putin for Hillary Clinton's defeat, they're pointing fingers at anti-war Democrats and Greens who found Clinton's hawkishness and corporatism unacceptable, notes Nat Parry.

By Nat Parry

Somewhat surprisingly, a genuine grassroots, broad-based movement has emerged to oppose the incoming Trump administration, but perhaps less surprisingly – given the American left's self-marginalizing tendencies – the nascent efforts may already be descending into sectarianism, finger-pointing and divisive identity-based politics.

One early sign of the anti-Trump coalition's fracturing came when a group of women decided after Hillary Clinton's defeat that they would organize a "Million Women March" to commiserate the first major-party female presidential nominee's electoral loss to Donald Trump, a misogynist.

The day after the election, a Hawaii woman named Teresa Shook created a Facebook event and invited a few dozen of her friends to march on Washington on Jan. 21, the day after Trump's inauguration. The idea was picked up by a Hillary Clinton Facebook fan page called Pantsuit Nation, with more than three million members, and suddenly there were multiple event pages with thousands of women signing up.

The original name of the march, however, was hastily dropped after the organizers were accused of "cultural appropriation." Apparently the organizers hadn't considered that the name "Million Woman March" was already used in 1997 by a demonstration organized for black women.

As one critic wrote on Facebook, "I take issue with white feminists taking the

name of something that Black people started to address our struggles. ... I will not even consider supporting this until the organizers are intersectional, original and come up with a different name.”

Other concerns were raised about whether an event organized primarily by white women would properly address issues of class and race, but some of those fears now seem to have been allayed. The “national co-chairs” of the event include women of color Tamika Mallory, Carmen Perez, and Linda Sarsour, with notable credentials in civil rights and social justice activism on their resumes.

Mallory, for example, is “nationally recognized as a fiery and outspoken champion for social justice who has worked closely with the Obama Administration as an advocate for civil rights issues,” according to the event’s website. Perez “has dedicated 20 years to advocating for many of today’s important civil rights issues, including mass incarceration, gender equality, violence prevention, racial healing and community policing.”

The event’s partner organizations include both established mainstream organizations such as the National Organization for Women and Oxfam, and upstarts further to the left such as Code Pink and Center for Popular Democracy. While Democratic Party-affiliated groups, such as the Indian American Democratic Club, have endorsed, so too have alternative parties such as the Baltimore County Greens.

Tactical Differences

But although many Democrats have gotten behind the women’s march, they seem to be keeping other counter-inaugural efforts at arm’s length. While Greens and anti-capitalists are uniting to take a stand on Jan. 20 in opposition to Trump’s swearing-in ceremonies, Democratic Party-affiliated groups are nowhere to be seen in the lists of endorsements for Inauguration Day protests.

For example, an “Occupy Inauguration” effort has been endorsed by the U.S. Green Party and Socialist Alternative, but no Democrats. The DC Welcoming Committee, “a collective of experienced local activists and out-of-work gravediggers,” is spearheading #DisruptJ20, which aims to “shut down the Inauguration,” while other events are taking place in spite of Democrats across the country.

Democratic Party efforts, on the other hand, include a “Boycott Trump” campaign initiated by the Democratic Coalition Against Trump, which claims to be “directly countering Donald Trump” through grassroots action, advertising and opposition research. The organization, comprised of Democratic elected officials, party chairs, delegates, grassroots leaders and activists in all 50 states, pledges to build “a movement to stop Trump,” although has not endorsed

counter-inaugural activities.

“There is an effort by Clinton supporters and the Democratic Party machine to keep the message safe,” said Sara Flounders, co-coordinator of the International Action Center, which plans to protest on Jan. 20. “But people who believed in the current electoral system just days ago are changing. They feel betrayed.”

Although at the moment, the Democratic Party and more left-wing elements seem to share common goals of “resisting the Trump regime,” many on the Democratic side still blame supporters of the Green Party’s presidential nominee Jill Stein for allegedly costing Clinton the election.

Under this logic, people who support parties in competition with Democrats still somehow owe their votes to the Democratic nominee on election day. It doesn’t seem to matter to Democratic partisans that Greens and other third party supporters have opted out of the two-party system in favor of building alternatives.

As Slate staff writer Jim Newell described the strange thinking in a column last month, “Democrats are still in the business of blaming people who are not Democrats for Hillary Clinton losing a presidential election.” Since third parties exist and don’t seem to be going anywhere, Newell notes that rather than bashing their supporters, Democrats might be better served by changing their campaign strategies “to limit defections to third parties, like they did in the previous two presidential elections.”

Blaming Progressives

This, however, is not what Democrats are doing. Instead, they seem intent on vilifying people on the left for not uniting behind their candidate, Hillary Clinton, who many could not support due to her pro-war policies and the backing she enjoyed from Wall Street.

On social media, Democratic partisans are issuing such attacks as “@DrJillStein HRC was the most qualified presidential candidate, and you ruined EVERYTHING,” and “you are a major reason why 2016 was the worst year ever.” Some have even accused Stein supporters of “caus[ing] the apocalypse.”

Beyond bashing Green Party supporters, some Democrats continue to lay the blame for Clinton’s historic loss at the feet of Bernie Sanders supporters. At Mother Jones magazine, Kevin Drum writes that “Republicans would have twisted [Sanders] up like a wet rag and tossed him down the drain.”

Drum also blames millennials for Clinton’s defeat, saying that young people “abandoned [her] for third-party candidates.”

This follows similar arguments made by Prof. Gil Troy, who wrote at Time Magazine on Nov. 14 that “Senator Bernie Sanders earned the 2016 ‘Ralph Nader Award’ for the Leftist Most Responsible for Helping Republicans Win the Presidency.”

By forcing her to express support for some progressive policies during the primaries, such as eliminating tuition at in-state colleges and universities, she was unable to mount “an effective re-centering in the fall,” Troy wrote. (This “effective re-centering” might have been further hampered when Wikileaks published excerpts from a paid speech Clinton gave in 2013, in which she acknowledged that on certain policy issues, she holds “both a public and a private position.”)

Troy further asserted that “just as Ralph Nader siphoned tens of thousands of votes on Election Day 2000 in Florida from Al Gore, causing the deadlock and George W. Bush’s victory, Bernie Sanders’ similar vampire effect enfeebled Hillary Clinton.”

According to this view, even running a progressive primary election challenge – much less a third party campaign – is unacceptably dangerous, creating a so-called “vampire effect” that “siphons votes” that rightfully belong to someone else.

So, discouragingly to those who may have hoped for effective opposition to Trump and the Republicans, even with common ground being sought at the moment between progressives and mainstream Democrats, recriminations continue, and unless a genuine effort at promoting understanding is made, the nascent alliance between leftists and moderates will most likely fizzle out after Jan. 20 – if it lasts that long.

Nat Parry is co-author of Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush. [This article first appeared at

<https://essentialopinion.wordpress.com/2017/01/03/nascent-anti-trump-coalition-already-fracturing/>]

Obama’s Deadly Afghan Acquiescence

From his first days, President Obama showed a lack of guts when confronted by powerful insiders. He backed down even when that meant squandering U.S. soldiers in the futile Afghan War “surges,” says ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern.

Occasionally a *New York Times* writer like Mark Landler will be permitted to step up to the plate and write a sensible article about President “No Guts Obama” and how he caved in to folks whom he lacked the political courage to cross.

Landler’s Jan. 1 article shows, among other things, how Obama’s bowing to heavyweights like Gen. David Petraeus, Defense Secretary Robert Gates, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton ended up getting thousands of people killed and prolonging the fool’s-errand Afghan war.

The pity, of course, is that Landler’s piece, “The Afghan War and the Evolution of Obama,” comes eight years too late. There is a lot of numbness out there today about how we were all had by “NGO,” together with attempts to blame bad decisions on his benighted advisers. But you know where the buck is supposed to stop. And a number of us, including Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS), spared no effort to get through to him in “real time.”

I can understand that some of you will not want to risk being further depressed. Others, however, may wish to be reminded of our efforts to warn President Obama before he let himself be conned into doubling down on the Afghan folly. Those others may want to skim through the re-runs (linked below) of early warnings in March 2009 and January 2010, together with some retrospective comments.

On March 28, 2009, as Obama was beginning his plunge into the Afghan War swamp, I wrote an article entitled, “Welcome to Vietnam, Mr. President,” which Consortiumnews.com republished last year with the intro: “With still no end in sight for the Afghan War, President Obama can’t say he wasn’t warned. Barely two months into his presidency in 2009, ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern welcomed Obama to his own Vietnam quagmire.”

Included in that piece was this passage: “Equally relevant to Obama’s fateful early decision on Afghanistan, Gen. Douglas MacArthur told another young President in April 1961: ‘Anyone wanting to commit American ground forces to the mainland of Asia should have his head examined.’”

The truth of that advice even eventually sunk into the fellow whom we at the CIA used to call “windsock Bobby Gates” in the days when he was starting his bureaucratic climb to the top by tailoring his positions to please his superiors.

Though Gates helped maneuver Obama into a pointless Afghan “counterinsurgency surge” in fall 2009, Gates later told aspiring officers at West Point: “Any future defense secretary who advises the president to again send a big American

land army into Asia or into the Middle East or Africa should 'have his head examined,' as General [Douglas] MacArthur so delicately put it."

My "Welcome to Vietnam, Mr. President" article of March 28, 2009, also noted: "When JFK's top military advisers, critical of the President's reluctance to go against [MacArthur's] advice, virtually called him a traitor – for pursuing a negotiated solution to the fighting in Laos, for example – Kennedy would tell them to convince Gen. MacArthur first, and then come back to him. (Alas, there seems to be no comparable Gen. MacArthur today.)"

Leaked Doubts

On Jan. 27, 2010, I was back at it again, citing the belated disclosure that U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Karl Eikenberry had tried to warn President Obama against escalating the Afghan War. I wrote:

"I imagine that in years to come, Eikenberry will proudly show his cables to his grandchildren. Or maybe he won't, out of fear that one of them might ask why he didn't have the guts to quit and let the rest of the country know what he thought of this latest March of Folly."

Eikenberry is an interesting case study showing, among other things, that lack of guts on the part of a commander-in-chief can be contagious. A retired Lt. General and then Obama's ambassador in Kabul, Eikenberry knew more about Afghanistan than the so-called "Gang of Five" – Gen. Petraeus, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, Defense Secretary Gates, Secretary of State Clinton, and special envoy Richard Holbrooke – put together.

Eikenberry sent back to Washington some very important, sensible advice, though we don't know whether Clinton forwarded the cables on to her boss. Nor do we know whether Eikenberry exercised his ambassadorial prerogative to contact the President directly.

Eikenberry had served three years in Afghanistan over the course of two separate tours of duty. During 2002-2003, he was responsible for rebuilding Afghan security forces. He then served 18 months (2005-2007) as commander of all U.S. forces stationed in the country. Surely, he could see the toll in killed and wounded that would inevitably result from the hopeless counterinsurgency strategy being urged on "NGO" by the "Gang of Five."

And Eikenberry's cables show that he felt strongly about it. He also knew, of course, that Obama was about to let himself be sandbagged by the Gang and its clever use of the media. So he sent two *SECRET NODIS* ("NODIS" means No Dissemination) cables to Clinton, who was his boss (and who – along with Gates – was one of what Gates called the "un-fireables"). Eikenberry surely doubted that

Clinton would share his advice with Obama, but did Eikenberry ever think of resigning loudly on principle? Apparently not.

So, what did he do when he was overruled? He trod up to Congress and fully supported the feckless surge of troops launched out of the cowardice/stupidity of “NGO” in bowing to the “Gang of Five.” It probably never occurred to Eikenberry to blow the whistle on the “tough guy/gal” policy which would end up getting a thousand or so U.S. troops killed along with a much larger number of Afghans.

For many a graduate of West Point, the academy’s motto seems to get garbled as they climb the ladder of success. Instead of “Duty, Honor, Country,” it becomes “Career, President, Sinecure Retirement.” Perhaps blowing the whistle did occur to Eikenberry. But if you challenge the Establishment in that way, you seldom end up with a cushy job like running a Research Center at Stanford.

Presumably, Eikenberry takes some gratification now in the fact that he turns out to have been correct in his bleak assessment of the “surge” in Afghanistan. He may even have been the one behind eventually leaking his cables to The New York Times, thus earning him applause from his academic colleagues.

But his burnished credentials didn’t save the lives of the soldiers tossed into the Afghan meat grinder or the many civilians who died needlessly as senior U.S. government officials put ideology and careerism – the need to look tough – ahead of what made sense for either Afghanistan or the United States.

In the end, however, the bloody futility of the past eight years in Afghanistan rest most heavily on the “Gang of Five” and the easily outmaneuvered “NGO,” who sits at the desk where the buck stops.

Ray McGovern works with Tell the Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. He was an Army Infantry/Intelligence officer and then CIA analyst for a total of 30 years, and is now a member of the Steering Group of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS).

Requiem for a UN ‘Yes Man’

Even as much of the world bridled at the U.S. pretensions of “unipolar” power, U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon toed Washington’s line and further undercut the U.N.’s supposed evenhandedness, writes Joe Lauria.

By Joe Lauria

After ten years of almost total obedience to Washington, Ban Ki-moon stepped down Sunday as United Nations Secretary-General, leaving behind a sorry legacy that has undermined the U.N.'s legitimacy, which rests on its real and perceived neutrality in overseeing world affairs.

The U.N.'s second secretary-general Dag Hammarskjold defined the job's role as a diplomat who has the ability and courage to navigate a course independent of the major powers and in defense of the world's population.

"The right of the Secretariat to full independence, as laid down in the Charter, is an inalienable right," Hammarskjold said shortly after his election in 1953. The U.N.'s purpose, he said, was not to submit to the major powers but to seek "solutions which approach the common interest."

Despite his elite background, his defense of the "common interest" distinguished Hammarskjold and alarmed many of the world's elites who wanted a more pliable secretary-general who would reliably take their side, especially in management of the Third World. After only one year in office, he condemned the U.S.-led coup in Guatemala that overthrew a democratically elected president. No secretary-general since has publicly criticized a CIA covert operation.

Hammarskjold's championing of the common interest of Africans and other colonized people put him at odds with the white rulers of apartheid South Africa as well as colonial Britain and the United States.

"The discretion and impartiality required of the Secretary-General may not degenerate into a policy of expedience," Hammarskjold responded.

When he also angered the Soviet Union, which demanded his resignation, he responded: "It is very easy to resign. It is not so easy to stay on. It is very easy to bow to the wishes of a Big Power. It is another matter to resist."

By navigating an independent course amid the major powers, Hammarskjold set the standard for the job of secretary-general – and, as I [reported](#) in 2014, it may have led to his death in a mysterious plane crash on Sept. 18, 1961, during a conflict over mineral-rich Congo.

Bending to Power

No other Secretary-General has come close to Hammarskjold's independence or his inventiveness in creative peacekeeping and personal mediation. The few others who tried to follow in his footsteps also found their U.N. careers cut short. For instance, Boutros Boutros-Ghali's insubordination to Washington in defending

developing countries in the face of America's post-Cold War, unilateralist expansion into spaces vacated by the Soviet Union cost him a second term. He had the temerity to tell Madeleine Albright, then the U.S. ambassador to the U.N., that Washington was his "problem."

"Coming from a developing country," Boutros-Ghali wrote in his memoir, "I was trained extensively in international law and diplomacy and mistakenly assumed that the great powers, especially the United States, also trained their representatives in diplomacy and accepted the value of it. But the Roman Empire had no need of diplomacy. Neither does the United States."

Others learned their lesson. Boutros-Ghali's successor, Kofi Annan, the only sub-Saharan secretary-general, was a major proponent of U.S. initiatives, including the controversial "responsibility to protect" doctrine of military intervention (as applied in Kosovo) and a U.N. partnership with private corporations, the so-called Global Compact, ultimately giving U.N. cover for neoliberal and multi-national misdeeds.

Though a darling of Washington, Annan got himself into hot water when he admitted to an insistent BBC interviewer that the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq was "illegal." The Bush administration made the remainder of his second term miserable and tried to pin the Oil-for-Food scandal on him, though it was a program run by the Security Council.

By contrast, Ban, a South Korean, was seen by the Americans as their man from the start. We "got exactly what we asked for," an administrator and not an activist, said John Bolton, America's irascible U.N. ambassador when Ban was elected in 2005. The U.N. charter doesn't call the secretary-general "president of the world" or "chief poet and visionary," Bolton said sarcastically in an [interview](#) with me and a colleague for The Wall Street Journal.

Ban said his "biggest blunder" until then had been in 2001 when, as South Korea's chairman of its nuclear test-ban treaty organization, he wrote a letter in favor of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty just a few months after George W. Bush pulled the U.S. out of the treaty. South Korean President Kim Dae-jung issued a public apology and fired Ban for his impertinence. It was the act of a vassal state and marked Ban's evolution into a servile diplomat.

State Department Advisers

Once Ban was installed at the U.N. in 2007, he broke with tradition by naming Americans – two former State Department diplomats – to be his chief political officers during his ten-year tenure. They brought with them a State Department perspective to the most politically influential job in the organization.

Ban carefully toed the U.S. line in his public pronouncements. Though he privately fumed over the Saudi military bombardment in Yemen and Riyadh's haughty dealings with the U.N., he dared not blame America's ally.

Likewise, on occasions when Ban sharply criticized Israel for its bombardment of U.N. schools in Gaza, killing scores of innocent people, he spoke only after the State Department had made the same criticism, almost word for word.

When the whistleblower Edward Snowden revealed U.S. mass surveillance of people all over the world, Ban condemned Snowden rather than defend the common interest of the world's population to be protected from the U.S. intelligence community's pervasive violations of their privacy.

Regarding the geo-strategic battle of our times – America's unilateral push for global hegemony versus an emerging multi-polar world, led by Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa – the U.N. as the world's premier multilateral organization would have seemed like a natural ally of the BRICS, which held its first formal summit in 2006 just months before Ban took office. But Ban backed the U.S. in every geo-strategic question against Russia and China during his time in office.

On Syria, Ukraine and the South China Sea, Ban parroted Washington's rhetoric and made no effort to mediate the disputes. He never condemned the U.S.-backed coup in Kiev or Washington's support for violent extremists in Syria, which Russia has confronted. He called for regime change in Damascus (after Obama did.)

Regarding sensitive concerns about Western interference in Africa, Ban failed to distinguish himself on a single African issue, merely endorsing whatever the U.S., Britain and France were up to on the continent. Ban was a prominent champion in the struggle to combat climate change, but it was a position fully endorsed by the Obama administration.

The new secretary-general, Antonio Guterres of Portugal, is inheriting crises that bedeviled Ban. Guterres, a former Portuguese prime minister and head of the U.N.'s refugee agency, whom I interviewed a couple of years ago for an hour without any handlers present, is smart, realistic and outspoken in favor of multilateralism. It won't be long before it's known if he will cross swords with the Trump administration, in the tradition of Hammarskjöld, or go the way of Ban and let Washington always get its way.

Joe Lauria is a veteran foreign-affairs journalist based at the U.N. since 1990. He has written for the Boston Globe, the London Daily Telegraph, the Johannesburg Star, the Montreal Gazette, the Wall Street Journal and other

newspapers. He can be reached at joelauria@gmail.com and followed on Twitter at [@unjoe](https://twitter.com/unjoe).

Danger in Democrats Demonizing Putin

With the Clintons' corporate money machine floundering after a devastating election defeat, Democrats are desperate to find someone to blame and have dangerously settled on Vladimir Putin, writes Norman Solomon.

By Norman Solomon

Many top Democrats are stoking a political firestorm. We keep hearing that Russia attacked democracy by hacking into Democratic officials' emails and undermining Hillary Clinton's campaign. Instead of candidly assessing key factors such as longtime fealty to Wall Street that made it impossible for her to ride a populist wave, the party line has increasingly circled around blaming Vladimir Putin for her defeat.

Of course partisan spinners aren't big on self-examination, especially if they're aligned with the Democratic Party's dominant corporate wing. And the option of continually fingering the Kremlin as the main villain of a 2016 morality play is clearly too juicy for functionary Democrats to pass up – even if that means scorching civil liberties and escalating a new cold war that could turn radioactively hot.

Much of the current fuel for the blame-Russia blaze has to do with the horrifying reality that Donald Trump will soon become president. Big media outlets are blowing oxygen into the inferno. But the flames are also being fanned by people who should know better.

Consider the *Boston Globe* article that John Shattuck – a former Washington legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union – wrote in mid-December. “A specter of treason hovers over Donald Trump,” the civil libertarian wrote. “He has brought it on himself by dismissing a bipartisan call for an investigation of Russia's hacking of the Democratic National Committee as a ‘ridiculous’ political attack on the legitimacy of his election as president.”

As quickly pointed out by Mark Kleiman, a professor of public policy at New York University, raising the specter of treason “is simply wrong” – and “its wrongness matters, not just because hyperbole always weakens argument, but because the carefully restricted definition of the crime of treason is essential to protecting free speech and the freedom of association.”

A Liberal Zeitgeist

Is Shattuck's piece a mere outlier? Sadly, no. Although full of gaping holes, it reflects a substantial portion of the current liberal zeitgeist. And so the argument that Shattuck made was carried forward into the new year by Robert Kuttner, co-editor of *The American Prospect*, who approvingly quoted Shattuck's article in a Jan. 1 piece that flatly declared: "In his dalliance with Vladimir Putin, Trump's actions are skirting treason."

The momentum of fully justified loathing for Trump has drawn some normally level-headed people into untenable – and dangerous – positions. (The "treason" approach that Shattuck and Kuttner have embraced is particularly ironic and misplaced, given that Trump's current course will soon make him legally deserving of impeachment due to extreme conflicts of interest that are set to violate the Emoluments Clause of the Constitution.)

Among the admirable progressives who supported Bernie Sanders's presidential campaign but have succumbed to Russia-baiting of Trump are former Labor Secretary Robert Reich and Congressman Keith Ellison, who is a candidate for chair of the Democratic National Committee.

Last week, in a widely circulated post on his Facebook page, Reich wrote: "Evidence continues to mount that Trump is on Putin's side." But Reich's list of "evidence" hardly made the case that Trump "is on Putin's side," whatever that means.

A day later, when Trump tweeted a favorable comment about Putin, Rep. Ellison quickly echoed Democratic Party orthodoxy with a tweet: "Praising a foreign leader for undermining our democracy is a slap in the face to all who have served our country."

Some of Putin's policies are abhorrent, and criticizing his regime should be fair game as much as criticizing any other. At the same time, "do as we say, not as we do" isn't apt to put the United States on high moral ground. The U.S. government has used a wide repertoire of regime change tactics including direct meddling in elections, and Uncle Sam has led the world in cyberattacks.

Intervention in the election of another country is categorically wrong. It's also true that – contrary to conventional U.S. wisdom at this point – we don't know much about a Russian role in last year's election. We should not forget the long history of claims from agencies such as the CIA that turned out to be misleading or downright false.

Late last week, when the Obama administration released a drum-rolled report on the alleged Russian hacking, Democratic partisans and mainline journalists took

it as something akin to gospel. But the editor of ConsortiumNews.com, former Associated Press and *Newsweek* reporter Robert Parry, wrote an assessment concluding that the latest report “again failed to demonstrate that there is any proof behind U.S. allegations that Russia both hacked into Democratic emails and distributed them via WikiLeaks to the American people.”

Key Questions

Even if the Russian government did intervene in the U.S. election by hacking emails and publicizing them, key questions remain. Such as:

–Do we really want to escalate a new cold war with a country that has thousands of nuclear weapons?

–Do we really want a witch-hunting environment here at home, targeting people with views that have some overlap with Kremlin positions?

–Can the president of Russia truly “undermine our democracy” – or aren’t the deficits of democracy in the United States overwhelmingly self-inflicted from within the U.S. borders?

It’s so much easier to fixate on Putin as a villainous plotter against our democracy instead of directly taking on our country’s racist and class biases, its structural mechanisms that relentlessly favor white and affluent voters, its subservience to obscene wealth and corporate power.

There’s been a lot of talk lately about refusing to normalize the Trump presidency. And that’s crucial. Yet we should also push back against normalizing the deflection of outrage at the U.S. political system’s chronic injustices and horrendous results – deflection that situates the crux of the problem in a foreign capital instead of our own.

We should reject the guidance of politicians and commentators who are all too willing to throw basic tenets of civil liberties overboard, while heightening the risks of brinkmanship that could end with the two biggest nuclear powers blowing up the world.

Norman Solomon is co-founder of the online activist group RootsAction.org. His books include *War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death*. He is the executive director of the Institute for Public Accuracy.

WPost's New 'Fake News' on Russian 'Hack'

Exclusive: The Washington Post's latest folly – falsely reporting a Russian “hack” into Vermont's electric grid – reflects the paper's steep decline from the days of Watergate, reports ex-British intelligence officer Annie Machon.

By Annie Machon

The Democratic National Committee (DNC) has been hacked – cue a national American trauma, allegations of dirty tricks, fears that democracy has been subverted, all leading to what the next U.S. president would call “our long national nightmare.”

But, no, I am not talking about the current Russo-phobic hysteria currently engulfing the mainstream U.S. media, replete with claims about “fake news,” expelled Russian diplomats, and a lack of skepticism about the evidence-lite hacking allegations.

Instead, I am dipping back into history – the old Watergate scandal – when Richard Nixon's “plumbers” stole information the old-fashioned way; they broke into the DNC offices, rifled the files and planted listening devices. On June 17, 1972, when police captured five burglars inside the DNC offices at the Watergate building in Washington, the case slowly unfolded over the next two years until President Nixon resigned on Aug. 9, 1974, and was replaced by Vice President Gerald Ford who declared “our long national nightmare is over.”

During those two years, The Washington Post became internationally and justifiably famous for breaking the story about Nixon's role in the Watergate cover-up and – since then – generations of cub reporters have dreamed of being the next Woodward and Bernstein. Besides leading to the downfall of the mendacious and paranoid Nixon, the scandal contributed to the reining in of an out-of-control intelligence establishment culminating in the Church Committee hearings of 1975.

What followed was greater, if unfortunately temporary, control of the U.S. intelligence agencies and at least an apparent respect for the rights of American citizens under the terms of the U.S. Constitution. The work of The Washington Post then was indeed relevant and world-changing.

The movie depiction of the Post's investigation, “All the President's Men” celebrated this exposé and confirmed in Western minds that our wonderful free press spoke truth to power. And perhaps, in this case, the press did (although I

have to say that I preferred the meltdown scene in the prophetic movie, “The Network,” which envisioned the slide of the news media into ratings-driven madness).

Lost Credibility

But – regarding The Washington Post – how the mighty have fallen. Over the past couple of months, the Post has blown what was left of its journalistic reputation out of the water.

First it unblushingly reported the PropOrNot “blacklist” of “fake news” Internet sites that were allegedly working at the Kremlin’s command to swing the U.S. election to Donald Trump, except that the list encompassed many of the most reputable independent (i.e., not U.S. corporate-owned) English-language international news sites (including Consortiumnews.com). Threatened with angry writs from some of the sites, the paper quickly printed a disclaimer distancing itself from the anonymous people behind PropOrNot, but still not apologizing for the McCarthyistic smear.

Then, last Friday, the newspaper was at it again – breathlessly reporting that the Vermont energy grid was apparently hacked by the scapegoat du jour, Russia. Although there should have been obvious questions asked: Why Vermont? What has that state ever done to Russia? Well, not much as it turns out; nor Russia to Vermont.

Yet again the Post has revised its reporting down to the fact that a laptop, completely unconnected to the grid, according to the energy provider’s statement, had been infected by malware. In other words, there was no Russian hacking into the Vermont power grid.

And yet, because it’s The Washington Post, this fake breaking “news” was taken seriously and metastasized through the body politic of America and beyond. This Russian hacking became a “post-truth” reality, no matter how fact-free the original story. (I hereby propose a #factfreediet for us all on Twitter for January, so we can highlight this phenomenon.)

Explaining Why

But here are the obvious next questions: Why did this non-story appear in The Washington Post and why now? Has The Washington Post suddenly fallen prey to a revamped Operation Mockingbird, its editorial staff stuffed to the gills with CIA agents of influence?

As I have written before, the CIA and its associates within the Deep State appear to be hell bent on undermining the legitimacy of the Trump election

result and this hyping of Russian hacking is one of the key weapons in this struggle. So perhaps the Deep State players are (re)activating a few agents of influence in the mainstream American media?

But there may possibly be a more tangential explanation for The Washington Post's plunge into fiction: Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon.com and one of the wealthiest people in the world. Amazon is not only the favorite purveyor of all goods online, but also suspected (at least in the U.K.) of massive tax avoidance scams as well as abusive employment practices in the same country.

Bezos is also, since 2013, the proud owner of The Washington Post, a purchase that heralded his unexpected business swerve into the old mainstream media. The deal to buy the newspaper was reported in the business press to have cost him \$250 million.

Interestingly in the same year Amazon cut a deal to develop a cloud-based service for the CIA – a deal worth a reported \$600 million over ten years. It also appears that this service has expanded across all 17 of America's intelligence agencies, so who can tell what it might be worth to Amazon now and in the future?

It is no doubt just an interesting coincidence that the Bezos-owned Washington Post is the fount of the current stream of CIA assertions that the Russians are hacking key U.S. institutions, starting with the DNC – which then somehow became “hacking the election” – and now the utility grid. Bezos himself has asserted that he exerts no direct control over the editorial decisions of the newspaper, and he has left in place many of the neoconservative editors who preceded his stewardship, so there may not be any need for direct orders.

Of course, all state-level players, including the Russians and certainly the Americans, are going to be probing the basic systems underpinning all our countries for vulnerabilities. That is what intelligence agencies do, and it is also what mercenary spy companies do on behalf of their corporate clients, and what hackers (either of the criminal flavor or the socially-minded hacktivists) do too. The dodgy malware, the code, and the vulnerabilities are all out there, often for sale or squirreled away by the national spy agencies for potential future advantage.

Whatever the truth about the DNC hacking allegations, The Washington Post sadly seems uninterested in properly pursuing it – indeed it seems interested in little beyond pursuing the specific political agenda of fanning a dangerous distrust of Russia and undermining the legitimacy of President-elect Trump.

If such a compliant corporate culture had existed back in 1972 at the time of

the first DNC “hack,” the Watergate scandal would surely never have been exposed. And the old media still wonders why it is no longer trusted?

Annie Machon is a former intelligence officer in the UK’s MI5 Security Service (the U.S. counterpart is the FBI).

Israel’s Above-the-Law Behavior

Despite stern warnings from the U.N. and even the U.S., Israel continues its steady march toward becoming an apartheid state that relies on anti-Arab racism to justify its behavior, as Lawrence Davidson describes.

By Lawrence Davidson

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu threw a temper tantrum on Dec. 24 after the U.S. failed to veto United Nations Security Council Resolution 2234 condemning Zionist settlements on Palestinian territory.

Netanyahu called the resolution “shameful.” He went so far as to tell the foreign secretary of New Zealand, one of the countries that brought the resolution forward for a vote, that this action was the equivalent of “an act of war.” He then started recalling Israeli ambassadors from the Security Council states that backed the resolution. Finally, Netanyahu said Israel would “not abide by it [the resolution].” All in all it was quite a performance.

In order to put the prime minister’s outrage in context, let’s look at what, in part, the resolution actually says. It “reaffirms the obligation of Israel, the occupying Power, to abide scrupulously by its legal obligations and responsibilities under the Fourth Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War ... and recalling the advisory opinion rendered on 9 July 2004 by the International Court of Justice, condemning all measures aimed at altering the demographic composition, character and status of the Palestinian Territory occupied since 1967, including East Jerusalem, including, inter alia, the construction and expansion of settlements, transfer of Israeli settlers, confiscation of land, demolition of homes and displacement of Palestinian civilians, in violation of international humanitarian law and relevant resolutions...”

In other words, UNSC Resolution 2234 told the Israeli government that it is obliged to follow the rule of law – in this case international law. Mr. Netanyahu’s response was to repudiate that law. Thus, the Israeli prime minister

ran from the law – something outlaws do.

This is nothing new. Israel has been acting in a criminal fashion in (among other areas) the West Bank of Palestine for the past 50 years – and doing so with impunity. “Impunity” is the key word here. The prime minister’s response was, in part, to the unexpected refusal of the United States to continue its half-century practice of protecting the Zionist state from any consequences for its illegal behavior.

Inadequate Responses

The response to Israel’s response has been telling. The European leaders have been very low-key in their reaction even though Netanyahu has bad-mouthed and snubbed many of them. The White House position is that Washington has always regarded settlements as “an impediment to peace” and a threat to a two-state solution, so their abstention on the resolution should be seen as consistent and appropriate.

On the other hand, Republicans in Congress sided with Israel. Take for instance the baffling assertion of Sen. John McCain that “Today’s passage of an ill-conceived resolution on Israeli settlements marks another shameful chapter in the bizarre anti-Israel history of the United Nations.” No mention here of the Israeli Prime Minister’s “bizarre” behavior.

However, and this is the important point, what is missing from these responses to Netanyahu’s tantrum is any public recognition of the main point of Resolution 2234. That is the fact that Israel stands in violation of the rule of law. And by doing so for decades, the Zionist state has eroded the force of international law generally. No state leader, including those who directly voted for the resolution at the U.N., has deigned to follow up on this point publicly.

Just to make things very clear, many aspects of civilized society are made possible by the rule of law. It’s the way all of us seek to maintain a tolerable level of order and strive to administer humane justice. However, such efforts can be fragile. There are problems:

– In practice, both laws and justice are traditionally defined by culture. Thus, it is possible that what is legal in one community is illegal in another, and that what is justice in one place might appear to be injustice in another. This is obviously an aspect of Israel’s problem. Israeli governments have seen things through the lens of a culturally determined and racist ideology, which precludes justice for those who have been subjected to ethnic and religious discrimination. Yet history has proven that such practices are a threat to everyone because of the dangerous precedents they set in a world of growing

diversity. In such a world, laws assuring humane intergroup relations should be consistent across national and ethnic lines.

—In a world of nation-states, the concept of national sovereignty has often served as protection against outside interference even in the face of criminal state behavior. For instance, a national government can claim that its laws oppressing minority groups reflect national security needs. Israel is not the first state to take just such a position.

Outside states have traditionally been reluctant to interfere lest their own national sovereignty be eroded by the precedent of open intervention. On the other hand, surreptitiously, Western powers have been avid practitioners of selective “regime change.” Hypocrisy is rampant. In such conditions the rule of law and the notion of justice are allowed to remain provincial and, at an extreme, indistinguishable from criminality.

It was in response to these problems that, starting in the Nineteenth Century, efforts began to create international treaties and organizations that promulgated international law – law that seeks to move the concept of justice beyond culture and alleged national interest by giving it universal application. Such efforts were actually attempts to take civilization to a higher level. The horrors that spurred on such efforts, ranging from war crimes to genocide, proved to be strong motivators.

There have been some successes in this effort, notably the series of treaties arrived at in Geneva, Switzerland. Notable here are the Geneva Conventions of 1949, which updated previous agreements in the wake of crimes committed during World War II. Of these, the Fourth Geneva Convention provided protections for civilians in time of war. Resolution 2234 cites this Convention.

Trouble with the Law

The development of international law has always posed a problem for states that are warlike, expansionist or driven by intergroup hatreds. Israel certainly fits this description and the fact, so often brought up by Zionists, that there are other states which also fit the bill, should not be allowed to confuse the issue.

Indeed, Israel has made strenuous efforts to deflect blame and suborn the foreign policies of other states through the use of special interest allies and agents wielding such sophistic arguments. However, such lobbying efforts are starting to bring diminishing returns.

It is the hard reality of Israel’s stubborn refusal to conclude a just peace with the Palestinians, while concurrently stealing their land, that has made the

country so notorious – notorious enough that most of the world’s nations are now willing to declare that the Zionist state is in open violation of international law.

Unfortunately, there are no policemen to apprehend criminals of Benjamin Netanyahu’s stature. Even the International Criminal Court will probably not attempt to do so. But that does not mean the Zionist state will continue to escape the consequences of its criminal behavior. Step by step Israel has become a pariah state that lives in increasing social, cultural and economic isolation. It is to be fervently hoped that Netanyahu’s recent tantrum will speed up this process.

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Kerry’s Belated Israel Truth-telling

After four years of getting “played” by Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, Secretary of State Kerry told some truths about Israel-Palestine that raised hackles among Netanyahu’s acolytes, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar describes.

By Paul R. Pillar

Secretary of State John Kerry’s speech last week on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is an excellent statement of the realities that are inescapable aspects of this conflict and that anyone who claims to deal with the dispute seriously must understand.

Most of those realities the secretary described with admirable clarity and directness. A few others, at least as important, come through between the lines, although the hand of political correctness on matters involving Israel still weighs so heavily that even a Secretary of State with less than a month to go before becoming a private citizen does not feel free to state them directly.

Important points that the Secretary made explicitly, and that should be takeaways from the speech for everyone, include these:

For U.S. policymakers dealing with this conflict, U.S. interests must come first. The United States should not, any more than any other outside party

claiming to want to resolve the conflict, act as lawyer for one side or the other. U.S. presidents and secretaries of state are paid to advance the interests of their own country, not those of any foreign government or entity.

As Kerry put it near the outset of his speech, "My job, above all, is to defend the United States of America – to stand up for and defend our values and our interests in the world. And if we were to stand idly by and know that in doing so we are allowing a dangerous dynamic to take hold which promises greater conflict and instability to a region in which we have vital interests, we would be derelict in our own responsibilities."

A two-state solution, notwithstanding how much out of reach it seems to become each day, is still the only outcome that can provide lasting peace and enable Israel to be a Jewish and democratic state. For the Palestinians, indefinite denial of their own nation-state means indefinite denial of the aspirations for self-determination felt by any other people, and indefinite subjugation, discontent and the inevitable violence that results from such denial. For Israelis, the basic demographic and geographic facts that frame the national choice remain the same as they have always been with regard to being a Jewish state, being democratic, and being in control of all the land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River. Israel can be any two of those things, but it is impossible to be all three.

To those inclined to discard the idea of a two-state solution right now and to speak of one state, Kerry asked this: "So if there is only one state, you would have millions of Palestinians permanently living in segregated enclaves in the middle of the West Bank, with no real political rights, separate legal, education, and transportation systems, vast income disparities, under a permanent military occupation that deprives them of the most basic freedoms. Separate and unequal is what you would have. And nobody can explain how that works. Would an Israeli accept living that way? Would an American accept living that way? Will the world accept it?"

Impediments to Peace

Israeli settlements are not the only impediment to a peace settlement, but they are one of the biggest impediments. Apologists for Israeli policies routinely argue in a monocausal way about troubles in the Middle East, saying that if X doesn't explain everything then we should behave as if it explains nothing. West Bank settlements have often been the X in this mode of argumentation. Kerry went into considerable detail in his speech with facts and figures about how the settlement program is, as a straightforward matter of geography, making a viable

Palestinian state less and less of a possibility.



He observed, "If more and more settlers are moving into the middle of Palestinian areas, it's going to be just that much harder to separate, that much harder to imagine transferring sovereignty, and that is exactly the outcome that some are purposefully accelerating."

Condoning expansion of some settlements but not others is not a solution. This is a favorite pseudo-solution to the settlements problem among those who want to appear reasonable while tilting heavily toward Israel and the settlement movement. The underlying presumption is that most of the biggest and oldest settlement blocs will become part of Israel in a final agreement, so we should be cool with new construction there and limit our displeasure to newer settlements that are even deeper in the West Bank.

Such a formula flouts the principle of international law that prohibits any colonization by the conqueror of militarily conquered territory. It also flouts the concept—repeatedly voiced at least as much by the Israeli government as by anyone else—that the terms of a final agreement should be determined in direct negotiations between the parties and not predetermined, including by outsiders.

Kerry aptly described the problem as being that "the decision of what constitutes a bloc is being made unilaterally by the Israeli Government, without consultation, without the consent of the Palestinians, and without granting the Palestinians a reciprocal right to build in what will be, by most accounts, part of Palestine."

Settlements do not contribute to Israeli security, and instead detract from it. Kerry noted how many settlements "actually increase the security burden on the Israeli Defense Forces." He also could have mentioned how prominently the Israeli occupation, including the colonization through settlements, has figured

as a *cause célèbre* for extremist violence.

Unsustainable Occupation

It's not only the colonization through settlements, but also other aspects of the occupation, that are unsustainable. They also are a form of oppression and denial of rights to an entire population. Kerry spoke of visiting West Bank communities where he "met Palestinians struggling for basic freedom and dignity amidst the occupation, passed by military checkpoints that can make even the most routine daily trips to work or school an ordeal, and heard from business leaders who could not get the permits that they needed to get their products to the market and families who have struggled to secure permission just to travel for needed medical care."

The position of the international community on the issue of the occupation has been one of overwhelming consensus (except for the United States and Israel) and consistency. The resolution passed by the Security Council last month was not a departure, despite contentions that it was. The distinction drawn between Israel and the territory it occupies is consistent with the consensus view that Israel is a full and legitimate member of the community of nations while its occupation of Palestinian territory is illegitimate.

Neither is there anything new in the resolution involving East Jerusalem – which is just as much a part of militarily conquered territory as the rest of the West Bank and just as much subject to negotiation to determine final status, rather than having that status determined by unilateral and expansive line-drawing by one of the parties.

The characteristics of a lasting and fair peace have been well known for some time. The terms still must be determined through negotiations between the parties, but this is not as if there were doubt about what the overall shape would have to be to constitute a lasting peace, or doubt about it being possible to construct a workable two-state solution – at least until and unless continued Israeli colonization through settlements extinguishes that possibility altogether. Kerry described the necessary characteristics by laying out six general principles for any agreement – principles that many different international statesmen could have expressed in very similar terms in previous years, and that many have in fact expressed.

In addition to these realities, the dedication of this Secretary of State, and the president under whom he serves, to work for outcomes that would serve the security and well-being of Israel as well as other concerned parties comes through strongly.

Thomas Friedman captures this well when he writes, “Barack Obama and John Kerry admire and want to preserve Israel as a Jewish and democratic state in the Land of Israel. I have covered this issue my entire adult life and have never met two U.S. leaders more committed to Israel as a Jewish democracy.”

President Obama bestowed on Israel the biggest aid package that the United States has ever given to anyone, and before last month he was the only U.S. president who, using the U.S. veto power, had never allowed the United Nations Security Council to pass any resolution critical of Israel. Against this background, the calumnies being thrown at Mr. Obama by the Israeli government and those who follow its lead are offensive and inexcusable.

Between the Lines

Secretary Kerry’s speech reflected some additional realities in a more subtle and indirect way, including the following.

The current Israeli government rejects a two-state solution. By now, not only the deeds but even the words of this government and its senior members have made obvious how much of a smokescreen have been Prime Minister Netanyahu’s occasional utterances, intended for international audiences, ostensibly accepting the idea of a Palestinian state. Power in Israel has moved toward members of the hard right who are unabashed about openly rejecting the concept of such a state and openly calling for annexation of occupied territory. It takes two negotiating partners to make a deal. Right now there is no such partner on the Israeli side. There will not be until and unless there is a major political redirection in Israel.

There is huge asymmetry in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Secretary Kerry – although striving to observe the usual convention about casting comparable blame on both sides, and devoting a significant part of his speech to offenses and shortcomings on the Palestinian side – touched on this lightly at a couple of points in his speech, such as in quoting the pertinent observation of Shimon Peres: “The original mandate gave the Palestinians 48 percent, now it’s down to 22 percent. I think 78 percent is enough for us.”

The asymmetry is patently huge regarding the instruments of power, including instruments to inflict armed violence. It is fundamentally huge in the sense that one side is the occupier and the other side is the occupied. It is within the power of an occupier, but not the occupied, to end an occupation.

This asymmetry sheds light on the attitudes of each side toward negotiations and who does or does not want to negotiate in good faith, a subject on which there have been many accusations with little regard for the historical record. One can

cut through the cloud of accusations by reflecting on what each side would have to gain from *not* negotiating in good faith.

Most Israelis currently don't have it all that bad with continuation of the status quo, and their rightist leaders evidently think they can keep a good thing going indefinitely despite the aforementioned demographic and geographic facts. The Palestinians, by contrast, are obviously the big losers in a continuation of the status quo: no state, no self-determination, no end to their subjugation, and no unilateral means to end any of this. They have ample reason to negotiate seriously, because they know a negotiated peace is the only way out of their current predicament.

The asymmetry also gives perspective to Israeli complaints, a crescendo of which followed last week's Security Council resolution, about being singled out for criticisms not directed at others. As a reading of this resolution suggests, if Israel receives criticism that others don't, it is because Israel is doing things that others don't.

There is no doubt that if Palestinians or other Arabs were colonizing land that they had seized through military force from Israel, such colonization would be every bit as much the target of critical Security Council resolutions. But Palestinians aren't colonizing seized land, and as Kerry noted, they are being kept from building even on land that is supposed to be theirs.

Different Interests

U.S. interests differ substantially from Israeli interests, especially as the latter are defined by the current Israeli government. A cottage industry has grown up over the past couple of years devoted to highlighting bad chemistry between Obama and Netanyahu, but personalities and chemistry between leaders have little to do with strain in U.S.-Israeli relations. Sure, dealing with the likes of Netanyahu tends to stimulate personal irritation, but that is hardly specific to Obama. It was Bill Clinton who, after his first meeting with the importunate Israeli prime minister, said with exasperation, "Who's the f***ing superpower here?"

The main strands of Israeli policy – and certainly almost everything having to do with the settlement program and occupation policies in general, which constitute a very large part of what Israeli policy is about – are not only incongruent with U.S. interests but directly opposed to them. This will be true as long as those policies continue, even if the prime minister were to get a personality transplant.

There is every reason to believe that the United States and Israel can be good

friends, especially when bearing in mind that the current right-wing government represents only one part of what is a spectrum of diverse views within Israel. And friends don't let friends drive drunk.

As Friedman observes, it's unfortunate that President-elect Trump is "passing Israel another bottle of wine." Or as Secretary Kerry put it, "Regrettably, some seem to believe that the U.S. friendship means the U.S. must accept any policy, regardless of our own interests, our own positions, our own words, our own principles – even after urging again and again that the policy must change. Friends need to tell each other the hard truths, and friendships require mutual respect."

Commentary often seen in the opinion pages that seems to assume a perfectly harmonious no-daylight-between-us relationship as what should be normal in U.S.-Israel relations, and that searches for missteps by the U.S. administration of the day as the reason the relationship is not perfectly harmonious, disregards the serious underlying conflict of interests. This conflict of interests routinely gets disguised with the term "ally" – a term that usually refers to mutually beneficial cooperation and commitment but in this case is applied to a one-way relationship in which enormous largesse in one direction is met in the other direction by such behavior as undermining the patron's foreign policy initiatives and interfering in its internal politics.

Netanyahu's government seems to go out of its way to poke a stick in the eye of its benefactor, with the settlement program one of its favorite sticks. Neither incorrect use of a term nor tweets about how harmony will break out on January 20 can hide such realities.

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