

Old Cold War Revives as Castro Dies

As the U.S. plows toward a New Cold War, remnants of the old one resurfaced with the death of Cuban leader Fidel Castro as the mainstream U.S. media flashed back to old Cold War rhetoric, says William Blum.

By William Blum

The most frequent comment I've read in the mainstream media concerning Fidel Castro's death is that he was a "dictator"; almost every heading bore that word. Since the 1959 revolution, the American mainstream media has routinely referred to Cuba as a dictatorship. But just what does Cuba do or lack that makes it a dictatorship?

No "free press"? Apart from the question of how free Western media is, if that's to be the standard, what would happen if Cuba announced that from now on anyone in the country could own any kind of media? How long would it be before CIA money – secret and unlimited CIA money financing all kinds of fronts in Cuba – would own or control almost all the media worth owning or controlling?

Is it "free elections" that Cuba lacks? They regularly have elections at municipal, regional and national levels. They do not have direct election of the president, but neither do Germany or the United Kingdom and many other countries. The Cuban president is chosen by the parliament, The National Assembly of People's Power. Money plays virtually no role in these elections; neither does party politics, including the Communist Party, since all candidates run as individuals.

Again, what is the standard by which Cuban elections are to be judged? Is it that they don't have private corporations to pour in a billion dollars? Most Americans, if they gave it any thought, might find it difficult to even imagine what a free and democratic election, without great concentrations of corporate money, would look like, or how it would operate. Would Ralph Nader finally be able to get on all 50 state ballots, take part in national television debates, and be able to match the two monopoly parties in media advertising? If that were the case, I think he'd probably win; which is why it's not the case.

Or perhaps what Cuba lacks is our marvelous "electoral college" system, where the presidential candidate with the most votes is not necessarily the winner. Did we need the latest example of this travesty of democracy to convince us to finally get rid of it? If we really think this system is a good example of democracy why don't we use it for local and state elections as well?

Is Cuba a dictatorship because it arrests dissidents? Many thousands of anti-war and other protesters have been arrested in the United States in recent years, as in every period in American history. During the Occupy Movement of five years ago more than 7,000 people were arrested, many beaten by police and mistreated while in custody. And remember: The United States is to the Cuban government like Al Qaeda is to Washington, only much more powerful and much closer; virtually without exception, Cuban dissidents have been financed by and aided in other ways by the United States.

Would Washington ignore a group of Americans receiving funds from Al Qaeda and engaging in repeated meetings with known members of that organization? In recent years the United States has arrested a great many people in the U.S. and abroad solely on the basis of alleged ties to Al Qaeda, with a lot less evidence to go by than Cuba has had with its dissidents' ties to the United States. Virtually all of Cuba's "political prisoners" are such dissidents.

While others may call Cuba's security policies dictatorship, I call it self-defense.

William Blum is an author, historian, and renowned critic of U.S. foreign policy. He is the author of *Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II* and *Rogue State: A Guide to the World's Only Superpower*, among others. [This article originally appeared at the Anti-Empire Report, <http://williamblum.org/> .]

Official Washington's 'Info-Wars'

Organs of Official Washington, such as the State Department and The Washington Post, are becoming unhinged over their weakening grip on the narratives that the people are supposed to believe, as William Blum explains.

By William Blum

On November 16, at a State Department press briefing, department spokesperson John Kirby was having one of his frequent adversarial dialogues with Gayane Chichakyan, a reporter for RT (Russia Today); this time concerning U.S. charges of Russia bombing hospitals in Syria and blocking the U.N. from delivering aid to the trapped population.

When Chichakyan asked for some detail about these charges, Kirby replied: "Why don't you ask your defense ministry?"

GC: Do you – can you give any specific information on when Russia or the Syrian Government blocked the UN from delivering aid? Just any specific information.

KIRBY: There hasn't been any aid delivered in the last month.

GC: And you believe it was blocked exclusively by Russia and the Syrian Government?

KIRBY: There's no question in our mind that the obstruction is coming from the regime and from Russia. No question at all.

...

MATTHEW LEE (Associated Press): Let me -- hold on, just let me say: Please be careful about saying "your defense minister" and things like that. I mean, she's a journalist just like the rest of us are, so it's -- she's asking pointed questions, but they're not –

KIRBY: From a state-owned -- from a state-owned –

LEE: But they're not –

KIRBY: From a state-owned outlet, Matt.

LEE: But they're not –

KIRBY: From a state-owned outlet that's not independent.

LEE: The questions that she's asking are not out of line.

KIRBY: I didn't say the questions were out of line.

.....

KIRBY: I'm sorry, but I'm not going to put Russia Today on the same level with the rest of you who are representing independent media outlets.

One has to wonder if State Department spokesperson Kirby knows that in 2011 Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, speaking about RT, declared: "The Russians have opened an English-language network. I've seen it in a few countries, and it is quite instructive."

I also wonder how Mr. Kirby deals with reporters from the BBC, a STATE-OWNED television and radio entity in the U.K., broadcasting in the U.S. and all around the world.

Or the state-owned Australian Broadcasting Corporation, described by Wikipedia as follows: "The corporation provides television, radio, online and mobile

services throughout metropolitan and regional Australia, as well as overseas ... and is well regarded for quality and reliability as well as for offering educational and cultural programming that the commercial sector would be unlikely to supply on its own.”

There’s also Radio Free Europe, Radio Free Asia, Radio Liberty (Central/Eastern Europe), and Radio Marti (Cuba); all (U.S.) state-owned, none “independent”, but all deemed worthy enough by the United States to feed to the world.

And let’s not forget what Americans have at home: PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) and NPR (National Public Radio), which would have a near-impossible time surviving without large federal government grants. How independent does this leave them? Has either broadcaster ever unequivocally opposed a modern American war? There’s good reason NPR has long been known as National Pentagon Radio. But it’s part of American media’s ideology to pretend that it doesn’t have any ideology.

As to the non-state American media ... There are about 1,400 daily newspapers in the United States. Can you name a single paper, or a single TV network, that was unequivocally opposed to the American wars carried out against Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan, Yugoslavia, Panama, Grenada, and Vietnam while they were happening, or shortly thereafter? Or even opposed to any two of these seven wars? How about one?

In 1968, six years into the Vietnam War, the *Boston Globe* (Feb. 18, 1968) surveyed the editorial positions of 39 leading U.S. papers concerning the war and found that “none advocated a pull-out.” Has the phrase “invasion of Vietnam” ever appeared in the U.S. mainstream media?

In 2003, leading cable station MSNBC took the much-admired Phil Donahue off the air because of his opposition to the calls for war in Iraq. Mr. Kirby would undoubtedly call MSNBC “independent.”

If the American mainstream media were officially state-controlled, would they look or sound significantly different when it comes to U.S. foreign policy?

New Cold War Propaganda

On Nov. 25, the *Washington Post* ran an article entitled: “Research ties ‘fake news’ to Russia.” It’s all about how sources in Russia are flooding American media and the Internet with phony stories designed as “part of a broadly effective strategy of sowing distrust in U.S. democracy and its leaders.”

“The sophistication of the Russian tactics,” the article says, “may complicate efforts by Facebook and Google to crack down on ‘fake news’.”

The *Post* states that the Russian tactics included “penetrating the computers of election officials in several states and releasing troves of hacked emails that embarrassed Clinton in the final months of her campaign.” (Heretofore this had been credited to Wikileaks.)

The story is simply bursting with anti-Russian references:

- –An online magazine header – “Trolling for Trump: How Russia Is Trying to Destroy Our Democracy.”
- –“the startling reach and effectiveness of Russian propaganda campaigns.”
- –“more than 200 websites as routine peddlers of Russian propaganda during the election season.”
- –“stories planted or promoted by the disinformation campaign were viewed more than 213 million times.”
- –“The Russian campaign during this election season ... worked by harnessing the online world’s fascination with ‘buzzy’ content that is surprising and emotionally potent, and tracks with popular conspiracy theories about how secret forces dictate world events.”
- –“Russian-backed phony news to outcompete traditional news organizations for audience”
- –“They use our technologies and values against us to sow doubt. It’s starting to undermine our democratic system.”
- –“Russian propaganda operations also worked to promote the ‘Brexit’ departure of Britain from the European Union.”
- –“Some of these stories originated with RT and Sputnik, state-funded Russian information services that mimic the style and tone of independent news organizations yet sometimes include false and misleading stories in their reports.”
- –“a variety of other false stories – fake reports of a coup launched at Incirlik Air Base in Turkey and stories about how the United States was going to conduct a military attack and blame it on Russia”

A former U.S. ambassador to Russia, Michael McFaul, is quoted saying he was “struck by the overt support that Sputnik expressed for Trump during the campaign, even using the #CrookedHillary hashtag pushed by the candidate.” McFaul said Russian propaganda typically is aimed at weakening opponents and critics.

“They don’t try to win the argument. It’s to make everything seem relative. It’s kind of an appeal to cynicism.” [Cynicism? Heavens! What will those Moscow fascists/communists think of next?]

The *Post* did, however, include the following: “RT disputed the findings of the researchers in an e-mail on Friday, saying it played no role in producing or

amplifying any fake news stories related to the U.S. election.” RT was quoted: “It is the height of irony that an article about ‘fake news’ is built on false, unsubstantiated claims. RT adamantly rejects any and all claims and insinuations that the network has originated even a single ‘fake story’ related to the US election.”

It must be noted that the *Washington Post* article fails to provide a single example showing how the actual facts of a specific news event were rewritten or distorted by a Russian agency to produce a news event with a contrary political message.

What then lies behind such blatant anti-Russian propaganda? In the new Cold War such a question requires no answer. The new Cold War by definition exists to discredit Russia simply because it stands in the way of American world domination. In the new Cold War, the political spectrum in the mainstream media runs the gamut from A to B.

William Blum is an author, historian, and renowned critic of U.S. foreign policy. He is the author of *Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II* and *Rogue State: A Guide to the World's Only Superpower*, among others. [This article originally appeared at the Anti-Empire Report, <http://williamblum.org/> .]

Trump Ponders Petraeus for Senior Job

Exclusive: President-elect Trump’s promise to “drain the swamp” of Washington seems forgotten – like so many political promises – as he meets with swamp creatures, such as disgraced Gen. David Petraeus, says ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

The news that President-elect Donald Trump called in disgraced retired Gen. David Petraeus for a job interview as possible Secretary of State tests whether Trump’s experience in hosting “The Celebrity Apprentice” honed his skills for spotting an incompetent phony or not.

Does Trump need more data than the continuing bedlam in Iraq and Afghanistan to understand that one can earn a Princeton PhD by writing erudite-sounding drivel about “counterinsurgency” and still flunk war? Granted, the shambles in which Petraeus left Iraq and Afghanistan were probably more a result of his

overweening careerism and political ambition than his misapplication of military strategy. But does that make it any more excusable?

In 2007, Adm. William Fallon, commander of CENTCOM with four decades of active-duty experience behind him, quickly took the measure of Petraeus, who was one of his subordinates while implementing a “surge” of over 30,000 U.S. troops into Iraq.

Several sources reported that Fallon was sickened by Petraeus’s unctuous pandering to ingratiate himself. Fallon is said to have been so turned off by all the accolades in the flowery introduction given him by Petraeus that he called him to his face “an ass-kissing little chickenshit,” adding, “I hate people like that.” Sadly, Petraeus’s sycophancy is not uncommon among general officers. Uncommon was Fallon’s outspoken candor.

The past decade has shown that obsequiousness to those above him and callousness toward others are two of Petraeus’s most notable character traits. They go along with his lack of military acumen and his dishonesty as revealed in his lying to the FBI about handing over top-secret notebooks to his biographer/lover, an “indiscretion” that would have landed a less well-connected person in jail but instead got him only a mild slap on the wrist (via a misdemeanor guilty plea).

Indeed, Petraeus, the epitome of a “political general,” represents some of the slimiest depths of the Washington “swamp” that President-elect Trump has vowed to drain. Petraeus cares desperately about the feelings of his fellow elites but shows shocking disdain for the suffering of other human beings who are not so important.

In early 2011 in Afghanistan, Petraeus shocked aides to then-President Hamid Karzai after many children were burned to death in a “coalition” attack in northeastern Afghanistan by suggesting that Afghan parents may have burned their own children to exaggerate their claims of civilian casualties and discredit the U.S., reported The Washington Post, citing two participants at the meeting.

“Killing 60 people, and then blaming the killing on those same people, rather than apologizing for any deaths? This is inhuman,” one Afghan official said. “This is a really terrible situation.”

Yet, on other occasions, the politically savvy Petraeus can be a paragon of sensitivity – like when he is in danger of getting crosswise with the Israel Lobby.

Never did Petraeus’s fawning shine through with more brilliance, than when an (unintentionally disclosed) email exchange showed him groveling before arch-neocon Max Boot, beseeching Boot’s help in fending off charges that Petraeus was

“anti-Israel” because his prepared testimony to a congressional committee included the no-brainer observations that Israeli-Palestinian hostility presents “distinct challenges to our ability to advance our interests” and that “this conflict foments anti-American sentiment, due to a perception of U.S. favoritism for Israel. ... Meanwhile, al-Qaeda and other militant groups exploit that anger to mobilize support.”

So, telling the truth (perhaps accidentally in prepared testimony) made Petraeus squirm with fear about offending the powerful Israel Lobby, but he apparently didn't hesitate to lie to FBI agents when he was caught in a tight spot for sharing highly sensitive intelligence with Paula Broadwell, his mistress/biographer. But, again, Petraeus realized that it helps to have influential friends. A court gave him a slap on the wrist with a sentence of two years probation and a fine of \$100,000 – which is less than he usually makes for a single speaking engagement.

Military Incompetent Without Parallel

And, if President-elect Trump isn't repulsed by the stench of hypocrisy – if he ignores Petraeus's reckless handling of classified material after Trump lambasted Hillary Clinton for her own careless behavior in that regard – there is also the grim truth behind Petraeus's glitzy image.

As a military strategist or even a trainer of troops, Petraeus has been an unparalleled disaster. Yes, the corporate media always runs interference for Official Washington's favorite general. But that does not equate with genuine success.

The Iraq “surge,” which Petraeus oversaw, was misrepresented in the corporate media as a huge victory – because it was credited with a brief dip in the level of violence at the cost of some 1,000 American lives (and those of many more Iraqis) – but the “surge” failed its principal goal of buying time to heal the rift between Shiites and Sunnis, a division that ultimately led to the emergence of the Islamic State (or ISIS).

Then, in early 2014, the crackerjack Iraqi troops whom Petraeus bragged about training ran away from Mosul, leaving their modern U.S.-provided weapons behind for the Islamic State's jihadists to play with.

In part because of that collapse – with Iraqi forces only now beginning to chip away at ISIS control of Mosul – the Obama administration was dragged into another Mideast war, spilling across Iraq and Syria and adding to the droves of refugees pouring into Europe, a crisis that is now destabilizing the European Union.

You might have thought that the combination of military failures and scandalous behavior would have ended David Petraeus's "government service," but he has never lost his skill at putting his finger to the wind.

During the presidential campaign, the windsack Petraeus was circumspect, which was understandable given the uncertainty regarding which way the wind was blowing.

However, on Sept. 1, 2015, amid calls from the mainstream U.S. media and establishment think tanks for President Obama to escalate the U.S. proxy war to overthrow the Syrian government, Petraeus spoke out in favor of giving more weapons to "moderate" Syrian rebels, despite the widespread recognition that U.S.-supplied guns and rockets were ending up in the hands of Al Qaeda's Nusra Front.

The new harebrained scheme – favored by Petraeus and other neocons – fantasized about Al Qaeda possibly joining the fight against the Islamic State, although ISIS sprang from Al Qaeda and splintered largely over tactical issues, such as how quickly to declare a jihadist state, not over fundamental fundamentalist goals.

But more miscalculations in the Middle East would be right up Petraeus's alley. He played an important role in facilitating the emergence of the Islamic State by his too-clever-by-half policy of co-opting some Sunni tribes with promises of shared power in Baghdad and with lots of money, and then simply looking the other way as the U.S.-installed Shia government in Baghdad ditched the promises.

Surge? Or Splurge With Lives

The so-called "surges" of troops into Iraq and Afghanistan are particularly gross examples of the way American soldiers have been used as expendable pawns by ambitious generals like Petraeus and ambitious politicians like former Defense Secretary Robert Gates.

The problem is that overweening personal ambition can end up getting a lot of people killed. In the speciously glorified first "surge," President George W. Bush sent more than 30,000 additional troops into Iraq in early 2007. During the period of the "surge," about 1,000 U.S. troops died.

There was a similar American death toll during President Barack Obama's "surge" of another 30,000 troops into Afghanistan in early 2010, a shift toward a counterinsurgency strategy that had been pressed on Obama by Petraeus, Gates and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Despite the loss of those 1,000 additional U.S. soldiers, the counterinsurgency "surge" had little effect on the course of the Afghan War.

The bloody chaos that continues in Iraq today and in the never-ending war in Afghanistan was entirely predictable. Indeed, it was predicted by those of us able to spread some truth around via the Internet, while being blacklisted by the fawning corporate media, which cheered on the “surges” and their chief architect, David Petraeus.

But the truth is not something that thrives in either U.S. politics or media these days. Campaigning early this year in New Hampshire, then-presidential aspirant Jeb Bush gave a short partial-history lesson about his big brother’s attack on Iraq. Referring to the so-called Islamic State, Bush said, “ISIS didn’t exist when my brother was president. ‘Al Qaeda in Iraq’ was wiped out ... the surge created a fragile but stable Iraq. ...”

Jeb Bush is partially right about ISIS; it didn’t exist when his brother George attacked Iraq. Indeed, Al Qaeda didn’t exist in Iraq until *after* the U.S. invasion when it emerged as “Al Qaeda in Iraq” and it wasn’t eliminated by the “surge.”

With huge sums of U.S. cash going to Sunni tribes in Anbar province, Al Qaeda in Iraq just pulled back and regrouped. Its top leaders came from the ranks of angry Sunnis who had been officers in Saddam Hussein’s army and – when the “surge” failed to achieve reconciliation between Sunnis and Shiites – the U.S. cash proved useful in expanding Sunni resistance to Baghdad’s Shiite government. From the failed “surge” strategy emerged the rebranded “Al Qaeda in Iraq,” the Islamic State.

So, despite Jeb Bush’s attempted spin, the reality is that his brother’s aggressive war in Iraq created both “Al Qaeda in Iraq” and its new incarnation, Islamic State.

The mess was made worse by subsequent U.S. strategy – beginning under Bush and expanding under President Obama – of supporting insurgents in Syria. By supplying money, guns and rockets to “moderate” Sunni rebels, that strategy has allowed the materiel to quickly fall into the hands of Al Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate, Nusra Front, and its jihadist allies, Ahrar al-Sham.

In other words, U.S. strategy – much of it guided by David Petraeus – continues to strengthen Al Qaeda, which – through its Nusra affiliate and its Islamic State spin-off – now occupies large swaths of Iraq and Syria.

Escaping a ‘Lost War’

All this is among the fateful consequences of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq 13 years ago – made worse (not better) by the “surge” in 2007, which contributed significantly to this decade’s Sunni-Shia violence. The real reason for Bush’s

“surge” seems to have been to buy time so that he and Vice President Dick Cheney could leave office without having a lost war on their résumés.

As author Steve Coll has put it, “The decision [to surge] at a minimum guaranteed that his [Bush’s] presidency would not end with a defeat in history’s eyes. By committing to the surge [the President] was certain to at least achieve a stalemate.”

According to Bob Woodward, Bush told key Republicans in late 2005 that he would not withdraw from Iraq, “even if Laura and [first-dog] Barney are the only ones supporting me.” Woodward made it clear that Bush was well aware in fall 2006 that the U.S. was losing.

Indeed, by fall 2006, it had become unavoidably clear that a new course had to be chosen and implemented in Iraq, and virtually every sober thinker seemed opposed to sending more troops.

The senior military, especially CENTCOM commander Gen. John Abizaid and his man on the ground in Iraq, Gen. George Casey, emphasized that sending still more U.S. troops to Iraq would simply reassure leading Iraqi politicians that they could relax and continue to take forever to get their act together.

Here, for example, is Gen. Abizaid’s answer at the Senate Armed Services Committee on Nov. 15, 2006, to Sen. John McCain, who had long been pressing vigorously for sending 20,000 more troops to Iraq:

“Senator McCain, I met with every divisional commander, General Casey, the corps commander, General Dempsey, we all talked together. And I said, ‘in your professional opinion, if we were to bring in more American troops now, does it add considerably to our ability to achieve success in Iraq?’ And they all said no.

“And the reason is because we want the Iraqis to do more. It is easy for the Iraqis to rely upon us do this work. I believe that more American forces prevent the Iraqis from doing more, from taking more responsibility for their own future.”

The U.S. ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, sent a classified cable to Washington warning that “proposals to send more U.S. forces to Iraq would not produce a long-term solution and would make our policy less, not more, sustainable,” according to a New York Times retrospective on the “surge” published on Aug. 31, 2008. Khalilzad was arguing, unsuccessfully, for authority to negotiate a political solution with the Iraqis.

There was also the establishment-heavy Iraq Study Group, created by Congress and

led by Republican stalwart James Baker and Democrat Lee Hamilton (with Robert Gates as a member although he quit before the review was completed). After months of policy review, the Iraq Study Group issued a final report on Dec. 6, 2006, that began with the ominous sentence "The situation in Iraq is grave and deteriorating."

It called for: "A change in the primary mission of U.S. Forces in Iraq that will enable the United States to begin to move its combat forces out of Iraq responsibly... By the first quarter of 2008...all combat brigades not necessary for force protection could be out of Iraq."

Rumsfeld's Known-Knowns

The little-understood story behind Bush's decision to catapult Robert Gates into the post of Defense Secretary was the astonishing fact that Donald Rumsfeld, of all people, was pulling a Robert McNamara; that is, he was going wobbly on a war based largely on his own hubris-laden, misguided advice.

In the fall of 2006 Rumsfeld was having a reality attack. In Rumsfeld-speak, he had come face to face with a "known known."

On Nov. 6, 2006, a day before the mid-term elections, Rumsfeld sent a memo to the White House, in which he acknowledged, "Clearly, what U.S. forces are currently doing in Iraq is not working well enough or fast enough." The rest of his memo sounded very much like the emerging troop-drawdown conclusions of the Iraq Study Group.

The first 80 percent of Rumsfeld's memo addressed "Illustrative Options," including his preferred – or "above the line" – options such as "an accelerated drawdown of U.S. bases ... to five by July 2007" and withdrawal of U.S. forces "from vulnerable positions – cities, patrolling, etc. ... so the Iraqis know they have to pull up their socks, step up and take responsibility for their country."

Finally, Rumsfeld had begun to listen to his generals and others who knew which end was up. The hurdle? Bush and Cheney were not about to follow Rumsfeld's example in "going wobbly." Like Robert McNamara at a similar juncture during Vietnam, Rumsfeld had to be let go before he caused a President to "lose a war."

Waiting in the wings, though, was Robert Gates, who had been CIA director under President George H. W. Bush, spent four years as president of Texas A&M, and had returned to the Washington stage as a member of the Iraq Study Group. While on the ISG, he evidenced no disagreement with its emerging conclusions – at least not until Bush asked him to become Secretary of Defense in early November 2006.

It was awkward. Right up to the week before the mid-term elections on Nov. 7,

2006, President Bush had insisted that he intended to keep Rumsfeld in place for the next two years. Suddenly, the President had to deal with Rumsfeld's apostasy on Iraq. Rumsfeld had let reality get to him, together with the very strong anti-surge protestations by all senior uniformed officers save one – the ambitious David Petraeus, who had jumped onboard for the “surge” escalation, which guaranteed another star on his lapel.

All Hail Petraeus

With the bemedaled Petraeus in the wings and guidance on strategy from arch-neocons, such as retired General Jack Keane and think-tank analyst Frederick Kagan, the White House completed the coup against the generals by replacing Rumsfeld with Gates and recalling Casey and Abizaid and elevating Petraeus.

Amid the mainstream media's hosannas for Petraeus and Gates, the significance of the shakeup was widely misunderstood, with key senators, including Sen. Hillary Clinton, buying the false narrative that the changes presaged a drawdown in the war rather than an escalation.

So relieved were the senators to be rid of the hated-but-feared Rumsfeld that the Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on Dec. 5, 2006, on Gates's nomination had the feel of a pajama party (I was there). Gates told them bedtime stories – and vowed to show “great deference to the judgment of generals.”

With unanimous Democratic support and only two conservative Republicans opposed, Gates was confirmed by the full Senate on Dec. 6, 2006.

On Jan. 10, 2007, Bush formally unveiled the bait-and-switch, announcing the “surge” of 30,000 additional troops, a mission that would be overseen by Gates and Petraeus. Bush did acknowledge that there would be considerable loss of life in the year ahead as U.S. troops were assigned to create enough stability for Iraq's Shiite and Sunni factions to reach an accommodation.

At least, he got the loss-of-life part right. Around 1,000 U.S. troops died during the “surge” along with many more Iraqis. But Bush, Cheney, Petraeus, and Gates apparently deemed that cost a small price to pay for enabling them to blame a successor administration for the inevitable withdrawal from America's failed war of aggression.

The gambit worked especially well for Gates and Petraeus. Amid glowing mainstream media press clippings about the “successful surge” and “victory at last” in Iraq, Gates was hailed as a new “wise man” and Petraeus was the military genius who pulled victory from the jaws of defeat. Their reputations were such that President Obama concluded that he had no choice but to keep them on, Gates as Defense Secretary and Petraeus as Obama's top general in the Middle

East.

Petraeus then oversaw the “surge” in Afghanistan and landed the job of CIA director, where Petraeus reportedly played a major role in arming up the Syrian rebels in pursuit of another “regime change,” this time in Syria.

Although Petraeus’s CIA tenure ended in disgrace in November 2012 when his dangerous liaison with Paula Broadwell was disclosed, his many allies in Official Washington’s powerful neocon community are now pushing him on President-elect Trump as the man to serve as Secretary of State.

Petraeus is known as a master of flattery, something that seemingly can turn Trump’s head. But the President-elect should have learned from his days hosting “The Celebrity Apprentice” that the winning contender should not be the one most adept at sucking up to the boss.

(Now, with the whole Middle East in turmoil, I find some relief in [this brief parody](#) by comedienne Connie Bryan of Petraeus’s performance in training Iraqi troops.)

Ray McGovern works with Tell the Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. He was an Army infantry/intelligence officer and then as a CIA analyst for a total of 30 years, from the administration of John Kennedy to that of George H. W. Bush. He is co-founder of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS).

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. Hmm.

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.'"
