

Relying on Unreliable Syrian Sources

When the mainstream U.S. media reports on Syria, it relies heavily on pro-rebel activists, including members of the White Helmets who have supplied false or dubious claims at key junctures of the war, reports Gareth Porter for Alternet.

By Gareth Porter

The White Helmets, founded to rescue victims trapped under the rubble of buildings destroyed by Syrian and Russian bombing, have become a favorite source for Western news media covering a story on Russian-Syrian bombing. Portrayed as humanitarian heroes for over the past year and even nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize last summer, the White Helmets have been accorded unquestioned credibility by journalists covering the Syrian crisis.

Yet the White Helmets are hardly a non-political organization. Funded heavily by the U.S. State Department and the British Foreign Office, the group operates only in areas in northern Syria controlled by an al Qaeda affiliate and their extremist allies—areas to which Western journalists have not had access.

Given that the White Helmets work under the authority of those who hold the real power in east Aleppo and other opposition-controlled zones, the Western media's reliance on this organization for information comes with serious risks of being manipulated.

The highly political role played by the White Helmets in relation to foreign press coverage was dramatically demonstrated after the attack on a Syrian Red Crescent truck convoy in the rebel held area of Urum al-Kubra, just west of Aleppo on September 19. The assault took place immediately after a ceasefire agreed to by Russia, the U.S. and the Syrian government was shattered by a deadly U.S. air attack on Syrian army forces battling ISIS around the city of Deir Ezzor on September 17.

The Obama administration assumed the attack was an airstrike and immediately blamed it on Russian or Syrian aircraft. An unidentified U.S. official told the New York Times that there was "a very high probability" that a Russian plane was near the area just before the attack, but the administration did not make public any evidence in support of that claim. In the days following the attack, news media coverage relied heavily on accounts provided by the White Helmets. The head of the organization in Aleppo, Ammar Al-Selmo, was offering them a personal on-the-scene account.

Selmo's version of the story turned out to be riddled with falsehoods; however,

many journalists approached it without an ounce of skepticism, and have continued to rely on him for information on the ongoing battles in and around Aleppo.

Changing Stories

The first detail on which Selmo's testimony revealed itself as dishonest is his claim about where he was located at the moment the attack began. Selmo told Time Magazine the day after the attack that he was a kilometer or more away from the warehouse where the aid convoy trucks were parked at that point—presumably at the local White Helmet center in Urm al-Kubra. But Selmo changed his story in an interview with the Washington Post published September 24, stating he was “making tea in a building across the street” at that moment.

Even more dramatically, Selmo claimed at first that he saw the beginning of the attack. According to the story published by Time on September 21, Selmo said he was drinking tea on the balcony when the bombing began, and “he could see the first barrel bombs falling from what he identified as a Syrian regime helicopter.”

But Selmo could not have seen a barrel bomb falling from a helicopter or anything else at that moment. In a video shot early the next morning, Selmo declared that the bombing had started at about 7:30pm. In later statements, the White Helmets put the time at 7:12pm. But sunset on September 19 was at 6:31pm, and by roughly 7pm, Aleppo was shrouded in complete darkness.

Someone evidently called Selmo's attention to that problem after the Time story was published, because by the time he gave his account to the Washington Post, he had changed that part of the story as well. The Post reported his amended account as follows: “Stepping onto a balcony just after 7pm, when it was already past dusk, he said he listened to a helicopter swoop in and drop two barrel bombs on the convoy.”

In videos the White Helmets made the night of the attack, Selmo went even further, asserting on one segment of the video that four barrel bombs had been dropped and in another, that eight barrel bombs had been dropped. The idea that barrel bombs were used in the attack was immediately picked up by self-styled “media activists” on behalf of the opposition authorities in Aleppo the following morning, as the BBC reported. That theme was in line with an effort by opposition sources going back to 2012 to identify “barrel bombs” as uniquely destructive weapons, more reprehensible than conventional missiles.

Questionable Evidence

In a video the White Helmets produced the night of the attack, Selmo addresses

viewers by pointing at the indentation of the supposed bomb blast. “You see the box of the barrel bomb?” he asks. But what is shown in the video is a rectangular indentation in the gravel or rubble that appears to be about a foot deep two feet wide and a little more than three feet long. He reaches under the surface and pulls out what look like a damaged shovel blade, based on its shape.

That scene clearly proves Selmo’s claim to have been completely false. Barrel bombs make very large round craters at least 25 feet wide and more than 10 feet deep, so the box-like indentation in the video bore no resemblance whatever to a barrel bomb crater.

Hussein Badawi, who is the local White Helmets director of Urum al-Kubra, is clearly lower than Selmo in the organization’s hierarchy. Badawi appeared briefly next to Selmo in one segment of the video made that night but remains silent, then disappeared. Nevertheless, Badawi directly contradicted Selmo’s claim that the first explosions that night were from barrel bombs. In a White Helmets video that was translated from Arabic into English, Badawi described those first explosions not as airstrikes but as “four consecutive rockets” near the center of the Red Crescent compound at Urum al-Kubra.

No other visual evidence of a crater such as would have been created by a barrel bomb has come to light. In support of Selmo’s assertion, The Russian-based Conflict Intelligence Team, which is dedicated to refuting Russian government claims, could only cite the video frame of Selmo holding up that single piece of metal.

Bellingcat’s Fake News

The Bellingcat website, whose founder Eliot Higgins is a non-resident fellow of the militantly anti-Russian, State Department-funded Atlantic Council, and has no technical expertise on munitions, pointed to the same frame. Higgins claimed that the piece of metal came from a “crater.” He also cited a second photograph that he said showed a “repaired crater” in the road next to a burnt-out truck. But the area in the photograph that appeared to be covered with fresh dirt is clearly no more than three feet long and a bit more two feet wide—again far too small to be evidence of a barrel bomb explosion.

Selmo’s White Helmet team also distributed to Bellingcat and media outlets what appeared at first glance to be visual evidence of Syrian and Russian air attacks: the crumpled tailfin of a Russian OFAB-250 bomb, which can be seen under the boxes in a photograph taken inside a warehouse at the site. Bellingcat cited those photographs as clinching evidence of Russian use of that bomb in the attack on the aid convoy.

But that photographs of the OFAB tailfin is extremely problematic as evidence of an airstrike. If an OFAB-250 bomb had actually exploded at that point it would have left a crater that was much larger than the one shown in that photograph. The standard rule of thumb is that an OFAB-250, like other any other conventional bomb weighing 250kg would make a crater 24 to 36 feet wide and 10 or 12 feet deep. The magnitude of its crater is shown in a video of a Russian journalist standing in one after the battle for the Syrian city of Palmyra, which had been held by ISIS.

Furthermore, the wall in the photograph only a few feet from the supposed point of impact was clearly not affected by the bomb. That indicates that either no OFAB-250 was dropped in that spot or it was a dud. But the picture of the boxes surrounding the OFAB tailfin also reveals other evidence that there was an explosion. As one observer discovered from a close examination, the boxes display evidence of shrapnel tears. A closeup of one package shows a pattern of fine shrapnel holes.

Only something much less powerful than an OFAB-250 bomb or a barrel bomb would account for those observable facts. One weapon whose shrapnel could cause the pattern seen in the photograph is the Russian S-5 rocket, two variants of which throw out either 220 or 360 small shrapnel fragments.

In the video he made the night of the attack, Selmo had already claimed that Russian aircraft fired S-5s at the site, although he mistakenly called them "C-5s." And a photograph of two S-5 missiles was also distributed to Bellingcat and to news organizations, including the Washington Post. Selmo insisted to Timemagazine that the airstrikes were divided between barrel bombs and missiles fired by Russian jets.

But again Badawi, the White Helmets chief for Urum al Kubra, contradicted Selmo in a separate video, stating that the initial barrage of missiles were launched from the ground. Badawi's admission was very significant, because the Syrian opposition forces have had supplies of Russian S-5s ever since the weapons were smuggled out of Libya to the rebels in large numbers in 2012. They have been using S-5s as ground-launched rockets like the Libyan rebels did, and have designed their own improvised launchers for them.

Badawi claimed the initial four missiles had been fired by Syrian government forces from the defense factories in southern Aleppo governorate. But the government defense plants in southern Aleppo governorate are in al-Safira—more than 25 kilometers away, whereas the S-5s have a range of only 3 to 4 kilometers.

Even more telling is that fact that, despite Selmo's insistence that airstrikes

continued for hours and included as many as 20 to 25 distinct attacks, none of the members of the White Helmet team captured a single airstrike in a video, which would have provided clear audio-visual evidence of his claim.

The Atlantic Council's Bellingcat site pointed to a video posted online by opposition sources in Aleppo as providing such audio evidence of jet planes just before the nighttime explosions. But despite a voice on the video declaring that it was a Russian airstrike, the sound stops immediately after the fiery explosion, indicating that it was caused by a ground launched missile, not a missile fired from a jet plane. Thus the confirming evidence of an airstrike claimed by Bellingcat did not actually confirm it at all.

A Go-to Source

Whoever was responsible for the attack on the Syrian Red Crescent aid convoy, it is clear that Ammar al-Selmo, the top White Helmet official in Aleppo, lied about where he was when the attack on the aid convoy began and, at least initially, misled his audience when he said he witnessed the first stages of the attack with his own eyes. What's more, he made claims of Syrian barrel bombs and Russian OFAB-250 bombs dropped on the convoy that are not supported by any credible evidence.

In light of Selmo's readiness to embellish his account and to support the narrative of a Russian-Syrian attack, Western media should have been far more careful about relying on it as confirming the U.S. charge about the aid convoy attack. But during the weeks of heavy Russian and Syrian bombing in eastern Aleppo that followed the breakdown of the ceasefire, Selmo was frequently quoted by the news media as a source on the bombing campaign. And Selmo exploited the new situation to push the rebels' political agenda.

On September 23, the White Helmets told the news media that three of their four operating centers in east Aleppo had been hit and two of them were out of commission. National Public Radio quoted Selmo as saying he believed the group had been deliberately targeted, because he had "intercepted pilots' communications and heard them getting orders to bomb his colleagues." Curiously, NPR failed to identify Selmo as the head of the White Helmets in east Aleppo, identifying him only as a "White Helmets member."

Five days later the Washington Post reported a similar claim by Ismail Abdullah, another White Helmets official working directly under Selmo. "Sometimes we hear the pilot tell his base, 'We see a market for the terrorists, there is a bakery for the terrorists,'" said Abdullah. "Is it okay to hit them? They say, 'Okay, hit them.'" He further claimed that on September 21, the White Helmets had heard an enemy pilot refer to the "terrorist" civil defense centers. The organization

sent a message to U.S. officials in New York for the U.N. General Assembly that they were being targeted, Abdullah added. These dramatic stories helped propel the White Helmets' campaign for the Nobel Peace Prize, which was announced days later but which they ultimately did not win.

A Fabrication

The claim that the White Helmets had overheard pilots asking for and receiving permission to hit targets while in the air is a fabrication, according to Pierre Sprey, a former Pentagon analyst on combat aircraft who played a central role in designing the F-16. "It's inconceivable that this could have been an authentic communication between an attack pilot and a controller," Sprey told AlterNet, referring to Selmo's accounts. "The only time a pilot might initiate a request to hit a target is if he sees gunfire from it. Otherwise it makes no sense."

The day after the Russian and Syrian bombing campaign on rebel-held eastern Aleppo began on September 22, Reuters turned to Selmo for an overall assessment of the bombing's impact on Aleppo. Selmo bluntly declared, "What's happening now is annihilation."

Following this dramatic statement, Western media continued to cite Selmo as though he were a neutral source. On September 26, Reuters went back to the White Helmets working under him again, citing an estimate by unnamed "civil defense workers" in Aleppo – which could only mean members of the White Helmets – that 400 people had already been killed in less than five days of bombing in and around Aleppo. But after three full weeks of bombing the United Nations and other agencies estimated that 360 people had been killed in the bombing, suggesting that the White Helmets figure had been several times higher than could be documented by non-partisan sources.

It is obviously difficult for the news media to cover events such as the attack on the Syrian Red Crescent aid convoy and the bombing in Aleppo from Istanbul or Beirut. But the hunger for information from the ground should not outweigh the obligation to vet sources. Selmo and his White Helmets should have been recognized for what they are: a partisan source with an agenda reflecting the power to which the organization is accountable: the armed extremists who have controlled east Aleppo, Idlib, and other areas of northern Syria.

The uncritical reliance on claims by the White Helmets without any effort to investigate their credibility is yet another telling example of journalistic malpractice by media outlets with a long record of skewing coverage of conflicts toward an interventionist narrative.

Gareth Porter is an investigative historian and journalist specializing in U.S.

national security policy. His latest book is *Manufactured Crisis: The Untold Story of the Iran Nuclear Scare* (Just World Books, 2014). [This article originally appeared at Alternet at [HTTP://WWW.ALTERNET.ORG/GRAYZONE-PROJECT/HOW-SYRIAN-WHITE-HELMETS-PLAYED-WESTERN-MEDIA](http://www.alternet.org/grayzone-project/how-syrian-white-helmets-played-western-media)]

The ‘Trump Effect’ Hits Europe

America’s vassal states of Europe were expecting a Hillary Clinton victory and were gearing up for a New Cold War with Russia, so Trump’s win has sent shock waves across the Continent, reports Gilbert Doctorow.

By Gilbert Doctorow

The Swedish Nobel Prize Committee is to be congratulated for its prescient selection of Bob Dylan as this year’s Laureate of the Prize for Literature because his signature song “The Times, They Are A-Changing” captures impeccably where we stand today in the international landscape after Donald Trump’s victory in the U.S. elections on Nov. 8.

The impact of the “Trump effect” on Europe’s politics is most identifiable in France, where its significance is hard to overstate, but the ramifications are likely to be felt across the Continent in the next year.

In the French primaries to select the candidate of the center-right Republican Party, heir to the Gaullist political legacy, voters advanced a contender who has been implementing the same political formula that propelled Trump’s victory – a call for fundamental change in the direction of government policies, a populist rejection of the elites based in the nation’s capital, assertion of traditional conservative social values of the provinces that involve rejection of multiculturalism, and a call for a “realist” as opposed to “values-driven” foreign policy that leads specifically to friendlier relations with Vladimir Putin’s Russia.

Francois Fillon, who has served in various ministerial posts in the 1990s and early in the new millennium – and was prime minister under President Nicolas Sarkozy for five years – was hardly a dark-horse outsider like Trump. Yet, in the current race for the presidency, Fillon was largely discounted by the media and professionals whose attention went primarily to whether Sarkozy’s latest bid would be stopped. There was less interest in who would stop him within the party and why. In that sense, Fillon’s victory has taken the French political world by surprise.

The chances of the Socialists in the next national elections are virtually nil with President Francois Hollande's personal approval rating down to the unprecedented level of 4 percent. Thus, the great likelihood is that the candidate from the Republicans, Fillon, will win the French presidency in the national election against the candidate of the far right, Marine Le Pen.

Fillon has adopted many of the most popular positions of the National Front, leaving behind only their rejection of European Union membership and its currency, the euro, which probably is a step too far for most of the electorate. Interestingly, Bloomberg.com issued an editorial this weekend backing Fillon as the best-placed politician to keep Le Pen from power; the news agency swallowed whole Fillon's many policies that follow in the tracks of Donald Trump, whom the very same agency, like nearly all mainstream U.S. media, portrayed as the new Satan.

Unlike the U.S. media coverage of Trump, there was nary a word about Fillon being a supposed tool of Putin, although his opponent Alain Juppé played that card in the last week, much as Hillary Clinton tried to do against Trump.

On Nov. 25, the online poll of the newspaper of the Right, *Le Figaro*, considered Fillon the winner of the last televised debate the night before 71 percent to 29 percent. Juppe's attempts to use Hillary Clinton claptrap about Russian influence succeeded with the French voters no better than it did in the U.S. The second round of primaries balloting on Nov. 27 bore out the clear trend, ending in a victory for Francois Fillon with 67 percent of the votes cast.

Alliance with Russia

Fillon has called repeatedly for forging a genuine alliance with Russia to defeat ISIS, and this will be a central demand of French foreign policy if he comes to power, meaning that the anti-Russian sanctions policy of Barack Obama and Angela Merkel will likely end.

To be sure, attempts to see the long hand of the Kremlin in the Fillon candidacy had, in fact, more justification than the total fabrication of lies that were used against Trump to assert the same point. A year ago at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, Fillon was a featured speaker and panelist in discussions with Putin. Fillon's Russia-friendly statements were welcomed and given proper airing on Russian television. At the time, however, Sarkozy seemed to have the Right to himself, and any bets on Fillon by the Kremlin seemed even less likely to pay off than the widely advertised loans given to Marine Le Pen's party by a Moscow bank.

It's also true that the driving force behind Fillon's victory within his own

party and his likely victory in the national elections in spring 2017 does not reside in an accommodation with Russia but in his plans for making his country great again, à la Trump.

Fillon's policies to revive business and industry entail tackling the 35-hour work week that has made France uncompetitive; slimming the civil service which has sucked in an additional one million employees under Hollande in what was the only measure he implemented to combat unemployment that was durable; and raising the retirement age. All this will require great political skills and courage, but if he does succeed, Fillon holds out the prospect that France will become the strongest country in the E.U. within 10 years.

That is an ambition that has been totally absent in France during the past decade or more of decay and national humiliation, including several high-profile terror attacks attributed to Islamic radicals. In the recent debate, Fillon called the E.U.'s current foreign policy insane. Very early in a Fillon presidency the sparks would be sure to fly between Paris and Berlin as they vie for leadership of the E.U.

This prospect of a power struggle between the driving countries of the E.U. is entirely healthy, and more constructive than all the Euroskeptic attacks on the E.U. from the far right that have bubbled up since the U.K.'s Brexit referendum to leave the E.U.

A Key Retirement

The past week brought another major political development at the general European level, the announcement that Martin Schulz, President of the European Parliament, is retiring from that post in order to return to German domestic politics, where he is expected to be named as the candidate of the Social Democrats (SPD) for Chancellor in the federal German elections scheduled for next autumn.

Schulz's departure has great importance on two counts: what it means for the prospects of Angela Merkel, the current favorite to remain in power with nearly 50 percent favorable ratings in latest polls despite all of her political missteps over the past year; and what it means for the European institutions considering who may be Schulz's successor at the helm of the Parliament.

As regards the internal German politics, Schulz is likely to bring greater dynamism to the SPD cause than the leader he would be replacing, Sigmar Gabriel, who is Vice Chancellor in the CDU-SPD coalition government. But it is hard to see how even an energized SPD can hope to win majority control of the Bundestag on its own or in coalition with prospective partners such as the Greens.

Therefore, the greater likelihood would be yet another coalition with Merkel, with whom in the important area of foreign policy and German control over E.U. institutions Schulz is surely on the same wave length. Both stand for a "values-based" as opposed to "realist" foreign policy, meaning in particular continuation of Cold War behavior and continuation of anti-Russian sanctions.

There are some in the liberal wing of the SPD who hope Schulz can be turned around once he spends more time in country and in discussion with his fellow party members. However, as recently as his keynote speech to the plenary session of the Boris Nemtsov Forum held in the European Parliament building on Nov. 16, Schulz was an enthusiastic defender of "liberal democratic" (read: neoconservative) guiding principles for seeking "regime change" in Russia and other allegedly authoritarian countries, stridently rejecting calls for a more reasoned approach from those within the E.U. itself (read: Hungary) and those abroad (read: Donald Trump's America).

The Neocons' Great Hope

The vacancy left behind by Schulz logically should be filled by a parliamentarian from one of the Right's parties, following the tradition of alternation in power of Right and Left (Schulz having occupied the post on behalf of the Left). In this connection, one name now being put forward cannot be ignored, Guy Verhofstadt, former Prime Minister of Belgium and long-time leader of the Alliance of Democrats and Liberals (ALDE).

There are many good reasons why Verhofstadt's candidacy for the post must be taken with all seriousness even if his contingent in the Parliament (10 percent of the house) is considerably smaller than the European People's Party, the main center-right grouping.

He is without question one of the intellectually strongest parliamentarians and has been a highly visible campaigner for European federalism, which is the most principled response that the Center can produce to the Euroskeptics and which is all the more relevant if indeed Trump's plans to cut U.S. contributions to the European defense and thus requires the creation of a European Army.

Verhofstadt was a regular speaker at the pro-federalist Spinelli Group events in Brussels calling for a United States of Europe. In 2012, he co-authored the handbook for a federal union with a founding member of the German Greens Daniel Cohn-Bendit, *Debout l'Europe*. Before the 2014 European-wide parliamentary elections, he campaigned for federalism in a number of countries across the Continent.

At the same time, Verhofstadt ensconced in the European Parliament would

represent a “last stand” of U.S. neoconservatives with whom he has been closely aligned, taking part in various events sponsored by the Foreign Policy Initiative of Robert Kagan and William Kristol. It would align the Parliament with the anti-Kremlin policies that Verhofstadt has personally authored and promoted for much of the past decade in cooperation with his party’s colleagues among marginally seditious Russian Opposition politicians that included Parnas group of Boris Nemtsov and Mikhail Kasyanov.

Typically, Guy Verhofstadt was one of the key organizers of the Boris Nemtsov Forum and introduced Martin Schulz from the dais. Verhofstadt as President of the European Parliament would mark a sharp split with Jean-Claude Juncker at the European Commission, the E.U.’s executive branch. Juncker is not a crusader but a “realist.” Such a split would probably ensure that for the foreseeable future the European Parliament would be just a talking shop with little real power.

So, the past week has shown that there is and will be movement of enormous importance in Europe both inside the European institutions and between the European institutions and the E.U.’s key Member States in 2017. That’s without even considering the possible nipping at the E.U.’s heels by the Euroskeptics from the smaller and more marginal Member States or the challenges to the status quo in Europe that will come from Donald Trump’s administration, including from his likely search for compromises and relaxation of tension with Russia.

These elements, acting separately or in combination, seem likely to have but one outcome: the end of the New Cold War and a rise in realism over ideology in international affairs.

Gilbert Doctorow is the European Coordinator of The American Committee for East West Accord Ltd. His latest book, *Does Russia Have a Future?* was published in August 2015.

What Trump Means for American Jews

American Jews historically fought for civil rights for all but veered away when Israel began seizing Palestinian land. Now, the Trump presidency presents a challenge and an opportunity to steer back to universal principles, says Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

Before the year 1967, the political and social relationships of the American Jewish community were very different than today. Those relationships were based on simple and accurate logic. Jews in the United States were a minority. The U.S. had other minorities as well, most notably African-Americans, who also had a long history of being discriminated against.

Given these conditions, it made sense for the American Jews to make alliances with other U.S. minorities – a united front, so to speak – with the clear-sighted understanding that if one group's rights were attacked, all of their rights stood in danger. The alliance proved beneficial, and many American Jews were involved in the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

This era of mutually beneficial cooperation lasted until the year 1967. In that year the State of Israel, which had put forth the hubristic claim of being a "Jewish state" whose government had the right to speak for the world's Jews, conquered territory from several of its neighboring states and then (1) refused to withdraw from most of that land, (2) began to move their own population into the conquered lands in violation of international law, and finally (3) began ethnically cleansing the conquered area of its non-Jewish population.

This process was so blatantly illegal and racist in nature that almost all American minority groups protested against it (the only notable exception being right-wing Cuban-Americans). Particularly strong protests came from African-Americans.

At that point American Jews had an important decision to make. Should they maintain a principled anti-racist position, which required standing apart from Israeli action and preserve their united front with other U.S. minority groups? Or should they abandon the united front strategy and cast their fortunes with their increasingly racist Israeli cousins?

Though it was predictably a tragic misjudgment, the American Jewish elite and most of the Jews of the time who followed their lead abandoned the anti-racist front, angrily turned away from those critical of Israeli behavior, and began supporting and rationalizing Israel's war on the indigenous population (the Palestinians) of the lands they had conquered.

This situation has continued to the present day. And, during all this time, it seems never to have occurred to the American Jewish community that its bond with Israel has cost them exactly those domestic allies that they would need if hate groups – those who lump together Jews with other American minorities and detest them all – eventually found influence in Washington.

Enter Trump

And now that is what appears to be happening. Donald Trump is president-elect. An article in Haaretz describes Trump's worldview as "reactionary, nativist, chauvinistic, anti-foreigner, anti-immigrant and mainly anti-Muslim." This concoction is threatening to American Jews as well. One can see this by paying attention to some of the people Trump is now naming as advisers and cabinet appointees. People such as:

Steve Bannon – Trump's "chief strategist." Bannon is a leader in the so-called "white nationalist" movement and "the standard bearer" for racist, anti-immigrant positions. He is also an anti-Semite who, reportedly, does not want his children going to school with Jews.

Frank Gaffney – Trump is consulting with Gaffney on a range of national security appointments. The problem is that Gaffney's view of the world is crazy. He is the founder of a think tank called the Center for Security Policy, which promotes such ideas as (1) President Obama is a "closet Muslim," (2) the Muslim Brotherhood is "infiltrating the U.S. government at high levels," and (3) Islamic religious law is "replacing American democracy."

Jeff Sessions – Sessions is a senator from Alabama whom Trump wants to make Attorney General because, allegedly, he is "a world class legal mind." He is also a known racist who, as a prosecuting attorney in Alabama, was denied a federal judgeship because of his racial insensitivity. What else can one expect from someone who thinks that "a white voting rights lawyer was a disgrace to his race." The American Civil Liberties Union describes Sessions as "the senator with probably the most anti-immigrant, anti-refugee, anti-child record in the Senate."

Gaffney and Sessions might not be as obviously anti-Semitic as Bannon, but one has to understand that there is a threat of their acting so, or condoning such action, by virtue of their overall hostility to minorities.

Two Consequences

Trump's election and choice of advisers have had two important consequences for Jews:

– The evolving social situation in the United States is now creating pressure on its Jewish community to move back to that pre-1967 position of a united front – the position that says an attack on the civil rights of one U.S. minority group is an attack on all of them. The need for such a position is so obvious that even the CEO of the Anti-Defamation League, Jonathan Greenblatt, has responded to it.

In a recent speech he declared, "We must stand with our fellow Americans who may

be singled out for how they look, who they love, where they're from or how they pray. ... So I pledge to you ... that if one day Muslim-Americans will be forced to register their identities, then that is the day that this proud Jew will register as a Muslim."

Unfortunately, Greenblatt's position is not a unanimous one among American Jewish leaders. As the Jewish commentator Peter Beinart points out, "American Jewry's two most influential groups [AIPAC and the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations] no longer take moral responsibility for the country in which their members live." That is because they have chosen to become promoters of Israeli, and not American, interests. "The result is that America's most powerful Jewish organizations ... judge American politicians by one standard: Do they support the Israeli government no matter what?"

– The Israeli government and its settler supporters have come out in full support of President-elect Trump, thus revealing a willingness to, at the very least, turn a blind eye to the evolving anti-Semitic trends within the new administration. While this might seem crazy, there is in fact a method to this madness.

Israeli journalist Yaron London explained this in a recent op-ed piece on Ynet: "a world view which supports white supremacy matches our [Israel's] government's interests." Why so? Because "all forms of Zionism hold the perception that a certain extent of anti-Semitism benefits the Zionist enterprise. To put it more sharply, anti-Semitism is the generator and ally of Zionism. Masses of Jews leave their place of residence only when their economic situation and physical safety are undermined."

A Second Chance

American Jews now have a rare opportunity. They can realize where their real interests lie and act accordingly. And, as they always have, those interests lie in upholding the universal principles of civil and humanitarian rights. To not do so is to affirm their present alliance with a nation self-destructing on tribalism and racism.

The truth is that Zionism has turned out to be a tragic and potentially fatal mistake. Those who led the Jewish community to support Zionism tied the fate of the U.S. Jews to an apartheid political ideology that has isolated them from much that is decent and progressive in the world.

As problematic as it is, the ascendancy of Donald Trump gives the American Jews a second chance to make the right choice, to join with their natural allies and fight for the equal rights of all groups. U.S. Jews should think long and hard

about this, for it may well be that their second chance will also be their last chance.

Lawrence Davidson is a history professor at West Chester University in Pennsylvania. He is the author of *Foreign Policy Inc.: Privatizing America's National Interest*; *America's Palestine: Popular and Official Perceptions from Balfour to Israeli Statehood*; and *Islamic Fundamentalism*.

The West's Shift Toward Repression

The West's "liberal democracies" are undergoing a shift toward repression with new initiatives to spy on citizens and punish whistleblowers who expose government abuses, observes ex-British intelligence officer Annie Machon.

By Annie Machon

Forgive my "infamously fluent French" but the phrase "pour encourager les autres" – a reference to executing one powerful person to send a message to others – seems to have lost its famously ironic quality. It seems that the U.S. government is globally paying big bucks to people to encourage them to expose the crimes of their employers, but only if they're working for banks and other financial institutions – as opposed to say working for the government and its intelligence agencies.

I have been aware for a few years that the U.S. government instituted a law in 2010 called the Dodd-Frank Act that is designed to encourage people employed in the international finance community to report malfeasance to the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), in return for a substantial percentage of any monies recouped.

This law seems to have produced a booming business for such high-minded "whistleblowers" – if that could be the accurate term for such actions. They are celebrated and can receive multi-million dollar paydays, the most recent (unnamed) source receiving \$20 million.

Nor is this U.S. initiative just potentially benefiting U.S. citizens – it you look at the small print at the bottom of this page, disclosures are being sent in from all over the world. Which is all to the public good no doubt, especially in the wake of the 2008 global financial crash and the ensuing fall-out that hit us all. We need more clarity about arcane casino banking practices that have bankrupted whole countries, and we need justice.

But U.S. government does send out a number of contradictory messages to those in other areas of work who might also have concerns about the legality of actions by their organizations which may have equal or even graver impacts on the lives of their fellow human beings.

Contrasting Legal Duties

If you work in finance anywhere in the world and you see irregularities, it is apparently your legal duty to report them through appropriate channels and then count the dollars as they flow in as reward. Such is the power of globalization, or at least the U.S. self-appointed role as the global hegemon.

However, if you happen to work inside the U.S. government, its intelligence agencies or its military, under the terms of the U.S. Constitution, it would appear that you also have a solemn duty under oath to report illegalities that violate the Constitution by going through the officially designated channels and hoping that reform is the result.

But, from all recent examples, it would appear that you get damn few thanks for such patriotic actions. Take the case of Thomas Drake, a former senior National Security Agency executive who in 2007 went public about waste and wanton expenditure within the agency, as I wrote way back in 2011. Before doing so, Drake had gone through all the prescribed routes for such disclosures, up to and including a congressional committee.

Despite all this, Drake was abruptly snatched by the FBI in a violent dawn raid and threatened with 35 years in prison. He (under the terrifying American plea bargain system) accepted a misdemeanor conviction to escape the horrors of federal charges, the resulting loss of all his civic rights and a potential 35 years in prison. He still, of course, lost his job, his impeccable professional reputation, and his whole way of life.

He was part of a NSA group that also included William Binney, the NSA's former Technical Director, and his fellow whistleblowers Kirk Wiebe, Ed Loumis and Diane Roark. These brave people had developed an electronic mass-surveillance program called Thin Thread that could zero in on those people who were genuinely of security interest and worth targeting, a program which would have been relatively cheap, costing only \$1.4 million and would have been consistent with the terms of the Constitution. According to Binney, it could potentially have stopped 9/11 and all the attendant horrors..

Instead, it appears that bureaucratic backs were scratched and political favors called in by the incoming neoconservative government of George W Bush in 2000, and another program called Trail Blazer was developed, to the tune of \$1.2

billion – and which spied on everyone across America (as well as the rest of the world) and thereby broke, at the very least, the terms of the Constitution.

Yet Bill Binney was still subjected to an FBI SWAT team raid – he was dragged out of the shower early one morning at gunpoint. All this is well documented in an excellent film "A Good American" and I recommend watching it.

If the treatment of financial whistleblowers were in place for national security whistleblowers, Binney would have received a payout of millions of dollars for protecting the rights of his fellow citizens and for saving the American taxpayers more than \$1 billion. But, of course, Binney's whistleblowing was not in the long-term business interests of the now-global surveillance of the National Security State.

Eisenhower's Warning

President Dwight Eisenhower, in his valedictory speech in 1961, warned of the subversive interests of the "military-industrial" complex. That seems so quaint now as we face a steroid-pumped, globalized military surveillance industry that will do anything to protect its interests. So, rather than holding the powerful and well-connected accountable for fleecing and spying on the American people, it is the principled whistleblowers who are crushed – "*pour encourager les autres.*"

There are the even-more-egregious cases of Chelsea (formerly Bradley) Manning and Edward Snowden. The former, as you may remember, is the former U.S. Army private currently serving 35 years in a military prison for exposing U.S. war crimes. She is the most obvious victim of outgoing-President Obama's war on whistleblowers and surely deserving of his supposed outgoing clemency.

The latter, currently stranded in Russia *en route* from Hong Kong to political asylum in Ecuador is, in my view and as I have said before, the most significant whistleblower in modern history. But he gets few thanks – indeed incoming Trump administration appointees have in the past called for imposing the death penalty on Snowden.

So all this is a "wonderfully outstanding encouragement" to those in public service in the U.S. – not. Work for a bank and anonymously snitch –ka-ching! Work for the government and blow the whistle – 30-plus years in prison or worse. Hmmm.

If President-elect Donald Trump is serious about "draining the swamp" then perhaps he could put some serious and meaningful public service whistleblower protection measures in place, rather than prosecuting such patriots.

After all, such measures would be a win-win situation, as I have said many times before – a proper and truly accountable channel for potential whistleblowers to go to, in the expectation that their concerns will be properly heard and investigated.

That way the intelligence agencies can become truly accountable, sharpen their game, avoid financial scandals and better protect the public; and the whistleblowers do not need to ruin their lives, lose their jobs, face imprisonment, or worse.

After all, where are the most heinous crimes witnessed? Sure, bank crimes impact the economy and ruin the lives of working people; but out-of-control intelligence agencies that kidnap, torture and assassinate people around the world, operating in secret, actually *end* lives.

Western Repression

All that said, other Western liberal democracies are surely less draconian than the U.S., no? Well, unfortunately not. Take the U.K., a country still in thrall to the glamorous myth of James Bond, and where there have been multiple intelligence whistleblowers from the agencies over the last few decades – yet all of them have automatically faced prison.

In fact, the U.K. suppression of intelligence, diplomatic and military whistleblowers seems to have acted as an exemplar to other countries in how you stifle ethical dissent from within.

Sure, the prison sentences for such whistleblowing are not as draconian under the U.K.'s Official Secrets Act (1989) as the anachronistic U.S. Espionage Act (1917). But the clear bright line against ANY disclosure is just as stifling.

In the U.K., a country where the intelligence agencies have for the last 17 years been illegally prostituting themselves to advance the interests of a foreign country (the U.S.), this is simply unacceptable. Especially as the U.K. has just made into law the Investigatory Powers Act (2016), which legalizes all this previously illegal activity and indeed expands the hacking powers of the state. (This law was enacted over expert advice.)

More worryingly, the ultra-liberal Norway, which blazed a calm and humanist trail in its response to the murderous white-supremacist terrorist attacks of Anders Breivik five years ago, has now proposed a draconian surveillance law.

And Germany – a country horrified by revelations made by Snowden in 2013 which stirred memories of the surveillance powers of the Gestapo and the Stasi last century – has also just expanded the surveillance authority of its intelligence

agencies.

In the face of all this, it appears there has never been a greater need of intelligence whistleblowers across the Western world. Yet it appears that, once again, there is one standard for financial whistleblowing, complete with generous financial rewards.

But for whistleblowers in the intelligence world, for those Poor Bloody Whistleblowers, it's prosecution and persecution as usual, despite the fact that they may indeed be serving the most profound of public interests – freedom, privacy and the ability to thereby have a functioning democracy.

As always – *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. So back to my fluent French, referenced at the start: we are, it seems, all still mired in the *merde*.

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

Reflections on the 'Dispossessed'

The story of modern human history has been the dispossession of working people and the concentration of wealth in fewer hands, now transformed into a system of cradle-to-grave debt, writes Nicolas J S Davies.

By Nicolas J S Davies

After centuries of hard-fought but limited progress, human society seems to be reverting to the law of the jungle. For many of our international neighbors, this means leading lives defined by aerial bombardment, guerrilla warfare, militia rule and displacement as refugees.

For half my neighbors in the U.S., it means living paycheck to paycheck under a corrupt "inverted totalitarian" political and economic system designed to funnel ever greater concentrations of wealth and power into the hands of a greedy and unsympathetic ruling class, exemplified at the moment by Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, the Koch brothers and Wall Street.

For people everywhere, the fragile collective systems of law, civil and human rights, social welfare, progressive taxation and public services that painstakingly evolved to provide human beings with basic rights and longer, healthier, happier lives are disintegrating into something closer to Thomas Hobbes' Seventeenth Century nightmare of a violent and chaotic world in which

most people's lives will be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short."

If we understood more of our own history, we might grasp a little better the fragility of the improving quality of life we or our parents once took for granted, the competing forces of progress and greed that have shaped the world we live in, and the mechanisms by which greed keeps rearing its head to undermine progress in spite of all our efforts.

Until I read Eric Hobsbawm's quartet of books that begins with *The Age of Revolution: 1789-1848* and ends with *The Age of Extremes: 1914-1991*, I did not know that my own great-great-grandparents in newly industrialized Dudley in England's Black Country were born with an average life expectancy of only 18 years.

I also learned from Hobsbawm that, when I was born in a British dockyard hospital in Sri Lanka in 1954, at least half of my fellow human beings still lived as subsistence farmers in societies that had evolved for centuries with less radical change than they have now experienced in my own short lifetime.

Loss of Communal Rights

In the bat of an eyelid in the sweep of human history, traditional ways of life based on communal rights to land and centuries of accumulated wisdom about how to live on it have been shattered and discarded.

On Friday, Consortiumnews reported on the crisis of landlessness and poverty that has led to decades of resistance and repression in the Philippines. Throughout the "developing" world, a billion poor, landless people have been herded into new megacities ringed by endless slums and shanty-towns, to lead lives defined by low-wage labor, street life, extreme poverty and insecurity, and unsanitary and toxic environments – not unlike Dudley in the 1830s.

The predicament facing our fellow creatures is even worse than our own. The World Wildlife Fund reported recently that the Earth's total population of wild animals, birds, fish, amphibians and reptiles has declined by 60 percent since 1970, and that the decline has accelerated in the past five years despite current conservation efforts.

The shattering of relationships between people, communities and the land they live on is in large part the culmination of a process that began in England 500 years ago. In medieval times, English peasants were forced to work their feudal masters' land, but they also had access to common land where they could build homes, grow crops and graze animals.

Then landowners began to “enclose” formerly common land in what we would now call a privatization of land, the most vital resource in an agricultural society. Feudal lords gradually became “modern” landlords and employers, scattering their former vassals to the wind with no right to land on which to build cottages, grow crops or graze animals.

As Thomas More wrote in *Utopia* in 1516, greedy landowners discovered that grazing sheep could be more profitable than sharing land with other human beings: “...the nobility and gentry, and even those holy men, the abbots, not contented with the old rents which their farms yielded, nor thinking it enough that they, living at their ease, do no good to the public, resolve to do it hurt instead of good. They stop the course of agriculture, destroying houses and towns, reserving only the churches, and enclose grounds that they may lodge their sheep in them...”

“[Ordinary people] are put in prison as idle vagabonds; while they would willingly work, but can find none that will hire them; for there is no more occasion for country labor, to which they have been bred, when there is no arable ground left. One shepherd can look after a flock which will stock an extent of ground that would require many hands if it were to be ploughed and reaped. This likewise in many places raises the price of corn.”

Orwell's Dim View

George Orwell echoed More's dim view of property owners and the enclosure of common lands in a column in *Tribune* on Aug. 18, 1944:

“...the so-called owners of the land ... simply seized it by force, afterwards hiring lawyers to provide them with title-deeds. In the case of the enclosure of the common lands..., the land-grabbers did not even have the excuse of being foreign conquerors; they were quite frankly taking the heritage of their own countrymen, upon no sort of pretext except that they had the power to do so. Except for the few surviving commons, the high roads, the lands of the National Trust, a certain number of parks, and the sea shore below high-tide mark, every square inch of England is ‘owned’ by a few thousand families. These people are just about as useful as so many tapeworms.”

The proportion of common land in England shrank from a third in 1500 to 27 percent by 1600, and has kept shrinking ever since. A series of parliamentary “Inclosure Acts” codified and regulated this process in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries, and the newly dispossessed provided a captive labor pool for new factories in places like Dudley, where women and children worked in conditions previously imposed only on convicts.

Before the Second World War, hundreds of “commoner” families still grew crops and grazed animals in Ashdown Forest, the largest remaining area of common land in southeast England (and the setting for A.A. Milne’s *Winnie-the-Pooh* stories). The commoners won a famous court case to uphold their rights in 1881, but half the remaining commoners lost their rights by failing to re-register under a new law in 1965. There are still 730 registered commoner families living in the forest, but reportedly only one family still makes its living grazing cattle on the common land. The others lead “modern” lives like the rest of us.

After the Jacobite rebellions of 1715 and 1745, Scottish clan chieftains followed the example of the English lords, turned their lands to sheep farming and ethnically cleansed their clan members – their own extended families – from the highlands.

The haunting emptiness of that landscape today is the result of a crime against humanity, well documented in John Preble’s classic, *The Highland Clearances*. Memories of burned-out crofts live on across the sea in place names like Ben Lomond in California, named for the last Scottish mountain the dispossessed highlanders could see from the decks of migrant ships sailing down the Clyde.

Destroying the Mayans

In the highlands of Guatemala, where indigenous Mayan peoples have fought fiercely to save their land and their culture for 500 years, girls at American mission schools are forced to exchange the beautiful *traje* (traditional clothes) hand-woven by their mothers and grandmothers for Scots tartan uniforms, cheap factory-made imitations of the *traje* of another highland culture who were banned from wearing it themselves after the Jacobite rebellions. The irony seems to be lost on their American benefactors.

As Europe’s rulers and landowners emptied their throwaway people into the Americas and other settler colonies, they spread the privatization of land and the destruction of traditional societies to new regions, leading to genocides of indigenous people and their cultures across the Americas and the world.

Colonial and post-colonial rulers alike have pitted the dispossessed of Europe against indigenous people in elemental struggles for survival in which the ultimate winners are always the wealthy few who can take advantage of the commodification of the Earth to claim ownership of more and more of it.

Across the world, legal concepts that evolved out of medieval English property law now serve as mechanisms to dispossess hundreds of millions of people: either

because they have no paper title to land their families may have lived on for centuries; or because the extra land they would need to support a growing extended family has already been expropriated by wealthy landlords or agribusiness companies; or because neoliberal government policies force small producers to compete with transnational companies in global markets, where prices of food and basic commodities fluctuate dramatically without regard for their impact on real people's lives; or because, as many Americans have experienced, they are swindled into debt and foreclosure by greedy bankers, wealthy investors, corrupt governments and courts.

The foreclosure crisis in the U.S. then dumped millions of its victims into newly inflated rental markets to be exploited all over again by other investors who are now their landlords.

Privatization on Steroids

Now these concepts of private ownership and property rights are expanding into new areas of life under novel legal constructs like intellectual property law, "free" trade and investment agreements, corporate personhood, binding arbitration, investor-state dispute settlement and global patent law.

These create new opportunities for privatization and profit, leaving ordinary human beings farther adrift in captive markets where more and more of the basics of life, from food to medical care to housing to education, must be bought at a premium from increasingly monopolistic corporations. The cradle-to-grave welfare state promised to the men who marched home from World War Two has metamorphosed into cradle-to-grave debt for their grandchildren.

As traditional communal land ownership was replaced by new systems of private property across the world, the rise of socialism and communism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries was an attempt to restore social justice, community and communal ownership through new forms of political and economic organization. It should therefore be no surprise that the collapse of the U.S.S.R. and the resulting expansion of the neoliberal world led to an unbridled global acceleration of privatization and the accumulation of all forms of wealth in fewer and fewer hands.

In the Western world, the prior gains of movements for labor, environmental, civil and human rights have fallen victim to a rampage of neoliberal political and economic policies, backed by triumphalist claims for the "magic of the market" that have more in common with religious dogma than social science. But the laws of economics have not really changed since the 1930s, when an apocryphal saying attributed to J.M. Keynes defined this kind of laissez-faire capitalism as "the absurd idea that the worst people, for the worst reasons,

will do what is best for all of us.”

The parasites who Orwell called the “so-called owners” of the world think they have built an impregnable legal fortress on the equally absurd idea that they own everything and that the rest of us therefore come into the world with nothing and must pay them for the privilege of living here. This is not the way that human beings have lived throughout our history on Earth, and it is not an improvement.

These so-called owners now threaten our very existence with their insatiable greed and genocidal behavior. So let us make sure that this disastrous experiment is short-lived, and that it ends, not in a nuclear holocaust, nor with a society destroyed by climate change, but with a peaceful, sustainable world that we will all love, share, and safeguard for future generations.

Castro’s Death

With the death of Fidel Castro, the world has lost the most prominent world leader of his generation to clearly and consistently challenge the immorality and absurdity of allowing the world to be ruled by such a parasitic and dangerous ownership class. China’s Xinhua news agency rightly called him, “a pioneer in battling the current international economic order, particularly against the capitalist system, neoliberal globalisation, foreign debt and exploitation of natural resources.”

With his passing, to quote another leader of his era, “The torch has been passed to a new generation.”

The Republican sweep in the 2016 election presents this generation of Americans with challenges that should be familiar by now after several decades of neoliberalism, notwithstanding the surprise rebranding of Donald Trump, a bigoted billionaire and TV game show host, as our new president.

In the conclusion of his masterwork, *Century of War*, historian Gabriel Kolko proposed a formula for a pragmatic way forward that is just as pertinent today as when he wrote it in 1994.

“In the last analysis,” Kolko wrote, “how means and ends are defined (is) constrained only by a quite simple dedication to being on the side of the oppressed, the disadvantaged, and the people who really work to earn what they spend, whenever the basic criterion of who should gain or lose in a society is applied. In the most basic sense, when the question of ‘whose side are you on’ is asked, this is ultimately the only response to it that makes the entire historic tradition of reform, the improvement of society, and socialism both meaningful and consistent... And it complements an equally necessary devotion to

the prevention of war.”

Kolko’s prescription remains a rational political response to the global crisis in which we are living. Its relevance has not been diminished by anything that has happened under the Clinton, Bush or Obama presidencies, and it will remain a solid basis for principled opposition and united resistance to whatever further madness the Trump administration unleashes on the world.

As Kolko prophetically concluded, “...there are no easy solutions to the problems of irresponsible, deluded leaders and the classes they represent, or the hesitation of people to reverse the world’s folly before they are themselves subjected to its grievous consequences.

“So much remains to be done – and it is late... While the prospects for essential and sufficient changes are very uncertain at the present moment, allowing the world’s drift since 1914 to reach its inevitable destructive culmination is a course that our natural desire for human survival instinctively rejects...

“Dispelling the myths of history, dismantling the pretensions of conventional wisdom and of leaders who claim omniscience, and discarding the shibboleths of ideologies that have betrayed their followers are all preconditions for escaping from the fatal illusions and errors that [the Twentieth] century has bequeathed to us.”

Nicolas J S Davies is the author of *Blood On Our Hands: the American Invasion and Destruction of Iraq*. He also wrote the chapters on “Obama at War” in *Grading the 44th President: a Report Card on Barack Obama’s First Term as a Progressive Leader*.

Philippines’ Duterte Seeks Peace

Exclusive: Filipino President Duterte oversaw a brutal anti-drug campaign but is now seeking peace with leftist revolutionaries and rejecting U.S. pressure for more counterinsurgency warfare, writes Marjorie Cohn.

By Marjorie Cohn

In April 2016, Rodrigo Duterte won the Philippine presidential election by a landslide, with more than 6 million votes. He openly declared that he was the nation’s first Left president, calling himself a socialist but not a communist. So far, his regime has been controversial, to put it mildly.

The U.S. press has focused on Duterte's vicious war on drugs that claimed upwards of 2,000 lives and led to the incarceration of tens of thousands of people. His decision to allow former Filipino dictator Ferdinand Marcos's burial in the National Cemetery of the Heroes also has drawn the ire of those who recall Marcos's brutal two-decade regime that killed more than 3,000, tortured tens of thousands, and stole \$10 billion from the Philippines.

But, significantly, Duterte is engaging with revolutionary forces in the peace process that aims to end 47 years of armed struggle against the repressive Filipino government. And Duterte has taken actions that, for the first time, challenge the longstanding military and economic power of the United States in the Philippines.

Peace Process With Opposition

Since 1969, a civil war has been raging in the Philippines. The roots of the armed conflict can be traced to the colonial and neocolonial domination of the Philippines by the Spanish, then U.S. imperialism, feudal exploitation by big landlords and capitalist interests, as well as widespread bureaucratic corruption. After Duterte's election, he cited peace as a top priority of his administration, vowing to engage in peace negotiations with the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP).

According to JustPeacePH, an international platform that supports the Philippine peace process and takes its name from its Internet site, "justpeace.ph," "The daily, systematic and systemic injustice experienced by the people drive them to desire and seek fundamental changes in society through various means. But because the forces against fundamental social change use all means including the instruments and violence of the state to defend the status quo, many Filipinos over many generations have embraced armed struggle to overthrow the ruling system."

The NDFP "is the alliance of progressive forces seeking to bring about fundamental change in the existing social system in the Philippines through armed revolution," JustPeacePH states in its Primer on Just and Lasting Peace in the Philippines. The NDFP alliance includes trade unions, peasants, youth, women, national minorities, teachers, health workers, religious clergy, the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), and the New People's Army.

Duterte's Peace Initiative

Two rounds of peace negotiations have already occurred since Duterte took office, with a third scheduled for January 2017 in Oslo, Norway.

In May, Duterte declared he would release all political prisoners, which number

more than 400, through a presidential declaration of amnesty, provided both houses of congress approve. Nineteen NDFP consultants, who have been involved in the revolutionary movement for years, have already been released.

Duterte offered four cabinet positions to the CPP, but they declined, stating there must first be a comprehensive peace agreement. The CPP, however, recommended a veteran peasant leader who was appointed Secretary of Agrarian Reform and a veteran academic activist leader who was named secretary of social welfare and development.

"These are major appointments," Luis Jalandoni, NDFP's Senior Adviser on the Peace Negotiating Panel, told me at a recent conference of the International Association of Democratic Lawyers in Lisbon, Portugal.

NDFP has a people's army and organs of political power with mass organizations in 71 out of the 81 provinces in the country, Jalandoni said. He noted that landlessness and poverty afflict the 100 million people in the Philippines.

"The NDFP insists on addressing the roots of the armed conflict in order to achieve a just and lasting peace," Jalandoni said.

The demands in the peace talks are: Release of all political prisoners; Land reform for the peasantry (70% of the population); National industrialization to develop the economy using available human and natural resources; Protect the environment and ancestral lands of the indigenous peoples; and Philippine national sovereignty and abrogation of all unequal treaties with the United States.

Challenging U.S. Power

U.S. domination and interference in the Philippines date back to 1898, when the United States annexed the Philippines. The U.S. continued to exercise colonial rule over the country until 1946, when the Philippines gained its independence although the United States retained many military installations there and the Filipino economy maintained its dependence on the U.S.

With U.S. assistance, Marcos ruled the Philippines with an iron fist from 1965 through 1986, under martial law from 1972 to 1981. In 2002, the Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo government developed Oplan Bayanihan, a counterinsurgency program modeled on U.S. strategies. After 9/11, the Bush administration gave Arroyo \$100 million to fund that campaign in the Philippines.

Oplan Bayanihan led to large numbers of extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances, torture and cruel treatment. Many civilians, including children, have been killed. Philippine military and paramilitary death squads murdered

hundreds of members of progressive organizations. Communities and leaders opposed to large-scale and invasive mining have been targeted. Even ordinary people with no political affiliation have not escaped the government's reign of terror.

From 2001 to 2010, the U.S. government provided more than \$507 in military assistance to the Philippine government, facilitating tremendous repression.

Between 2010 and 2015, the Philippine police, military and paramilitary forces perpetrated extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances, torture, illegal arrests and forced evacuation, many to enable extraction by mining companies.

The 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, which President Barack Obama negotiated with Duterte's predecessor, gave U.S. troops the right to prolonged deployment in the Philippines. The agreement is widely seen in the Philippines as a threat to the country's sovereignty.

In September 2016, Duterte declared, "I am not a fan of the Americans ... Filipinos should be first before everybody else." He added, "In our relations to the world, the Philippines will pursue an independent foreign policy. I repeat: The Philippines will pursue an independent foreign policy."

The United States has not apologized for all the atrocities it committed against the Filipino people, Duterte said. Responding to U.S. criticism of the Philippines for its human rights violations, he stated, "Why are you Americans killing the black people there, shooting them down when they are already on the ground."

Duterte promised to end joint military maneuvers with U.S. forces and expel the hundreds of U.S. troops currently stationed in the Philippines. He also expressed his intention to end bilateral agreements concluded by his predecessor with the United States and reverse permission for the United States' use of five Philippine military bases.

"I will break up with America," Duterte said. "I would rather go to Russia and to China." He vowed to rescind joint patrols with U.S. and Filipino forces against Chinese expansion in the disputed South China Sea. Indeed, Duterte recently traveled to China and secured valuable fishing rights for Filipinos in the South China Sea.

Hope for Peace Prospects

In an unprecedented development, both the government and the opposition declared unilateral ceasefires in August. But there are still problems with the government's ceasefire, says Jalandoni, as Duterte doesn't have full control of

the military. The military and paramilitary forces, which are protected by the military, have engaged in several violations that imperil the ceasefire, he said.

“There is high optimism that the peace talks will prosper under the presidency of Duterte,” according to JustPeacePH. “Unlike past presidents who harbor strong anti-communist bias, Duterte seems capable of rethinking the government’s peace strategy since he claims to be a socialist.”

Opposition forces are not uncritical of the excesses in Duterte’s war on drugs. The CPP declared the campaign is becoming anti-people and anti-democratic. Due process must be respected, human rights must be upheld; the drug users and small drug dealers, who come from poverty, require rehabilitation and care, the CPP maintains.

“Understandably, Duterte’s war on drugs and other crimes is given more coverage by the global media,” JustPeacePH wrote in its primer. “But Duterte’s aim to establish a lasting peace in the provinces deserves even more attention as this strikes at the root causes of the problem of illegal drugs and related crimes.”

Jalandoni said, “Duterte is not a saint but he stands for an independent foreign policy. His stand against the United States is respected and has received a lot of support.”

The NDFP, Jalandoni noted, says that “if there are threats against Duterte by U.S. imperialism, the Left will be a reliable ally to him,” adding, “He is the first president to stand up to the United States.”

Marjorie Cohn is professor emerita at Thomas Jefferson School of Law, former president of the National Lawyers Guild, and deputy secretary general of the International Association of Democratic Lawyers. She is a member of the International Legal Assistance Team that advises the National Democratic Front of the Philippines on human rights and humanitarian law in their peace negotiations. Her most recent book is *Drones and Targeted Killing: Legal, Moral, and Geopolitical Issues*. Visit her website at <http://marjoriecohn.com/> and follow her on Twitter @marjoriecohn.

Trump’s Possible Path Out of Ukraine Crisis

Exclusive: The U.S.-backed coup in Ukraine in 2014 sparked a New Cold War with

Russia, but a President Trump could roll back tensions with a creative strategy for resolving the Ukraine standoff, writes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

If Donald Trump wants to make a decisive and constructive mark on U.S. foreign policy early in his presidency, there's no better place to start than by helping to end the brutal war in Ukraine that has claimed some 10,000 lives.

The Obama administration helped ignite that war by attempting to yank Ukraine out of Russia's orbit and into the Western security and economic sphere. Working alongside the European Union, Washington fanned mass street protests that led to a violent putsch against Kiev's elected government in February 2014. Moscow responded by annexing (or, depending on your point of view, reunifying with) Russian-speaking Crimea, which is also headquarters of Moscow's Black Sea Fleet, and backing pro-Russia separatists in the eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk.

Since then, the two sides have fought to a bloody stalemate. Besides killing thousands of civilians, the war has sunk Ukraine's economy and fostered rampant corruption. U.S. and E.U. sanctions have dragged down Russia's economy and derailed cooperation between Washington and Moscow in other theaters. Rising tensions between NATO and Russia have greatly raised the odds of an accidental military confrontation between the world's two largest nuclear powers.

The best hope for Ukraine – and renewed East-West cooperation – is the Minsk Protocol, signed by Ukrainian, Russian, and European parties in the capital of Belarus on Sept. 5, 2014. The agreement provided for a ceasefire, an exchange of prisoners, and a framework for a political settlement based on giving the Donetsk and Luhansk regions a “special status.”

That agreement broke down amid renewed fighting until the parties signed the Minsk-2 Agreement on Feb. 12, 2015. It provided for constitutional reforms, elections in the two republics, and restoration of Ukrainian sovereignty over its borders. But Kiev has made no serious move to recognize the special status of its breakaway regions, and the two sides have engaged in sporadic hostilities ever since.

Final Words

Presidents Obama and Putin exchanged what may have been their final, desultory words on the subject at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Peru this month. Obama “urged President Putin to uphold Russia's commitments under the Minsk agreements,” while a Russian spokesman said the two men “expressed

regret that it was not possible to make progress in Ukraine.”

As current foreign policy messes go, however, the Ukrainian imbroglio may offer the greatest opportunities for a rewarding cleanup. Doing so will require both sides to acknowledge some fault and find creative ways to save face.

Fortunately, President-elect Trump has created an opening for such a settlement by reaching out to Putin during the election campaign and explicitly declining to bash Russia for its annexation of Crimea (which followed a hastily arranged referendum in which the official results showed that 96 percent of the voters favored leaving Ukraine and rejoining Russia).

There are also small signs of progress that give hope. A limited demilitarization accord signed in September led to a mutual retreat by the Ukrainian army and pro-Russia separatists from a small city in eastern Ukraine. The withdrawal was verified by observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), a party to the Minsk accords. Meanwhile, Ukraine, Germany, France and Russia are working on a new roadmap to strengthen the ceasefire.

Conditions for Peace

In a June 2015 interview with Charlie Rose, Putin laid out clear and reasonable conditions for making the Minsk accord stick:

“Today we primarily need to comply with all the agreements reached in Minsk ... At the same time, I would like to draw . . . the attention of all our partners to the fact that we cannot do it unilaterally. We keep hearing the same thing, repeated like a mantra – that Russia should influence the southeast of Ukraine. We are. However, it is impossible to resolve the problem through our influence on the southeast alone.

“There has to be influence on the current official authorities in Kiev, which is something we cannot do. This is a road our Western partners have to take – those in Europe and America. Let us work together. ... We believe that to resolve the situation we need to implement the Minsk agreements, as I said. The elements of a political settlement are key here. There are several. . . .

“The first one is constitutional reform, and the Minsk agreements say clearly: to provide autonomy or, as they say, decentralization of power. . . .

“The second thing that has to be done – the law passed earlier on the special status of . . . Luhansk and Donetsk, the unrecognized republics, should be enacted. It was passed, but still not acted upon. This requires a resolution of the Supreme Rada – the Ukrainian Parliament – which is also covered

in the Minsk agreements. . . .

“The third thing is a law on amnesty. It is impossible to have a political dialogue with people who are threatened with criminal persecution. And finally, they need to pass a law on municipal elections on these territories and to have the elections themselves. All this is spelled out in the Minsk agreements. . . .

“I repeat, it is important now to have a direct dialogue between Luhansk, Donetsk and Kiev – this is missing.”

Future of Crimea

Any lasting settlement will also require some compromise over Crimea, which Putin has vowed never to relinquish.

As Ray McGovern, the CIA’s former chief Russia analyst, has noted, the annexation of Crimea did violate a pledge that Russia made in 1994 – along with Great Britain and the United States – “to respect the independence and sovereignty and existing borders of Ukraine,” as a precondition to Ukraine giving up its nuclear weapons. Of course, the United States and the E.U. had already violated the same pledge by supporting a coup d’état against the country’s elected government.

McGovern cited other “extenuating circumstances, including alarm among Crimeans over what the unconstitutional ouster of Ukraine’s president might mean for them, as well as Moscow’s not unfounded nightmare of NATO taking over Russia’s major, and only warm-water, naval base at Sevastopol in Crimea.”

In support of annexation, Russian and Crimean authorities also pointed to the hasty referendum that was held in Crimea in March 2014, which resulted in 96 percent support for reunification with Russia, a relationship dating back to the Eighteenth Century. Subsequent polls of Crimean opinion, conducted by Western firms, have largely confirmed support for the 2014 referendum on rejoining Russia. But the referendum did not have international observers and was not accepted by the United States and other Western nations.

Condemning the annexation in a soaring speech about the “rule of law” and America’s dedication to universal principles, President Obama contrasted Crimea with Kosovo, which NATO forcibly broke away from Serbia in 1999.

Obama said, “Kosovo only left Serbia after a referendum was organized not outside the boundaries of international law, but in careful cooperation with the United Nations and with Kosovo’s neighbors. None of that even came close to happening in Crimea.”

Actually, none of that came close to happening in Kosovo, either. Obama's story was a myth, but it confirmed the powerful legitimacy offered by popular referenda, like those in Great Britain over Scottish independence or Brexit.

Yet, as part of a permanent settlement of the larger Ukraine crisis, the Minsk signatories could agree to hold another, binding referendum in Crimea under international supervision to decide whether it stays under Russian rule or returns to Ukraine.

To get Russia's buy-in, the United States and its European allies should agree to lift sanctions if Moscow abides by the referendum and other terms of the Minsk accord. They should also agree to rule out the incorporation of Ukraine into NATO, the original sin that sowed the seeds of crisis between Russia and the West. Russia, in turn, could agree to demilitarize its border with Ukraine.

Obstacles to Settlement

President Putin has signaled his willingness to compromise in several ways, including firing his hardline chief of staff, Sergei Ivanov, and welcoming the presence of armed observers from OSCE to monitor the Minsk agreement.

But major obstacles still impede progress. One is President Petro Poroshenko's stalling in the face of opposition to the Minsk accord by Ukrainian nationalists. Kiev needs to be given a firm choice: go it alone, or compromise if it wants continued economic support from the United States and Western Europe. The Obama administration has quietly urged the Poroshenko government to honor the Minsk agreement, but has never put teeth behind its entreaties.

The other major obstacle is hostility from militarist hardliners in the West who propose arming Ukraine to ratchet up conflict with Russia. Prime examples include the State Department's chief policy maker on Ukraine, Victoria Nuland; former NATO Commander Gen. Philip Breedlove, who became infamous for issuing inflated warnings about Russian military operations; Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman John McCain; and Stephen Hadley, Raytheon board member and former national security adviser to President George W. Bush, who chairs the Orwellian-named United States Institute for Peace.

But Trump will have great leeway as commander-in-chief to reject their advice and set a new direction for NATO's policy on Ukraine and Russia more generally. He has everything to gain by breaking the cycle of political conflict with Moscow.

An ally in the Kremlin will immeasurably improve his chances of making deals in the Middle East, finding a way out of Afghanistan, and managing China.

The next few months should tell us whether Trump has the independence, imagination, and gumption to do the right thing.

Jonathan Marshall is author or co-author of five books on international affairs, including *The Lebanese Connection: Corruption, Civil War and the International Drug Traffic* . Some of his previous articles for Consortiumnews include "Nazi Roots of Ukraine's Conflict," "Escalations in a New Cold War," "European Union's Imperial Overreach," and "Kosovo Chaos Undercuts Clinton 'Success.'"

The West's Media Delusions

Exclusive: The U.S. mainstream news media often holds itself out as the world's gold standard, home for careful reporting and diverse opinions compared to Russia's monolithic propaganda, but the reality is quite different, says James W Carden.

By James W Carden

In a wide ranging and necessary survey of Russian political programming, Dr. Gilbert Doctorow, himself a frequent guest on those shows, observes that:

"The charges – that Russian media are only an instrument of state propaganda directed at the domestic population to keep Russian citizens in line and at foreign audiences to sow dissent among Russia's neighbors and within the European Union – are taken as a matter of faith with almost no proofs adduced. Anyone who questions this 'group think' is immediately labeled a 'tool of Putin' or worse."

Dr. Doctorow has launched an important conversation in light of the release of yet another alarmist media report, this time by a British neoconservative group named (oddly) after a long deceased Democratic Senator from Washington State (Henry "Scoop" Jackson), which seeks to stifle debate on Russia policy in the West by smearing dissenters from the Russia-bashing conventional wisdom as "Putin's useful idiots."

Doctorow's experience with the Russian media therefore serves a double use: to combat willful Western misconceptions of the Russian media landscape as well as to serve as a useful point of comparison with U.S. media outlets and their coverage of Russia.

If we take the example of the purportedly liberal cable news outlet MSNBC, we

find, paradoxically, that the hard-right neoconservative stance toward Russia goes virtually unopposed. Regarding Russia, in comparison with their principal center-left cable news rival CNN, which, to its credit occasionally makes room for the minority “detente” point of view, MSNBC leaves about as much room for dissent as the Soviet-era Pravda – actually, perhaps less.

New McCarthyism

As it happens, there was a similar disparity when it came to the way the two networks covered the U.S. presidential election. While CNN went about bringing much needed balance to its coverage, albeit in the most inept way possible – by hiring paid flacks from each of the campaigns to appear alongside actual journalists, MSNBC (like Republican rival FOX News) wholly dispensed with any pretense of objectivity and served as little more than as a mouth piece for the disastrous Clinton campaign.

As such, the “liberal” network found itself in the vanguard of the new McCarthyism which swept the 2016 campaign, but which has, in fact, been a feature of the American debate over Russia policy since at least the beginning of the Ukraine crisis in late 2013 – if not earlier.

Examples abound, but perhaps the most striking case of the neo-McCarthyite hysteria which MSNBC attempted to dress up as its legitimate concern over U.S. national security was a rant that Rachel Maddow unleashed on her audience in June when Maddow opened her show with a monologue dedicated to the proposition that Donald Trump was in league with Vladimir Putin.

Maddow, in her signature smarter-than-thou tone, informed readers that the “admiration” between Putin and Trump “really is mutual. I mean, look at this headline, ‘Putin praises Trump. He’s brilliant and talented person.’ ‘Putin praises bright and talented Trump.’ ‘Vladimir Putin praises outstanding and talented Trump.’ There was some controversy over how to exactly translate Putin’s remarks, but Putin took care to flatter Donald Trump publicly, exactly the way Donald Trump likes to be flattered, and that’s apparently enough for Donald Trump, that’s all he needs to hear, that’s all he needs to know, to tell him, how great Vladimir Putin is.

“Putin likes Trump, he must be smart, must be great. So, that is the very, very unusual context here, that you have a Republican presidential nominee who is very, very susceptible to flattery. It’s the most powerful thing in the world to him. If you compliment him, he will never forget it and that’s kind of all he needs to know about you.”

Maddow went on in this vein for quite a while longer (meaning: little actual

content but lots of “very, very’s” and eye-rolling). But her central insight, such as it was, was little more than a regurgitation of Democratic National Committee talking points. To no one’s surprise, Maddow’s accusations were repeated almost verbatim in the press releases issued by the Clinton campaign which accused Trump of being little more than a Russian fifth columnist.

Maddow’s evidence-free, innuendo laden June rant took on an added importance because she was the messenger. After the risible, self-important sports journalist Keith Olbermann left the network in 2011, Maddow took over as the network’s house intellectual. So her words carry weight with its viewers in a way, say, Mika Brzezinski’s do not.

Nevertheless at no point at which I am aware did Maddow ever host a guest who pushed back against the still unproven charges that the Russian government had interfered in the U.S. election or that Donald Trump was, in the words of former CIA functionary Mike Morell, an “unwitting agent of the Kremlin” – never mind that as recently as Nov. 15, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Corker admitted he had “no proof” of Moscow’s interference in the U.S. election.

While it is unclear whether MSNBC’s Joy Reid is seen as “serious” a voice as Maddow, it is unquestionable that she has emerged as the network’s most enthusiastic practitioner of the new McCarthyism.

Days before the election Reid hosted Newsweek’s increasingly unhinged Kurt Eichenwald and former Naval officer Malcolm Nance who has repeatedly and without evidence claimed the Wikileaks-Podesta emails were fake.

Why, asked Reid, are the Russians backing Trump? As if that assertion was beyond dispute. Well, said Eichenwald, “They hate Hillary Clinton...” Oh. Reid then went on to wonder why the FBI is down-playing the intelligence community’s allegedly deep concern that Russia was interfering in the election.

Putin-Bashing

Days later, right after the election, Reid re-assembled a panel featuring Nance, the reliable Putin critic Nina Khrushcheva and Esquire’s Charles Pierce to reinforce the message that MSNBC had been pushing since the summer: that the Russian government had its hand on the scale of the U.S. election. Pierce, in particular, was apoplectic.

That Reid’s roundtable featured Pierce made a good deal of sense. Throughout the campaign, Pierce has been determined to draw a direct link between the Trump campaign and Putin. A sample of his output helps tell the tale. On July 24, Pierce published “Donald Trump’s and Vladimir Putin’s Shared Agenda Should Alarm Anyone Concerned About Democracy” in which Pierce speculated that “Trump seems

increasingly dependent on money from Russia and from the former Soviet republics within its increasingly active sphere of influence.”

In his offering of Sept. 9, Pierce protested that “It’s not ‘red-baiting’ to be concerned about Russian interference in our elections.” Pierce, perhaps moved to madness by *The Nation* editorial “Against Neo-McCarthyism,” sounded as though he were channeling the ghost of James Jesus Angleton, asking, “Are we supposed to believe that Donald Trump really went on RT television by accident? That nobody on his staff knew that the Russian government’s American network picks up Larry King’s podcast?”

About a month before the election, on Oct. 11, Pierce informed readers of the once-great *Esquire*, “Vladimir Putin Is Determined to See Trump in the Oval Office.” Still worse, according to Pierce, “There is little question now that Vladimir Putin is playing monkey-mischief with the 2016 presidential election, and that the Trump campaign is the primary beneficiary of that.”

All of the aforementioned is to demonstrate that the American media’s much touted pluralism is little more than a fiction when it comes to reporting on Russia. The diversity of Left-Right voices on the political spectrum that Doctorow has encountered in Moscow indicates that the widespread perception that Moscow’s political culture is monolithic compared to that of the Washington’s is, at the very least, challengeable.

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

Demonizing Russian Media

The West is escalating its demonization of Russian media as weapons of “information warfare” that need neutralizing, but Gilbert Doctorow finds that accusation just another part of the West’s own propaganda war.

By Gilbert Doctorow

One of the West’s top points in condemning Vladimir Putin’s “regime” since 2007 has been his alleged suppression of democratic institutions, including an assault on media freedom and imposition of government-directed propaganda. This week, the accusation was repeated in a resolution of the European Parliament

calling for stronger counter-measures in defense of European values against “information warfare” from Moscow.

The charges – that Russian media are only an instrument of state propaganda directed at the domestic population to keep Russian citizens in line and at foreign audiences to sow dissent among Russia’s neighbors and within the European Union – are taken as a matter of faith with almost no proofs adduced. Anyone who questions this “group think” is immediately labeled a “tool of Putin” or worse.

I experienced this firsthand in March 2015 when, as one of three debaters on “The Network,” a Euronews public affairs program, I objected to remarks by a fellow panelist, Chairman of the European Parliament’s Foreign Relations Committee Elmar Brok, who maintained that Putin crushed all liberties and his country has no free press.

Based on my familiarity with the many different political lines of the Russian print media and of the patently unintimidated Kremlin-critics behind the national radio station Ekho Moskvyy and television station Dozhd’, I countered that, for example, Russian coverage of events in the Donbass was more multi-sided and free than coverage in the U.S.

Brok lashed out with the slanderous question: “And how much did the Kremlin pay you to say that?” The broadcaster then allowed this video-taped exchange to air freely.

I have ruminated on this exchange ever since and sought incontrovertible proof of the relative freedom of expression on Russian broadcast media. My close examination of the wildly popular political talk shows on Russian television first as a spectator and then as a participant has provided just that.

I have written previously about my initial experience going back six months to when I first took part in a program on the Rossiya 1/Vesti 24 state channel, Yevgeni Popov’s “Special Correspondent.” I mentioned at the time the nearly permanent presence on these programs of domestic opposition figures as well as of foreigners from the U.S., Ukraine, Poland and Israel, in particular, who could be counted on to present views on the political topic of the day’s discussion at sharp variance with the Kremlin line.

Assessing the Talk Shows

In early autumn I appeared on the same presenter’s new show “Sixty Minutes,” as well on what is probably the most respected show of this genre, “Sunday Evening with Vladimir Soloviev,” another Rossiya 1 production. Soloviev has done feature-length television interviews with Vladimir Putin and may be considered

to be as close to power as people in this medium get. His personal views are probably more nationalist than the ruling United Russia party, but on his shows he, too, gives time on air to very diverse Russian and foreign views.

In the past month, I broadened my experience with the Russian talk show format by participating in shows on the other major state channel, Pervy Kanal ("Time Will Tell") and on the country's largest commercial television channel, NTV ("The Meeting Place"). This accelerated learning was facilitated by the U.S. presidential elections, which made Russian-speaking talking heads from America like myself a rather hot commodity on Russian television at least briefly.

In speaking to fellow panelists during break time, in interviews with presenters, I gathered some inside information about the production side of the talk shows, including their target audiences, their technical aspects and their substantive positioning.

Anyone looking over Russian television programming in general quickly finds that talk shows as a format take up a very large part of broadcast time. Of course, the focus of talk shows may be highly diverse, and political talk shows were traditionally an evening phenomenon, as is the case with the Rossiya 1 shows cited above, while daytime programming more typically focuses on housewives' concerns, daydreams of romance or tips for cooking, and the like.

In this sense, it was a bold move when two years ago Pervy Kanal decided to launch a daily two-hour political talk show ("Time Will Tell") in mid-afternoon. As expected, the target audience proved to be stay-at-home women and viewers aged 50 and above, although it appears there are also a fair number of viewers watching the program in the work place.

Going Daytime

The ratings captured by this show typically are in the 20s, meaning that 20 or so percent of all television viewers in Russia at the given time are tuned to the given program, yielding an audience numbering in the millions. On Nov. 9, when I appeared on the show dedicated to analysis of the U.S. election results, the numbers spiked to 30 percent, as one might well understand given the very great interest among ordinary Russians in the outcome of the race for the U.S. presidency and the outlook for war or peace.

As "Time Will Tell" presenter Artyom Sheinin explained to me, the decision to appear on daytime television called for certain production decisions differentiating the programs from the evening talk shows. Firstly, the expectation of a less sophisticated audience meant that the language of panelists should be free of political science jargon and allusion to little

known names or philosophies.

Said Artyom, panelists are asked to pitch their arguments as they would “talking to their kids, their mom or their lover.” On the other hand, overly calm discussion is not seen as a benefit. The presenter explains that his audience sitting at home at mid-day is in need of “an adrenaline shot,” and the normal penchant of Russian panelists to shout down one another in a free-for-all is not discouraged in the way it is on evening programming. The evening viewer is assumed to have come home from work and is seated in his armchair before the television, wants his nerves soothed more than excited.

All Russian political talk shows on the main channels are produced in the afternoon, Moscow time, and all feature on screen the caption “Live On Air.” However, where and when these shows are broadcast live versus rebroadcast from video tapes is another matter.

For example, the Rossiya 1/Vesti programs are broadcast live to the Russian Far East, where they appear at the end of prime-time evening broadcasts. Then they are re-broadcast at local evening prime time in each of the eight other time zones of the Russian Federation lying to the west, showing last in Moscow.

In this regard, two years ago when it launched “Time Will Tell,” Pervy Kanal took a second unparalleled risk by broadcasting live to Moscow in the afternoon. From a political standpoint, this was like a high-flying trapeze act without the benefit of a safety net.

In fact all of these programs are also video-taped, and all the major channels make the tapes available for internet viewing on their websites in full or shortened versions.

Similar Formats

Just as Russian television has often copied studio design and presentation formats from American television (I think in particular of the way the “Tonight Show” has been replicated on major Russian channels), so they copy from one another. In fact, if you turn on any of the political talk shows I cited above, you will find rather similar studios with live audiences.

Indeed, at Pervy Kanal, the producers remark jokingly that when NTV decided to launch its own afternoon talk show, “The Meeting Place,” that network picked up not only the production format and studio design but also some of the production staff. The format of having male-female pairs of talk show hosts also has spread widely in the industry.

But there appears to be a significant difference between these shows on the

degree to which they are “scripted” by management upstairs, the degree to which they are free discussion. Perhaps the most scripted is this season’s new entry at Rossiya 1, “Sixty Minutes,” in which presenters Yevgeni Popov and Olga Skabeyeva are reading off teleprompters and the audience applause is aggressively prompted. On the other hand, the lead presenter on Pervy Kanal’s “Time Will Tell,” Artyom Sheinin proudly says that he has no script handed to him, that what he says on air is what he himself prepared or is thinking at the time.

One ubiquitous fact is that the panelists are not scripted and if anyone is cut off in mid-sentence it is by other panelists vying for the microphone, not by the presenter keeping the political line of discourse in check. Except in the case of senior politicians, who are given the respect their rank demands, no panelist is safe from interruptions and the audience encourages a culture of gladiators in the arena, with applause punctuating the debates.

On NTV there is the additional expression of audience disapproval, but that is rare. The benefits of these ground rules go to the quick-witted as well as to the loudest voices, whatever their political complexion.

The culture of these talk shows is permeated by a newsroom mentality. Some of the presenters, especially on Rossiya 1/Vesti 24, come from television journalism and have gotten their appointments as a reward for successful work in the field, especially in hazardous areas. Such was the background of talk show host Yevgeni Popov, who for years reported from Ukraine, initially during the Orange Revolution days and later during the Maidan protests.

The content of each program on all channels is subject to change at the last minute as are the list of invited panelists in case of breaking news. This favors inviting panelists who are living in the Moscow area. They can be invited and disinvited at short notice. In fact, all the major political shows on the three channels I observed from inside use many of the same Russian and foreign panelists chosen from among political scientists at universities or think tanks, journalists and Duma or Federation Council members.

Western Voices

To be sure, not all panelists come down to the studio. A very few lucky experts are given air time from remote locations, their close-up image projected onto a wall-sized screen.

One such “regular” on the Rossiya 1/Vesti 24 channel is Dimitri Simes, president of The Center for the National Interest in Washington, D.C. These vignette appearances get special treatment, without any interruption from other panelists

and only respectful questioning from the host.

Panelists in greatest demand can be seen leaving one show early so as to be able to get over to another studio on a different channel when there is the rotation of panelists between advertising breaks. None is in greater demand than the American Michael Bohm, who in the dark days of worsening relations with the West provided all channels with highly fluent statements in Russian of the latest policy position of the Washington Consensus, often accompanied by Russian folk expressions.

This has been especially appreciated by television producers representing the more hardline supporters of the Kremlin for whom Bohm is the kind of American the audience loves to hate, his every remark justifying demands for greater military expenditures by the Kremlin. Nonetheless, it remains true that through Bohm and a few other Westerners on these shows, the full blast of Western critiques of Kremlin policy gets prime broadcasting time in Russia.

The senior politicians brought in as panelists come from all the Duma parties, not just the ruling United Russia. In the past half year, I noted in particular the frequent presence of the leader of the nationalist LDPR party, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, while Gennady Zyuganov of the Communists or Sergey Mironov, leader of Just Russia, have been rare birds.

On the other hand, there have been frequent appearances by the Liberals of the Yabloko party, which never made it past 1 percent of votes cast in the latest parliamentary elections, not to mention the minimum 5 percent threshold for Duma representation.

The talk show programs are prepared with great professionalism. Behind each there is extensive research to find appropriate archival and/or latest visuals. The administrative chores involved in arranging logistics for the panelists chosen are also considerable. The team members I have encountered were uniformly dedicated, working crazy hours to get their job done.

Encouraging Strong Opinions

I also noted a peculiar complicity between the staff “handlers” and us panelists. Clearly, production staff is rewarded for finding “fresh blood” panelists who play out well, and they make sure that their dogs in the race are well tended with coffee, tea, and, if needed, a shot of brandy during breaks to keep their spirits high.

On the Rossiya 1/Vesti 24 talk shows presenters and the panelists all are wired with headset microphones. However, on both Pervy Kanal and NTV, only the presenters are wired, while panelists are seated next to production assistants

holding microphones, which they make available upon request. Indeed, the assistants act as coaches to newcomers like myself, whom they urge to speak louder, speak faster, etc. to get the greatest debate effect out of us.

In conclusion, my firsthand experience with the Russian political talk show phenomenon left me with no doubt that this is bona fide journalism serving the public interest, exposing the broad Russian television audience, from everyone's parents and grandparents to business leaders and university dons, to a great many different competing and well-presented views on the major issues of the day, both domestic and international.

This reality is sharply at variance with what U.S. and Western European mainstream media would have us believe about Putin's Russia.

Gilbert Doctorow is the European Coordinator of The American Committee for East West Accord Ltd. His most recent book, *Does Russia Have a Future?* was published in August 2015.

US House Seeks Syria-War Escalation

Moving to trap President-elect Trump into a war escalation in Syria, the House rushed through a resolution promoting a U.S.-imposed "no fly zone" that could spark World War III, reports Rick Sterling.

By Rick Sterling

Late in the day, on Nov. 15, one week after the U.S. elections, the lame-duck Congress convened in special session with normal rules suspended so the House could pass House Resolution 5732, the "Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act" calling for intensifying the already harsh sanctions on Syria, assessing the imposition of a "no fly zone" inside Syria (to prevent the Syrian government from flying) and escalating efforts to press criminal charges against Syrian officials.

HR5732 claims to promote a negotiated settlement in Syria but, as analyzed by Friends Committee for National Legislation, it imposes preconditions which would actually make a peace agreement more difficult.

There was 40 minutes of "debate" with six representatives (Ed Royce, R-California; Eliot Engel, D-New York; Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, R-Florida; Dan Kildee, D-Michigan; Chris Smith, R-New Jersey; and Carlos Curbelo, R-Florida) all speaking in favor of the resolution. There were few other representatives

present, but the House Foreign Affairs Committee stated that the resolution was passed “unanimously” without mentioning these special conditions.

According to Wikipedia, “Suspension of the rules is a procedure generally used to quickly pass non-controversial bills in the United States House of Representatives ... such as naming Post Offices...” In this case, however, the resolution could lead to a wider war in the Middle East and potentially World War III with nuclear-armed Russia.

Most strikingly, the resolution calls for evaluating and developing plans for the United States to impose a “no fly zone” inside Syria, a sovereign nation, an act of war that also would violate international law as an act of aggression. It also could put the U.S. military in the position of shooting down Russian aircraft.

To call this proposal “non-controversial” is absurd, although it may say a great deal about the “group think” of the U.S. Congress that an act of war would be so casually considered. Clearly, this resolution should have been debated under normal rules with a reasonable amount of Congressional presence and debate.

The motivation for bypassing normal rules and rushing the bill through without meaningful debate was articulated by the bill’s sponsor, Democrat Eliot Engel: “We cannot delay action on Syria any further. ... If we don’t get this legislation across the finish line in the next few weeks, we are back to square one.”

The current urgency may be related to the election results since President-elect Donald Trump has spoken out against “regime change” foreign policy. As much as neoconservatives and their liberal-interventionist allies are critical of President Obama for not doing more in Syria, these Congressional hawks are even more concerned about the prospect of a President who might move toward peace and away from war.

The Caesar Fraud

HR5732 is titled the “Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act,” which House Foreign Affairs Committee Chair Royce explained was named after “the brave Syrian defector known to the world as Caesar, who testified to us the shocking scale of torture being carried out within the prisons of Syria.”

In reality, the Caesar story was a grand deception involving the CIA with funding from Qatar to sabotage the 2014 Geneva peace negotiations. The 55,000 photos which were said to show 11,000 torture victims have never been publicly revealed. Only a tiny number of photos have been publicized. However, in 2015, Human Rights Watch was granted access to view the entire set. They revealed that almost one half the photos show the opposite of what was claimed: instead of

victims tortured by the Syrian government, they actually show dead Syrian soldiers and civilian victims of car bombs and other terror attacks. The “Caesar” story, replete with a masked “defector,” was one of the early propaganda hoaxes regarding Syria.

One of the other big lies regarding Syria is that the U.S. has been doing nothing. Royce said, “The administration has decided not to decide. And that itself, unfortunately, has set a course where here we sit and watch and the violence only worsens. Mr. Speaker, America has been sitting back and watching these atrocities for far too long. Vital U.S. national security interests are at stake.”

Rep. Engel said, “Four years ago I thought we should have aided the Free Syrian Army. They came to us in Washington and begged us for help. ... They were simply looking for weaponry. I really believe if we had given it to them, the situation in Syria would have been different today.”

That narrative is nonsense. By late 2011, the U.S. was actively coordinating, training and supplying armed opposition groups. When Muammar Gaddafi’s Libyan government was toppled in fall 2011, the CIA oversaw the diversion of Libyan weapons to the Syrian armed opposition, as documented in the [Defense Intelligence Agency report](#) of October 2012.

These weapons transfers were secret. For the public record, it was acknowledged that the U.S. was supplying communications equipment to the armed opposition while U.S. “allies” – Saudi Arabia and Qatar – were supplying the weaponry. This is one reason that Saudi purchases of weapons skyrocketed during this time period; they were buying weapons to replace those being shipped to the armed opposition in Syria. It was very profitable for U.S. arms manufacturers.

Huge weapons transfers to the armed opposition in Syria have continued to the present, with the U.S. government even more directly involved. This past spring, Janes Defense [reported](#) the details of a U.S. delivery of 2.2 million pounds of ammunition, rocket launchers and other weaponry to the armed opposition.

So, the political claims that the U.S. has been inactive are baseless. In reality, the U.S. has done everything short of a direct attack on Syria. And the U.S. military is starting to cross that line. On Sept. 17, the U.S. air coalition conducted a series of airstrikes on the Syrian Army in Deir Ezzor, killing 80 Syrian soldiers and enabling ISIS to launch an attack on the position. Claims that it was a “mistake” are highly dubious.

The assertions by Congressional hawks that the U.S. has been “inactive” in the Syrian conflict are part of the false narrative suggesting the U.S. must “do

something” which leads to a “no fly zone” and full-scale war. Ironically, these calls for war are masked as “humanitarian” though even proponents, such as Hillary Clinton, privately have acknowledged that large numbers of Syrians, including civilians, would be killed in the U.S. attacks needed to establish the “no fly zone.”

And, never do the proponents bring up the case of Libya where the U.S. and NATO “did something”: destroyed the government and created chaos.

Fact-Free House of Propaganda

With only a handful of representatives present and no dissent, the six Congressional members engaged in unrestrained propaganda and misinformation.

Engel, said “We’re going into the New Year 2017, Assad still clings to power, at the expense of killing millions of his citizens.” Even if all the deaths, including Syrian soldiers and civilians killed by anti-government jihadists, were blamed on Assad, this number is way off anyone’s charts.

Rep. Kildee said “The world has witnessed this terrible tragedy unfold before our eyes. Nearly half a million Syrians killed. Not soldiers – men, women, children killed.”

The official text of the resolution says, “It is the sense of Congress that– (1) Bashar al-Assad’s murderous actions against the people of Syria have caused the deaths of more than 400,000 civilians...”

The above accusations – from “millions of citizens” to “half a million” to “400,000 civilians” – are all preposterous lies. Credible estimates of casualties in the Syrian conflict range from 300,000 to 420,000. The opposition-supporting Syrian Observatory for Human Rights estimates the documented 2011-2016 death toll as follows: killed pro-Syrian forces – 108,000; killed anti-government forces – 105,000; killed civilians – 89,000

In contrast with Congressional and media claims, civilians comprise a minority of the total death count and the heaviest casualties are among those fighting in defense of the Syrian state. In the U.S. political world and the mainstream media, these facts are ignored and never mentioned because they point to the reality versus the propaganda narrative which has allowed the U.S. and its allies to continue funding terrorism and a war of aggression against Syria.

The Congressional speakers were in full self-righteous mode as they accused the Syrian government of “committing crimes against humanity and war crimes against civilians including murder, torture and rape. No one has been spared from this targeting, even children.” A naive listener would never know that the Syrian

government is primarily fighting the Syrian branch of Al Qaeda including thousands of foreign fighters supplied and paid by foreign governments.

The speakers went on to accuse the Syrian military of “targeting” hospitals, schools and markets. A critical listener might ask why they would do that instead of targeting Al Qaeda terrorists and their allies who launch dozens and sometimes hundreds of hell-cannon missiles into the government-held sections of Aleppo every day.

The Congressional propaganda fest would not be complete without mention of the “White Helmets.” Royce said “We (previously) heard the testimony of Raed Saleh of the Syrian White Helmets. These are the doctors, nurses and volunteers who actually, when the bombs come, run towards the areas that have been hit in order to try to get the injured civilians medical treatment. ... They have lost over 600 doctors and nurses.”

This is more Congressional nonsense. There are no nurses or doctors associated with the White Helmets. The organization was created by the U.S. and U.K. and heavily promoted by a “shady PR firm.” The White Helmets operate solely in areas controlled by Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front (recently renamed Syria Conquest Front) and associated terrorist groups. The White Helmets do some rescue work in the conflict zone but their main role is in the information war manipulating public opinion.

The White Helmets actively promote U.S./NATO intervention through a “no fly zone.” Recently, the White Helmets became a major source of claims about innocent civilian victims in east Aleppo.

Given the clear propagandistic history of the White Helmets, these claims should be treated with skepticism. We need to ask exactly what is the evidence?

The same skepticism needs to be applied to video and other reports from the Aleppo Media Center. AMC is a creation of the Syrian Expatriates Organization whose address on K Street in Washington, D.C., indicates it is a U.S. marketing operation.

What’s Going On?

The campaign to overthrow the Syrian government is failing and there is possibility of a victory for the Syrian government and its allies.

The earlier flood of international jihadi recruits is drying up. The Syrian Army and allies are gaining ground militarily and negotiating settlements or re-locations with “rebels” who previously terrorized Homs, Darraya (outer Damascus) and elsewhere. In Aleppo, the Syrian army and allies are tightening the noose

around the armed opposition in east Aleppo.

This has caused alarm among neoconservative lawmakers devoted to Israel, Saudi Arabia and U.S. empire. They are desperate to prevent the Syrian government from finally eliminating the terrorist groups which the West and its allies have promoted for the past five-plus years.

“Pro Israel” groups have been major campaigners for passage of HR5732. The name of Simon Wiesenthal is even invoked in the resolution. Rabbi Lee Bycel wrote, “Where is the Conscience of the World?” as he questioned why the “humanitarian” HR5732 was not passed earlier.

Israeli interests are one of the primary forces sustaining and promoting the conflict. Syria is officially at war with Israel which continues to occupy the Syrian Golan Heights; Syria has been a key ally of the Lebanese Hezbollah resistance; and Syria has maintained its alliance with Iran. In 2010, Secretary of State Clinton urged Syria to break relations with Hezbollah, reduce relations with Iran and come to settlement with Israel. The Syrian refusal to comply with these Washington demands was instrumental in solidifying Washington’s hostility.

Congressional proponents of HR5732 make clear the international dimension of the conflict. Royce explains, “It is Russia, it is Hezbollah, that are the primary movers of death and destruction. ... It is the IRGC [Revolutionary Guard] fighters from Iran.”

Engel echoes the same message: “Yes, we want to go after Assad’s partners in violence ... Iranian and Hezbollah forces.”

In words and deeds Israel has made its position on Syria crystal clear. Israeli Ambassador to the United States Michael Oren explained in an interview: “we always wanted [President] Bashar Assad to go, we always preferred the bad guys who weren’t backed by Iran to the bad guys who were backed by Iran ... the greatest danger to Israel is by the strategic arc that extends from Tehran, to Damascus to Beirut. And we saw the Assad regime as the keystone in that arc.”

These statements have been fully backed up by Israeli actions bombing Syrian positions in southern Syria and providing medical treatment for Nusra/Al Qaeda and other armed opposition fighters.

What Will Happen Now?

If the Syrian government and its allies continue to advance in Aleppo, Deir Ezzor, outer Damascus and the south, the situation will come to a head. The enemies of Syria – predominately the U.S., Gulf Countries, NATO and Israel – will come to a decision point. Do they intervene directly or do they allow their

“regime change” project to collapse? HR5732 is an effort to prepare for direct intervention and aggression.

One thing is clear from the experience of Libya: Neoconservatives do not care if they leave a country in chaos. The main objective is to destabilize and overthrow a government which is too independent. If the U.S. and its allies cannot dominate the country, then at least they can destroy the contrary authority and leave chaos.

What is at stake in Syria is whether the U.S. and allies, including Israel and Saudi Arabia, are able to destroy the last secular and independent Arab country in the region and whether the U.S. goal of being the sole superpower in the world prevails. The rushed passage of HR5732 without any meaningful debate is indicative of that.

Despite Trump’s election and his stated priority of taking on Islamic terrorism – not overthrowing Assad – the “regime change” proponents have not given up their war on Syria. They still seek to escalate U.S. aggression there and hope to box President Trump in.

It’s also clear that the U.S. Congress has become a venue where blatant lies can be stated with impunity and where violent actions are advanced behind a cynical and amoral veneer of “humanitarianism.”

Rick Sterling is an investigative journalist and member of Syria Solidarity Movement.
