

MH-17's Unnecessary Mystery

Exclusive: Nearly 18 months after Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 crashed in eastern Ukraine, one of the troubling mysteries is why the U.S. government after rushing to blame Russia and ethnic Russian rebels then went silent, effectively obstructing the investigation into 298 deaths, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

As the whodunit mystery surrounding the shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 nears the 1½-year mark, the Obama administration could open U.S. intelligence files and help bring justice for the 298 people killed in eastern Ukraine on July 17, 2014. Instead, a separate mystery has emerged: why has the U.S. government clammed up since five days after the tragedy?

Immediately after the crash, senior Obama administration officials showed no hesitancy in pointing fingers at the ethnic Russian rebels who were then resisting a military offensive by the U.S.-backed Kiev regime. On July, 20, 2014, Secretary of State John Kerry appeared on TV talk shows claiming there was a strong circumstantial case implicating the rebels and their Russian backers in the shoot-down.

After mentioning some information gleaned from “social media,” Kerry said on NBC’s “Meet the Press”: “But even more importantly, we picked up the imagery of this launch. We know the trajectory. We know where it came from. We know the timing. And it was exactly at the time that this aircraft disappeared from the radar.”

Two days later, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence released a “Government Assessment,” also citing “social media” seeming to implicate the rebels. Then, this white paper listed military equipment allegedly supplied by Russia to the rebels. But the list did not include a Buk missile battery or other high-powered anti-aircraft missiles capable of striking MH-17, which had been flying at around 33,000 feet.

The DNI also had U.S. intelligence analysts brief a few select mainstream reporters, but the analysts conveyed much less conviction than their superiors may have wished, indicating that there was still great uncertainty about who was responsible.

The Los Angeles Times article said: “U.S. intelligence agencies have so far been unable to determine the nationalities or identities of the crew that launched the missile. U.S. officials said it was possible the SA-11 [the designation for a Russian-made anti-aircraft Buk missile] was launched by a defector from the

Ukrainian military who was trained to use similar missile systems.”

That uncertainty meshed somewhat with what I had been told by a source who had been briefed by U.S. intelligence analysts shortly after the shoot-down about what they had seen in high-resolution satellite photos, which they said showed what looked like Ukrainian military personnel manning the battery which was believed to have fired the missile.

There is also an important distinction to make between the traditional “Intelligence Assessment,” which is the U.S. intelligence community’s gold standard for evaluating an issue, complete with any disagreements among the 16 intelligence agencies, and a “Government Assessment,” like the one produced in the MH-17 case.

As former CIA analyst Ray McGovern wrote: “The key difference between the traditional ‘Intelligence Assessment’ and this relatively new creation, a ‘Government Assessment,’ is that the latter genre is put together by senior White House bureaucrats or other political appointees, not senior intelligence analysts. Another significant difference is that an ‘Intelligence Assessment’ often includes alternative views, either in the text or in footnotes, detailing disagreements among intelligence analysts, thus revealing where the case may be weak or in dispute.”

In other words, a “Government Assessment” is an invitation for political hacks to manufacture what was called a “dodgy dossier” when the British government used similar tactics to sell the phony case for war with Iraq in 2002-03.

Demonizing Putin

Yet, despite the flimsiness of the “blame-Russia-for-MH-17” case in July 2014, the Obama administration’s rush to judgment proved critical in whipping up the European press to demonize President Vladimir Putin, who became the Continent’s *bete noire* accused of killing 298 innocent people. That set the stage for the European Union to accede to U.S. demands for economic sanctions on Russia.

The MH-17 case was deployed like a classic piece of “strategic communication” or “Stratcom,” mixing propaganda with psychological operations to put an adversary at a disadvantage. Apparently satisfied with that result, the Obama administration stopped talking publicly, leaving the impression of Russian guilt to corrode Moscow’s image in the public mind.

But the intelligence source who spoke to me several times after he received additional briefings about advances in the investigation said that as the U.S. analysts gained more insights into the MH-17 shoot-down from technical and other sources, they came to believe the attack was carried out by a rogue element of

the Ukrainian military with ties to a hard-line Ukrainian oligarch. [See, for instance, Consortiumnews.com's "[Flight 17 Shoot-Down Scenario Shifts](#)" and "[The Danger of an MH-17 Cold Case.](#)"]

But that conclusion if made public would have dealt another blow to America's already shaky credibility, which has never recovered from the false Iraq-WMD claims in 2002-03. A reversal also would embarrass Kerry, other senior U.S. officials and major Western news outlets, which had bought into the Russia-did-it narrative. Plus, the European Union might reconsider its decision to sanction Russia, a key part of U.S. policy in support of the Kiev regime.

Still, as the MH-17 mystery dragged on into 2015, I inquired about the possibility of an update from the DNI's office. But a spokeswoman told me that no update would be provided because the U.S. government did not want to say anything to prejudice the ongoing investigation. In response, I noted that Kerry and the DNI had already done that by immediately pointing the inquiry in the direction of blaming Russia and the rebels.

But there was another purpose in staying mum. By refusing to say anything to contradict the initial rush to judgment, the Obama administration could let Western mainstream journalists and "citizen investigators" on the Internet keep Russia pinned down with more speculation about its guilt in the MH-17 shoot-down.

So, silence became the better part of candor. After all, pretty much everyone in the West had judged Russia and Putin guilty. So, why shake that up?

The Ukrainian Buks

Yet, what has become clear after the initial splurge of U.S. blame-casting is that U.S. intelligence lacked key evidence to support Kerry's hasty judgments. Despite intensive overhead surveillance of eastern Ukraine in summer 2014, U.S. and other Western intelligence services could find no evidence that Russia had ever given a Buk system to the rebels or introduced one into the area.

Satellite intelligence reviewed both before and after the shoot-down only detected Ukrainian Buk missile systems in the conflict zone. One could infer this finding from the fact that the DNI on July 22, 2014, did not allege that Buks were among the weapons systems that Russia had provided. If Russian-supplied Buks had been spotted and the batteries of four 16-foot-long missiles hauled around by trucks are hard to miss their presence surely would have been noted.

But one doesn't need to infer this lack of evidence. It was spelled out in a [little-noticed report](#) by the Netherlands' Military Intelligence and Security

Service (MIVD) that was made public last October when the Dutch Safety Board issued its findings on the causes of the doomed MH-17 flight. (Since the flight had originated in Amsterdam and carried many Dutch passengers, Netherlands took a lead role in the investigation.)

Dutch intelligence, which as part of NATO would have access to sensitive overhead surveillance and other relevant data, reported that the only anti-aircraft weapons in eastern Ukraine capable of bringing down MH-17 at 33,000 feet belonged to the Ukrainian government.

MIVD made that assessment in the context of explaining why commercial aircraft continued to fly over the eastern Ukrainian battle zone in summer 2014. MIVD said that based on "state secret" information, it was known that Ukraine possessed some older but "powerful anti-aircraft systems" and "a number of these systems were located in the eastern part of the country."

But the intelligence agency added that the rebels lacked that capacity: "Prior to the crash, the MIVD knew that, in addition to light aircraft artillery, the Separatists also possessed short-range portable air defence systems (man-portable air-defence systems; MANPADS) and that they possibly possessed short-range vehicle-borne air-defence systems. Both types of systems are considered surface-to-air missiles (SAMs). Due to their limited range they do not constitute a danger to civil aviation at cruising altitude."

MIVD noted that on June 29, 2014, "the Separatists captured a Ukrainian armed forces military base in Donetsk [where] there were Buk missile systems," a fact that was reported in the press before the crash and attracted MIVD's attention.

"During the course of July, several reliable sources indicated that the systems that were at the military base were not operational," MIVD said. "Therefore, they could not be used by the Separatists."

In other words, it is fair to say based on the affirmative comments from MIVD and the omissions from the U.S. DNI's "Government Assessment" that the Western powers had no evidence that the ethnic Russian rebels or their Russian allies had operational Buk missiles in eastern Ukraine, but Ukraine did.

It also would have made sense that Ukraine would be moving additional anti-aircraft systems close to the border because of a feared Russian invasion as the Ukrainian military pressed its "anti-terrorism operation" against ethnic Russians fighters. They were resisting the U.S.-backed coup of Feb. 22, 2014, which had ousted elected President Viktor Yanukovich, whose political base was in the east.

According to the Dutch Safety Board [report](#), issued last October, a Ukrainian

warplane had been shot down by a suspected air-to-air missile (presumably from a Russian fighter) on July 16, 2014, meaning that Ukrainian defenses were probably on high alert. The Russian military also claimed that Ukraine had activated a radar system that is used to guide Buk missiles.

Gunning for Putin?

I was told by the intelligence source that U.S. analysts looked seriously at the possibility that the intended target was President Putin's official plane returning from a state visit to South America. His aircraft and MH-17 had similar red-white-and-blue markings, but Putin took a more northerly route and arrived safely in Moscow.

Other possible scenarios were that a poorly trained and undisciplined Ukrainian squad mistook MH-17 for a Russian plane that had penetrated Ukrainian airspace or that the attack was willful provocation designed to be blamed on the Russians.

Whoever the culprits and whatever their motive, one point that should not have remained in doubt was where the missile launch occurred. Remember that just three days after the crash, Secretary Kerry had said U.S. intelligence detected the launch and "We know where it came from."

But last October, the Dutch Safety Board still hadn't pinned down anything like a precise location. The report could only place the launch site within a 320-square-kilometer area in eastern Ukraine, covering territory then controlled by both Ukrainian and rebel forces. (The safety board did not seek to identify which side fired the fateful missile).

By contrast, Almaz-Antey, the Russian arms manufacturer of the Buk systems, conducted its own experiments to determine the likely firing location and placed it in a much smaller area near the village of Zaroshchenskoye, about 20 kilometers west of the Dutch Safety Board's zone and in an area under Ukrainian government control.

So, with the firing location a key point in dispute, why would the U.S. government withhold from a NATO ally (and investigators into a major airline disaster) the launch point for the missile? Presumably, if the Obama administration had solid evidence showing that the launch came from rebel territory, which was Kerry's insinuation, U.S. officials would have been only too happy to provide the data.

A reasonable conclusion from the failure to share this information with the Dutch investigators is that the data does not support the preferred U.S. government narrative. If there's a different explanation for the silence, the

Obama administration has failed to provide it.

Amid the curious U.S. silence, the most significant public finding by Western intelligence is that the only powerful and operational anti-aircraft-missile systems in eastern Ukraine on July 17, 2014, belonged to the Ukrainian military.

Nevertheless, the mainstream “conventional wisdom” remains that either the ethnic Russian rebels or the Russians themselves shot down MH-17 and have sought to cover up their guilt.

Some of this certainty comes from the simpleminded game of repeating that Buk missiles are “Russian-made,” which is true but irrelevant to the issue of who fired the missiles, since the Ukrainian military possesses Russian-made Buks.

But much of this “group think” can be credited to the speed with which the Obama administration got its narrative out immediately citing dubious “social media” and exploiting the West’s disdain toward Russian President Putin. He was a ready-made villain for the story.

Lying First

A similar case occurred in 1983 when Korean Airlines Flight 007 penetrated deeply into Soviet territory and was pursued by a Soviet fighter that after issuing warnings that were ignored shot the plane down believing it was an enemy military aircraft. Though the Soviets quickly realized they had made a terrible mistake, the Reagan administration wanted to use the incident to paint the “evil empire” in the vilest of tones.

So, Reagan’s propagandists edited the ground-control intercepts to make it appear that the Soviets had committed willful murder, a theme that was presented to the United Nations and was gullibly lapped up by the mainstream U.S. news media.

The fuller story only came out in 1995 with a book entitled *Warriors of Disinformation* by Alvin A. Snyder, who had been director of the U.S. Information Agency’s television and film division. He described how the tapes were edited “to heap as much abuse on the Soviet Union as possible.”

In a boastful but frank description of the successful disinformation campaign, Snyder noted that “the American media swallowed the U.S. government line without reservation. Said the venerable Ted Koppel on the ABC News ‘Nightline’ program: ‘This has been one of those occasions when there is very little difference between what is churned out by the U.S. government propaganda organs and by the commercial broadcasting networks.’”

Snyder concluded, "The moral of the story is that all governments, including our own, lie when it suits their purposes. The key is to lie first."

In the case of MH-17, however, the falsehoods and deceptions are not simply some spy-vs.-spy propaganda game of gotcha, but rather obstruction of justice in a mass murder investigation. Whatever evidence the Obama administration has, it should have long since been made available to the investigators, but so far the official Dutch reports have indicated no such assistance.

While the U.S. government maintains its official silence, the Russian manufacturer has tried to provide details about the functioning of various generations of Buks and challenged the conclusion from the Dutch Safety Board of precisely which model likely brought down MH-17. The Dutch Safety Board cited a 9M38M1 missile using a 9N314M warhead that dispersed "butterfly or bow-tie" fragments that ripped through MH-17's fuselage.

But Almaz-Antey reported that only older warheads and missiles of the 9M38 type have that signature. "The 9M38M1 missile has no H-shaped striking elements," Almaz-Antey executive Yan Novikov said. According to the manufacturer, the Russian army had phased 9M38 missiles out years ago, but they remained part of Ukraine's arsenal.

On Jan. 14, the Russian aviation agency issued its own report critical of the Dutch Safety Board's understanding of the Buk models, saying that "the strike elements" in the 9N314M warhead did not match the composition of what was recovered from MH-17. Yet, the Dutch-led criminal investigation, which is being partly run by the Ukrainian government, has shown little interest in the Russian information.

'Citizen Journalists'

The inquiry has been much more welcoming of leads from Bellingcat, a group of "citizen journalists" led by British blogger Eliot Higgins.

Despite having made significant mistakes in an earlier investigation of the Syria-sarin case in 2013 including misstating the range of suspect missiles Higgins has been treated as something of a savant on the MH-17 case, basing his analysis on photographs that popped up the Internet purportedly showing a Buk missile system heading eastward from Donetsk shortly before MH-17 was shot down.

Although one of the first lessons anyone learns about the Internet is to be cautious about what you find there, Higgins and Bellingcat relied on the images to conclude that this battery was dispatched from Russia under the command of Russian forces. The bloggers went so far as to send a list of Russian soldiers' names as suspects to the MH-17 criminal investigators.

There are, of course, problems with this sort of theorizing. First, it assumes that the photos on the Internet are genuine and not cleverly photo-shopped fakes. The Internet can be a devil's playground for both amateur and professional disinformationists.

But even assuming that the photos are real, there is the question of why if this cumbersome weapons system was lumbering around eastern Ukraine apparently for weeks did Western intelligence services not detect it from overhead surveillance either before or after the shoot-down? From Bellingcat's Internet photos, it appears there was no effort to conceal the Buk system, which curiously was headed eastward toward Russia, not westward from Russia.

Higgins also directed an Australian TV film crew to the supposed site in Luhansk where the Buk battery, minus one missile, supposedly made its getaway back into Russia. However, the location that the Australian crew filmed clearly was the wrong place. None of the landmarks matched up, but this journalistic fraud did nothing to diminish Bellingcat's sterling reputation with mainstream Western news outlets which routinely repeat the group's allegations. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[A Reckless Stand-upper on MH-17.](#)"]

It turns out that it is an excellent business model for "citizen" bloggers to find "evidence" on the Internet to reinforce whatever the U.S. government's propagandists are claiming. Since the U.S. government's credibility is shaky at best, young hip Internet readers are more inclined to trust what they hear from bloggers and when the bloggers echo what Washington claims, the mainstream media and well-funded think tanks will join in the applause.

Latest Speculation

Earlier this month, Bellingcat's speculation identifying Russian soldiers as MH-17 suspects based on their assignment to a Buk battery was splashed across the international press, including Dutch television, London's Telegraph and the British Guardian. The U.S.-funded Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty headlined [its story](#), "Russian Soldiers Said Involved in Downing of MH17 Airliner," complete with photos of Russian soldiers with their eyes blacked out, courtesy of Bellingcat.

"The Britain-based Bellingcat group said it had identified up to 100 Russian soldiers who may have knowledge of the movements of the Buk missile launcher that destroyed the Boeing 777 on July 17, 2014, killing all 298 on board," RFE/RL reported, citing a quote that Higgins gave to the Telegraph: "We have the names and photos of the soldiers in the June convoy who traveled with the MH17 Buk, their commanders, their commanders' commanders, etc."

Higgins told Dutch TV channel NOS that Bellingcat believed that at least 20 soldiers in an air-defense unit based in Kursk “probably” either fired the missile or know who fired it.

The Dutch-led prosecution team, which collaborates with the Ukrainian government and nations that suffered large numbers of deaths from the crash including Australia and Malaysia, welcomed the Bellingcat information and promised to “seriously study it.”

Not that the prosecution team has asked or appears interested, but one could also give the sleuths a list of Americans who almost certainly have knowledge about who fired the missile and from exactly where: CIA Director John Brennan, DNI James Clapper, Secretary of State John Kerry and President Barack Obama.

Any one of those officials could end the strange silence that has enveloped the U.S. government’s knowledge about the MH-17 shoot-down since five days after the tragedy and by doing so perhaps they could finally bring some clarity and justice to this mystery.

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

The Clintons’ Cheap Shot at Sanders

Seeing the polls tighten, Hillary Clinton’s campaign has gone on the attack against Sen. Bernie Sanders over his support for Medicare for all, accusing him of seeking to destroy Obamacare (though he voted for it). It’s a deceptive assault, say Bill Moyers and Michael Winship.

By Bill Moyers and Michael Winship

The Clinton campaign just made a serious mistake. They sent Hillary and Bill Clinton’s daughter Chelsea out on behalf of her mother to bash Sen. Bernie Sanders on the issue of health care.

What’s so wrong with that? Don’t all candidates use family surrogates when and where they can? The Kennedys, for example, deployed a horde of kinfolk for Jack’s campaign for president, then Bobby’s, then Teddy’s.

But when it’s the first time (as this was for Clinton the younger), the

surrogate should be sure whereof she speaks, and had better stick to talking about her candidate, not the opponent. Unfortunately, Chelsea Clinton misrepresented Sen. Sanders's position, and her premiere performance on the stump backfired, producing a flood of political donations to Sanders.

Here's what she said: "Senator Sanders wants to dismantle Obamacare, dismantle the [Children's Health Insurance Program], dismantle Medicare, and dismantle private insurance." Whew! She would have us believe that the Vermont senator is a one-man wrecking crew, an enraged King Kong or, to be modern about it, a mendacious Darth Vader proposing "to go back to an era before we had the Affordable Care Act that would strip millions and millions and millions of people off their health insurance."

Uh, not exactly. In fact, not even close. As Karen Tumulty noted in *The Washington Post*, Bernie Sanders has long been a champion of a single-payer health care system as the only way to assure that all Americans receive medical coverage. Rather than "strip" millions and millions of people of their health insurance, he wants to be sure millions and millions of people actually *get* health insurance.

This was Sanders's position as far back as 1993 when newly-elected President Bill Clinton put First Lady Hillary Clinton in charge of reforming our disheveled and unjust health care system. Her task force huffed and puffed in secret for months, calling in legions of experts and academics, ultimately producing a plan so complicated and impenetrable not to mention unexplainable that it would have collapsed of its own ponderous weight even if the Republicans had not propagandized it into a laughingstock of pretensions and inefficiencies that could only make matters worse.

And here's an ironic note: During that 1993 quest for a health care plan, Secretary Clinton sent Sanders an autographed picture of the two of them, wishing him the best and thanking the senator "for your commitment to real health care access for all Americans."

All these years later, Sanders is still fighting the battle for single-payer, Medicare-like coverage for all, even as fellow Democrats capitulated to the siren songs of the health and insurance industries. President Obama, himself a one-time advocate of single-payer coverage, buckled to the insurance companies and its lobbyists and minions in Congress and agreed to health care legislation (the Affordable Care Act) that would continue to treat healing the sick as a profit center instead of a basic human right.

And look at former presidential candidate and single-payer advocate Howard Dean, Bernie's fellow Vermonter, who went on MSNBC this week and said that the Sanders

plan “would in fact undo people’s health care That is something people should be concerned about.”

Why the change of heart? Maybe because Dean “now serves as senior advisor to the law firm Dentons, where he works with the firm’s Public Policy and Regulation practice, a euphemism for Dentons’ lobbying team,” [Lee Fang reports at *The Intercept*](#). “The Dentons Public Policy and Regulation practice lobbies on behalf of a variety of corporate health care interests, including the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America [PhRMA], a powerful trade group for drugmakers like Pfizer and Merck.”

Fang notes that, “Incumbent health care interests, particularly drug companies and insurers, have long viewed single-payer as a threat to their business model,” and points to documents that we uncovered in 2009 on *Bill Moyers Journal* with the help of former health insurance executive, now whistleblower Wendell Potter. They showed a systematic plan by health insurers to discredit single-payer.

As president of the Clinton Foundation, the richly endowed philanthropy that has become the family’s private station for public causes, Chelsea Clinton must know this. The cynic might think [the more than \\$2.6 million](#) given so far by the health industry to Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign and outside groups supporting her (three times that of any other candidate, Democrat or Republican) might be leading Chelsea Clinton to use the same kind of false accusations so long used against her parents.

But why would any of the family, their campaign team, advisors and supporters assume that the public would accept such a wild and irresponsible distortion?

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Will Reckless Saudis Seek War with Iran?

Exclusive: Under growing economic and political pressure, the new Saudi leadership is showing a dangerous impulse toward military interventions, raising prospects for a direct and destructive confrontation with its regional rival Iran, writes Daniel Lazare.

By Daniel Lazare

Now that Saudi Arabia has severed diplomatic ties with Iran and reportedly bombed Iran's embassy in Yemen, the big question is whether the Saudis are desperate and unhinged enough to launch an attack across the Persian Gulf. While Saudi leaders insist they have no such intent, there are mounting pressures pushing them in that direction.

The ruling family is under unprecedented strain. Its economy is shrinking; it's bogged down in a seemingly endless war in Yemen; and its human-rights policies are an international scandal. If countries could have nervous breakdowns, Saudi Arabia would be well on its way. And when breakdowns occur, nations do crazy things.

Of course, there is always the possibility that sanity will suddenly descend upon the Saudis. But reason seems to be in increasingly short supply. Here's a quick rundown of the reasons why Saudi Arabia is in such dire straits that war with Iran might appear to Saudi leaders as the best remaining option.

Reason #1: Economic collapse.

The 70-percent crash in oil prices since mid-2014 is not unprecedented. Crude plunged some 70 percent during and after the 2008 financial crisis, though it quickly bounced back once central bankers began cutting interest rates. But this time around the realization is growing that the prices will not be coming back anytime soon.

The reason is simple: a classic crisis of over-production straight out of *Das Kapital* as shale drillers grow more adept, sidelined producers such as Iran go on-stream, and demand continues to slide due to the collapse of the Chinese economy and ongoing listlessness in Japan and the West. Too many goods are chasing too few customers, a problem affecting not just energy but raw materials in general.

As *The New York Times* recently warned: "The commodities hangover, the dark side of a decade-long boom, could last for a while."

This doesn't bode well for Saudi Arabia. When a country's fortunes are bound up with a single commodity the way the Saudis' are with oil, the result is not just a business reversal, but an existential crisis. Leaders wind up discredited, while government as a whole enters into a crisis of legitimacy.

Saudi Arabia would be in better straits if it had used its income to diversify. But faced with a gusher of oil wealth seemingly without end, the Saudis preferred to spend rather than invest. By 2013, they were more dependent on oil

revenue than 40 years earlier.

Thus, the kingdom's choices are severely limited. The military card is one of the few left in the deck.

Reason #2: The United States.

U.S.-Saudi relations nearly collapsed after the attack on the World Trade Center in September 2001, but thanks to a compliant Congress and a supine press, President George W. Bush was able to cover up evidence of high-level Saudi complicity and put the alliance back on track. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[The Secret Saudi Ties to Terrorism.](#)"]

But things were never the same. Bush's invasion of Iraq upset the delicate balance in the Persian Gulf by tossing out Saddam Hussein, a Sunni, and replacing him with a series of pro-Shi'ite governments increasingly beholden to Iran.

Obama worked hard at repairing the damage. But his decision to withdraw support from Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak in the middle of the Arab Spring left the Saudis wondering whether he would toss them overboard when the going got rough. Obama's demand that Syria's Bashar al-Assad, an Alawite (a variant of Shia Islam) and a Saudi *bête noire*, "must go" pleased the Saudis, who joined with the Qataris and other "friends of Syria" to contribute \$100 million to anti-Assad rebels.

But the Saudis were taken aback when the White House began complaining that the money was going to ferocious Sunni Islamists whose atrocities against Shi'ites, Christians and other religious minorities wound up driving the population into the arms of Assad's secular Baathist government.

A similar pattern followed the Saudi decision to send troops across the 16-mile King Fahd Causeway to crush democratic protests in Shi'ite-majority Bahrain. When Obama ventured a few words of [mild criticism](#), the Saudis made no effort to hide their [annoyance](#).

Then, when the U.S. entered into nuclear talks with Iran, the Saudis expressed alarm that the Americans might be switching sides. Feeling alone and abandoned, they concluded that they had no choice but to act on their own when Shi'ite Houthi rebels seemed to be at the point of gaining control of Yemen. Fed up with White House dilly-dallying, the Saudis launched an air war against the Houthis after giving the U.S. only [an hour's notice](#).

The more the White House resisted being drawn into the Saudis' paranoid worldview, the more mistrustful the Saudis became and the more aggressive their

behavior grew, a pattern that would repeat itself in the months ahead.

Reason #3: The logic of sectarianism.

From a Western perspective, the Sunni-Shi'ite conflict makes no sense. In the final analysis, a war of succession among Muhammad's followers that has raged on and off since the Seventh Century, it is as if the heirs of the Merovingians and Carolingians were still blasting away at one another in the rubble of Brussels. But where few Westerners can even remember who the Merovingians and Carolingians were or which one came first, Muslims behave as if their civil war occurred just yesterday.

The explanation is actually rather simple. As the self-appointed "custodian of the two holy mosques," i.e. Mecca and Medina, the Saudi royal family bases its claim on Muslim law, the notion that its rule is legally valid according to shari'a and that it is therefore incumbent upon all Muslims to accede to its legitimacy.

But Shi'ites view the Saudis as merely another pack of illegal Sunni usurpers with zero legitimacy. For the Saudis, this is no laughing matter. The more insecure the regime grows, the more it sees such slights as fighting words.

When you're a theocracy, in other words, fine points like these are all-important. This is why the 1979 Iranian revolution filled the Saudis with such dread; it was the first time Shi'ites had taken state power in centuries. It is why the Arab Spring protests that nearly toppled the Sunni ruling family in neighboring Bahrain were equally as frightful.

If Bahrain's 70-percent Shi'ite majority had succeeded, it would have brought Shi'ite state power to within a few miles of Saudi shores. From there, it would have been a hop, skip and jump to Saudi Arabia's oil-rich Eastern Province where the local Shi'ite majority is equally unhappy with Sunni rule.

All too aware that Shi'ites outnumber Sunnis nearly two to one in the nations bordering on the Persian Gulf, the Saudis feel increasingly isolated on their own home turf. Their only option, they believe, is to gather Sunni forces from afar and use them to counter the Shi'ite threat at home.

As Saudi Prince Bandar bin Sultan once told Sir Richard Dearlove, head of the British intelligence service MI6, "The time is not far off in the Middle East, Richard, when it will be literally 'God help the Shia.' More than a billion Sunnis have simply had enough of them."

The war against Shi'ite Alawites in Syria, Shi'ite protesters in Bahrain, Shi'ite Houthis in Yemen, and Shi'ite dissidents like Sheik Nimr al-Nimr in the Saudis' own Eastern Province could be just a prelude to the real war against the center of Shi'ite power in Iran.

Reason #4: Implementation Day.

Like Israel, Saudi Arabia was overjoyed when the United Nations Security Council imposed trade sanctions on Iran in 2006 for refusing to suspend its uranium enrichment program. Not only did the measures isolate Iran politically and economically, but it had the added benefit of cutting off a fellow oil exporter from the markets, thereby helping to insure that prices would remain high for years to come.

But with sanctions about to expire in the wake of last year's nuclear accord "implementation day" could be just days away all those emotions are now running in reverse.

Ironically, sanctions were not entirely negative for Iran. While the Saudis succumbed to the lure of easy money, Iran facing a shutdown of exports didn't fall into the trap of total dependency on oil production. Instead, Iran had no choice but to build up other sectors.

As *Foreign Affairs* points out, Iran's economy is highly diversified as a consequence, with oil and gas accounting for less than a fifth of GDP. At roughly \$17,000, per-capita GDP is ahead of China and Brazil. With some 4.4 million young people enrolled in universities, 60 percent of them women and 44 percent majoring in the so-called STEM fields of science, technology, engineering and math, Iran is clearly an emerging powerhouse.

So Iran is far less vulnerable to the ups and downs of the energy markets, which means its relative weight within the region will likely grow. The Saudis can practically feel the ground moving beneath their feet as the economic center of gravity shifts to the other side of the gulf.

The Saudis do have one advantage. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, their military expenditures exceed Iran's by as much as seven to one. Although Iran would almost certainly prevail in a drawn-out war of attrition since it has nine times as much active and reserve military personnel, the Saudis might believe that could deal a harsh blow to their rivals by deploying high-tech air power and that Iran's ability to retaliate would be limited. After all, as sectors of the ruling family are probably asking themselves, why spend billions on a high-tech offensive capability if you don't use it?"

Reason #5: Islamic State.

Saudi attitudes toward the Islamic State (also known as ISIS, ISIL and Daesh) are ambivalent. While vowing undying enmity toward these extremists, the Saudis are aware that the group enjoys significant popular support among the region's Sunnis.

When Karen Elliott House, former publisher of *The Wall Street Journal*, visited Saudi Arabia in November 2014, she encountered a "Saudi imam [who] told me that his son is begging to go to Syria to join ISIS. While the imam says he is discouraging the teenager, he acknowledged that he finds the ISIS call for a caliphate 'exciting.' Like all too many Saudis, he sees the Al Saud as too worldly."

For those repelled by Saudi royal greed and corruption and what member of the Saudi rank-and-file is not? ISIS is thus the logical alternative. Frederic Wehrey, a scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, makes a similar point.

"Sunni clerics," he notes, "have always said, 'Well, ISIS is kind of bad, but at least ISIS is standing up to the Shias in Iran.'"

This puts the Saudis in the hotspot since not only are they fighting against ISIS, but they are also allied with the U.S., which, from a Sunni perspective, now appears to be tilting toward Iran. That makes the Saudis doubly uncomfortable.

The only way the ruling family can redeem itself in the eyes of the Wahhabist *ulema* (as the mullahs are collectively known) is by escalating its own war against Shia Islam. This is why the Saudis have wound down participation in the U.S.-led effort against ISIS in Syria and Iraq in order to concentrate on the war in Yemen. The Saudi monarchy wishes to see ISIS beaten because it represents an eventual threat to the kingdom. But the mullahs are more comfortable fighting against Shi'ism, and the royal family has no choice but to go along.

Reason #6: Internal Saudi dynamics.

The Al Saud are not only isolated internationally, but domestically. The late king Abdullah was a mild modernizer who encouraged young people to study abroad and built the King Abdullah University for Science and Technology, located in Thuwal on the Red Sea coast, as a center for co-education. His successor, the 80-year-old Salman bin Abdulaziz, is the opposite, a hardliner who doubled public executions after acceding to the throne last January, stepped up aid to Al Nusra, the Syrian branch of Al Qaeda, and then launched the air assault on

Yemen.

Where Abdullah was a skilled consensus builder, Salman, a member of the so-called Sudairi Seven, a powerful faction within the royal family, apparently sees no need to work as hard at building support and is hence comparatively isolated.

For Saudi watchers, the results are evident from Salman's appointments. He sidelined one crown prince after gaining the throne, put his nephew in his place, and then handed real power over to his favorite son, Muhammad bin Salman, who, at just 29 or 30, is now minister of defense, deputy crown prince, chief of the royal court, and chairman of the council for economic and development affairs.

The results have been disastrous. Brash, inexperienced, and ill-informed, Muhammad did not study abroad very unusual for scions of the Saudi elite but instead gained a bachelor's degree from King Fahd University in Riyadh, a snake pit of racism, backbiting, and petty tyranny if confidential employee reviews are to be believed ("they cheat, steal your benefits, trap you, and have no respect for employees third circle of hell").

A recent interview with *The Economist* was positively eerie. Over the course of five hours, the young prince insisted that everything in the kingdom was fine, that popular support for the royal family was firm, that the war in Yemen was going swimmingly, and so on.

When asked why, at 18 percent, the female labor participation rate is among the lowest in the world, he insisted that it has nothing to do with the fact that women can't drive or can't leave home without a male chaperone. Rather, it is the fault of the women themselves.

Muhammad said of the typical Saudi woman: "She's not used to working. She needs more time to accustom herself to the idea of work. A large percentage of Saudi women are used to the fact of staying at home. They're not used to being working women. It just takes time."

Thanks to Muhammad's efforts to strengthen his position in the line of success, the German spy agency BND complained in a report last month that "the careful diplomatic stance of older members of the Saudi royal family has been replaced by an impulsive policy of intervention" in Yemen, Syria and elsewhere and that the Al Saud were "prepared to take unprecedented military, financial and political risks to avoid falling behind in regional politics" meaning that more dangerous interventions were likely to follow.

Instead of less war, in other words, the outlook is for more. For the moment,

Muhammad is a popular figure. Poets and singers write songs about him, and friends depict him in various social media as a macho warrior surrounded by lions and fighter jets.

But that could change in a flash as gas taxes are raised and other revenue-raising measures kick in. In 2011, the regime was only able to save itself during the Arab Spring by spending \$130 billion to pump up salaries, build housing, finance religious organizations, and otherwise buy social peace. But austerity means an unwinding of social benefits that could bring political discord back to the table. So the Al Saud have every reason to be nervous.

Bottom line: As the family business craters, the U.S. winds down its military commitments, sectarianism intensifies, and ISIS and Iran both grow more threatening, the House of Saud may see no choice but to mount a swift assault across the gulf.

As Muhammad bin Salman told *The Economist*, a Saudi-Iranian war would be “a major catastrophe.” But with its own catastrophic collapse looming, the kingdom may lash out at its prime enemy first.

Daniel Lazare is the author of several books including *The Frozen Republic: How the Constitution Is Paralyzing Democracy* (Harcourt Brace).

Chavismo's Sturdy Legacy

Exclusive: Right-wing parties are staging a comeback in Latin America, with the most dramatic victory in Venezuela's parliamentary elections. Yet, despite troubled leftist regimes facing weak economies and corruption charges, their social reforms have slashed poverty and appear safe for now, writes Andrés Cala.

By Andrés Cala

A string of recent electoral and political setbacks for Latin American leftist governments brought about by voter fatigue and an acute economic crisis is swinging the regional political pendulum in a revisionist direction with some analysts foreseeing a return to “free market” neoliberalism. But reversing a generation of social gains for the poor will not be easy or likely.

On Nov. 23, 2015, Argentines elected center-right Mauricio Macri as president, replacing the 12-year Peronista regime led by Cristina Fernández de Kirchner.

But the sharpest blow to the Left came in Venezuela on Dec. 6, when Chavismo, the most radical of the so-called Pink Tide regional movements, suffered its first electoral defeat in 16 years and a massive one at that when the opposition won an absolute majority in parliamentary elections.

In Brazil, the center-left regime that came to power in 2003 is fighting a recession and a string of corruption scandals that are raising popular and congressional pressures on President Dilma Rousseff to step down. Even Ecuador's charismatic President Rafael Correa is facing increasing opposition, although like his ally, Bolivian President Evo Morales, he is not up for election in the near-term.

But these reversals do not mark the Pink Tide's end, nor a return to the infamous neoliberal era of last century that deepened economic inequality and contributed to harsh political repression. Indeed, the decade-and-a-half pendulum swing to the left started slowing years ago and is now clearly moving in the opposite direction. But the new Latin American Right will be hesitant to reintroduce failed economic policies from the 1990s that ended up empowering the Left.

No doubt, the right-wing political movements will be more Wall Street friendly and challenge policies that have institutionally handicapped them, such as appointments to the courts and limits on press freedoms. But the Right lacks the political mandate to undo years of economic devolution from the old concentrations of wealth toward a more equitable sharing of the region's riches. Social gains that have spread throughout the region, even into countries ruled by the Right such as Colombia, would be hard to take away, even if trends toward greater equality stall.

As for the Left, some setbacks can be blamed on its own mismanagement and corruption, which along with the global economic crisis and for Venezuela the drop in oil prices, fed popular discontent. The electoral reversals could prompt a needed period focused on correcting mistakes and regaining the confidence of the citizens.

Chavismo Legacy

The legacy of the populist Left movements in Latin America which started in Venezuela when Hugo ChÃavez came to power in 1999 and spread in other forms to Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, El Salvador and a few Caribbean countries is the improved welfare of millions of citizens who had been confronting some of the greatest inequality on earth.

Under populist reforms, poverty was more than halved and social services, namely

education and health, improved vastly. The middle class in Latin America grew more than 50 percent since 2003, according to the World Bank, benefiting from a commodity-price boom and more equitable distribution of wealth.

Government institutions have become more stable and political violence which once made Latin America infamous for “disappearances” and “death squads” fell to historically low levels.

Geopolitically, the region grew more independent from U.S. dominance and wrestled back some control over its fiscal affairs. Even in countries that resisted the leftist ascent, such as Colombia, social investment reached historic highs.

But not all was good. Money was squandered on corruption and inefficient schemes sought by “client” groups. Authoritarianism and political polarization increased over the years. When oil and other commodity prices started falling, political capital also was drained away.

In the case of Venezuela, ChÃavez’s death in 2013 left behind a mismanaged economy that continued to sink under the government of his successor, the far-less charismatic NicolÃas Maduro. The economy contracted around 10 percent in 2015, the biggest decline in the world; oil production and incomes tumbled; shortages of food and consumer goods became widespread; inflation soared into four digits; and foreign investment, even from close friends like China, evaporated.

Maduro was unable to assert his authority, even within Chavismo itself. While jailing opposition figures who were accused of coup plotting, he wavered in his timid efforts to reform the economy to alleviate the suffering of his own followers. While it’s true the country faced “an economic war” from internal and external opponents of its socialist policies, the fact remains that Chavismo was all but paralyzed.

Venezuela’s political stalemate also is far from over. Maduro is seeking to block the newly formed parliament, threatening an escalating institutional tit-for-tat that will deepen the crisis. The opposition too is seeking to undo the firm grip of Chavismo on the country’s institution. The standoff between Chavistas and the opposition is fluid and could worsen to eventually invite a coup from one of the sides.

But even in the context of extreme political polarization, social policies have not been threatened, and with ample Chavista support still among Venezuela’s poor and Maduro’s term running until 2019, the opposition will likely target macroeconomic policy and legal reforms as its first priorities.

In Argentina, Macri has shown his willingness to take on Peronismo, resorting to some of the same unilateral policies and bypassing Congress that he criticized Fern andez for doing. His government will seek to access international financial markets that his predecessor shunned, and he has already removed some export taxes, foreign exchange controls, and moved to attract foreign capital. But again, there is no sign yet he will undo the social policy of Peronismo.

In regional powerhouse Brazil, Rousseff will more than likely survive the impeachment attempts by the opposition over corruption scandals involving some of her closest aides. In fact, her mentor and predecessor Lula da Silva has come to her rescue and is rumored to be planning a comeback for 2018.

But in no case are Brazil's social policies at risk, a reality underlined by the fact that not even Rousseff has been able to introduce the kind of unpopular cuts in programs that some financial advisers say are needed to jumpstart the sputtering economy.

And, while not Chavista or populist, Uruguay and Chile have developed their own socialist strategies even while defending more "free-market" economic policies; Peru and Colombia, while even more market-friendly and governed by the Right, are using their economic growth, even amid the commodity slump, to integrate their largely impoverished populations more fully into their economies.

Still, times are tough for Latin America which saw the year ending with an economic contraction of 0.9 percent, a downturn particularly acute in South America as the Brazilian and Venezuelan economies tanked.

In 2016, the economy is expected to be flat regionally, but contract more than 2 percent in South America, according to the World Bank. Of the large economies, Colombia, Peru and Chile will fare better than Brazil and most notably Venezuela. Argentina will grow marginally.

The incoming right-wing leaders will have to deliver meaningful economic turnarounds, without hurting social policies, to convince citizens they are a better alternative to Chavistas, Peronistas, Lulistas and others on the Left.

The economic hardships could spark more instability in the region, especially if Chavismo implodes in Venezuela and the Right overplays its hand. But Latin America's transformation over the past 15 years has created an opportunity for a more mature region to leave its violent past behind and to address its challenges through more peaceful political means.

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What Hillary Knew about Libya

Exclusive: In Official Washington's propaganda world, the U.S. government and its "allies" are always standing for what's right and good and the "enemies" are the epitome of evil doing the vilest things. But some emails to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton depicted a far different reality, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

To justify U.S. "regime changes," the U.S. government has routinely spread rumors and made other dubious claims which even when later doubted or debunked are left in place indefinitely as corrosive propaganda, eating away at the image of various "enemies" and deforming public opinion.

Even though this discredited propaganda can have a long half-life continuing to contaminate the public's ability to perceive reality for years President Barack Obama and his administration have shown no inclination to undertake a kind of HAZMAT clean-up of the polluted information environment that American citizens have been forced to live in.

A recent case in point was the emergence in the State Department's New Year's Eve release of more than 3,000 emails to and from former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton of evidence that two key propaganda themes used to advance violent "regime change" in Libya in 2011 may have originated with rebel-inspired rumors passed on by Clinton's private adviser Sidney Blumenthal.

A March 27, 2011 [email](#) from Blumenthal reminded Clinton that "I communicated more than a week ago on this story, [Libyan leader Muammar] Qaddafi placing bodies to create PR stunts about supposed civilian casualties as a result of Allied bombing, though underlining it was a rumor. But now, as you know, [Defense Secretary] Robert Gates gives credence to it."

Blumenthal's email, which was slugged "Rumor: Q[addafi]'s rape policy," then plunged ahead into his new rumor: "Sources now say, again rumor (that is, this information comes from the rebel side and is unconfirmed independently by Western intelligence), that Qaddafi has adopted a rape policy and has even distributed Viagra to troops. The incident at the Tripoli press conference involving a woman claiming to be raped is likely to be part of a much larger outrage. Will seek further confirmation."

A month later, this bizarre Viagra-rape angle became part of a United Nations presentation by then U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Susan Rice who brought up the

Viagra charge in a debate about the evils of Muammar Gaddafi's regime.

A U.N. diplomat at the closed session on April 28, 2011, told The Guardian that "It was during a discussion about whether there is moral equivalence between the Gaddafi forces and the rebels. She listed human rights abuses by Gaddafi's forces, including snipers shooting children in the street and the Viagra story."

On Blumenthal's other propaganda point, it's not clear where Defense Secretary Gates got the idea to accuse Gaddafi of "staging" scenes of U.S.-inflicted carnage, but Blumenthal's email indicates that he was disseminating that rumor which might have been picked up by Gates, rather than independently confirmed by Gates. (It's also true that the "staging" excuse has been used before when evidence emerges of U.S. bombs killing civilians.)

Media Self-Interest

Yet, regardless of the truth or falsity of such U.S. claims and counter-claims, the chance that someone inside Official Washington is going to review the lies and exaggerations used to rationalize a major U.S. foreign policy initiative in this case, the violent overthrow of the Gaddafi regime to, in effect, "clear" Gaddafi's name is remote at best.

The few cases of the media debunking U.S. propaganda, such as exposing the made-up claims about Iraqi soldiers killing babies on incubators before the Persian Gulf War in 1990-91, are rare exceptions to the rule. Even rarer are cases when the U.S. government admits that it relied on false information, such as the intelligence community recanting its pre-invasion claims about Iraq hiding WMD stockpiles in 2002-03.

The much more common approach is to simply leave the decaying propaganda in place and move on to the next target of opportunity. There is little benefit for anyone to undertake the painstaking work of separating whatever slices of truth exist within the rot of lies and exaggerations that were used to justify some war.

The way mainstream journalism usually works in America is that a reporter who challenges U.S. government propaganda aimed at a foreign "enemy" is putting his or her career at risk. The reporter's patriotism will be questioned amid suggestions that he or she is a "fill-in-the-blank-with-the-villain's-name" apologist.

And since the reality whatever it is is usually fuzzy, there is almost never any vindication for a brave stance. So, the smart career play is to go along with the propaganda or stay silent.

A similar reality exists inside the U.S. government. Honest intelligence analysts can expect no rewards if they debunk one of these propaganda themes, especially after a number of important U.S. officials have gone out publicly and sold the falsehood to the people. Making the Secretary of State or the Defense Secretary or the President look bad is not a great career move.

France's Designs

Plus, the propaganda themes, which stress American righteousness in standing up to foreign evil, are useful in obscuring the self-interested motives that often circle around a killing field like the one that Libya has become.

For instance, another Blumenthal memo to Clinton explained France's political and pecuniary interests in toppling Gaddafi and thus thwarting his ambitious plans to use Libya's oil wealth as a means of freeing parts of Africa from French domination.

In an April 2, 2011 [email](#), Blumenthal informed Clinton that sources close to one of Gaddafi's sons were reporting that "Qaddafi's government holds 143 tons of gold, and a similar amount in silver" and the hoard had been moved from the Libyan Central Bank in Tripoli closer to the border with Niger and Chad.

"This gold was accumulated prior to the current rebellion and was intended to be used to establish a pan-African currency based on the Libyan golden Dinar. This plan was designed to provide the Francophone African Countries with an alternative to the French franc (CFA)."

Blumenthal then added that "According to knowledgeable individuals, this quantity of gold and silver is valued at more than \$7 billion. French intelligence officers discovered this plan shortly after the current rebellion began, and this was one of the factors that influenced President Nicolas Sarkozy's decision to commit France to the attack on Libya."

The email added: "According to these individuals, Sarkozy's plans are driven by the following issues: a. A desire to gain a greater share of Libya oil production, b. Increase French influence in North Africa, c. Improve his internal political situation in France, d. Provide the French military with an opportunity to reassert its position in the world, e. Address the concern of his advisors over Qaddafi's long term plans to supplant France as the dominant power in Francophone Africa."

In an earlier [email](#), dated March 27, 2011, Blumenthal also discussed the French interests in the conflict, citing "knowledgeable individuals" who said that Sarkozy "is pressing to have France emerge from this crisis as the principal foreign ally of any new government that takes power."

So do you think it would it be easier for the Obama administration to rally American support behind this “regime change” by explaining how the French wanted to steal Libya’s wealth and maintain French neocolonial influence over Africa or would Americans respond better to propaganda themes about Gaddafi passing out Viagra to his troops so they could rape more women while his snipers targeted innocent children? Bingo!

Seeing No Jihadists

In selling the Libyan policy to the American people, it was also important to downplay another part of the crisis: that Gaddafi was right when he warned of the danger from Islamic radicals, including Al Qaeda’s North African affiliate, operating in eastern Libya.

Gaddafi’s original military offensive was aimed at these groups, but the Obama administration’s propagandists twisted the issue into Gaddafi supposedly committing “genocide” against the people of eastern Libya, thus requiring a U.S.-led “responsibility to protect” or “R2P” mission.

However, in the emails to Clinton, Blumenthal conveyed the actual reality that these supposedly innocent anti-Gaddafi rebels in the east indeed included jihadist elements. He wrote: “Sarkozy is also concerned about continuing reports that radical/terrorist groups such as the Libyan Fighting Groups and Al Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) are infiltrating the NLC [the rebel’s National Transitional Council] and its military command.

“Accordingly, he [Sarkozy] asked [a] sociologist who has long established ties to Israel, Syria, and other nations in the Middle East, to use his contacts to determine the level of influence AQIM and other terrorist groups have inside of the NLC. Sarkozy also asked for reports setting out a clear picture of the role of the Muslim Brotherhood in the rebel leadership.”

Blumenthal added: “Senior European security officials caution that AQIM is watching developments in Libya, and elements of that organization have been in touch with tribes in the southeastern part of the country. These [European] officials are concerned that in a post-Qaddafi Libya, France and other western European countries must move quickly to ensure that the new government does not allow AQIM and others to set up small, semi-autonomous local entities, or ‘Caliphates’, in the oil and gas producing regions of southeastern Libya.”

In other words, the danger of Islamic terror groups exploiting the power vacuum that the Obama administration and its Western allies were creating inside Libya was well understood in March 2011, but the supposed “R2P” mission pressed ahead nevertheless.

The “R2P” advocates also turned a blind eye to evidence that black Africans working for Gaddafi’s government were being systematically rounded up and murdered. As Blumenthal reported to Clinton, “Speaking in strict confidence, one rebel commander stated that his troops continue to summarily execute all foreign mercenaries captured in the fighting.”

These so-called “mercenaries” were contractors from black Africa where many people viewed Gaddafi as a champion of the continent’s development, independent of the former Western imperial powers and the harsh demands of the International Monetary Fund. While some of these blacks were part of Gaddafi’s security structure, others were involved in construction projects.

Whatever their assignments, executing prisoners of war is a war crime and the image of U.S.-backed rebels singling out black Africans for execution turns the pretense of an “R2P” mission on its head or perhaps all those noble humanitarian arguments were just phony from the start.

As Brad Hoff of the Levant Report wrote, “historians of the 2011 NATO war in Libya will be sure to notice a few of the truly explosive confirmations contained in the new emails: admissions of rebel war crimes, special ops trainers inside Libya from nearly the start of protests, Al Qaeda embedded in the U.S. backed opposition, Western nations jockeying for access to Libyan oil, the nefarious origins of the absurd Viagra mass rape claim, and concern over Gaddafi’s gold and silver reserves threatening European currency.”

Reality’s Hard Sell

But it probably would have been a hard sell to the American people if the U.S. government explained the dark side of the “R2P” mission that it involved systematic executions of blacks and rapacious Western officials grasping for oil and gold as well as creating a vacuum for jihadists. Instead, it worked much better to promote wild rumors about Gaddafi’s perfidy.

It is in this way that U.S. citizens, the “We the People” who were supposed to be the nation’s sovereigns, are treated more like cattle herded to the slaughterhouse.

Some of us did try to warn the public about these risks. For instance, on March 25, 2011, days before Blumenthal’s emails, I described the hazard from the neocon “regime change” strategies in Libya and Syria, writing:

“In rallying U.S. support for these rebellions, the neocons risked repeating the mistake they made by pushing the U.S. invasion of Iraq. They succeeded in ousting Saddam Hussein, who had long been near the top of Israel’s enemies list, but the war also removed him as a bulwark against both Islamic extremists and

Iranian influence in the Persian Gulf.

“By embracing these uprisings, the neocons invited unintended consequences, including further Islamic radicalization of the region and deepening anti-Americanism. Indeed, a rebel victory over Gaddafi risked putting extremists from an al-Qaeda affiliate in a powerful position inside Libya.

“The major U.S. news media aided the neocon cause by focusing on Gaddafi’s historic ties to terrorism, including the dubious charge that he was behind the Pan Am 103 bombing in 1988. There was little attention paid to his more recent role in combating the surge in al-Qaeda activity, especially in eastern Libya, the base of the revolt against him.” [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“Neocons Regroup on Libyan War.”](#)]

Though the 2011 concerns about Al Qaeda have since morphed into worries about its spinoff, the Islamic State, the larger point remains valid regarding Libya, which descended into the status of failed state after Gaddafi’s ouster and his brutal torture-murder on Oct. 20, 2011. Secretary Clinton greeted the news of Gaddafi’s demise with glee, exulting, “we came, we saw, he died” and then laughed. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“Hillary Clinton’s Failed Libya Doctrine.”](#)]

More than four years later, the Obama administration still struggles to piece together some order from the chaos in Libya, where Western governments have even abandoned their Tripoli embassies. Meanwhile, the Islamic State and other jihadist groups continue to expand their control of Libyan territory.

In Syria, President Bashar al-Assad has hung on despite continued efforts by the Obama administration and its regional Sunni allies to remove him. The four years of war waged mostly by jihadists armed and financed by Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Western powers have killed a quarter million people and made millions homeless, now spreading the Mideast’s disorders into Europe where the refugee crisis is dividing the European Union.

Of course, in the U.S. mainstream media, the Syrian deaths and destruction are blamed almost entirely on Assad, much as the conflict in Libya was blamed on Gaddafi and the U.S. invasion of Iraq was blamed on Saddam Hussein. In the world created by U.S. propaganda, it is always some other guy’s fault.

In the Syrian case, the major decaying propaganda theme that continues to contaminate public understanding of the crisis has been the accusation that Assad “gassed his own people” with sarin on Aug. 21, 2013. Although independent evidence has long been pointing in the direction of a rebel provocation, perhaps aided by Turkey, the old rotting propaganda is routinely dug up by neocons and their liberal interventionist sidekicks to justify why “Assad must go!” [See

Consortiumnews.com's "[The Collapsing Syria-Sarin Case.](#)"]

In the case of Libya, Blumenthal's emails provide a useful window into what was actually happening behind the scenes and what Secretary of State Clinton knew.

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

EU in Stress: the German-Polish Clash

The strains on Europe from neocon-devised policies of "regime change" in Syria and Ukraine are resurfacing historical divisions and reviving old animosities among European states, including a war of words between Angela Merkel's Germany and Poland's new right-wing government, as Gilbert Doctorow explains.

By Gilbert Doctorow

It may have been a foregone conclusion that Poland under the control of Jaroslaw Kaczynski's Law and Justice Party because of its Euroskeptic and nationalist positions would quickly join Viktor Orban's Hungary as a "bad boy" of the European Union.

In recent months, especially since the Law and Justice Party's electoral victory last October, Poland has stood out as a leading naysayer to the E.U.'s calls for sharing the burden of receiving the wave of refugees arriving from Syria and the Middle East. Polish criticism of the open borders policy championed by German Chancellor Angela Merkel has been stinging.

For instance, before the election, Kaczynski raised alarms about the possibility that the Mideast refugees might carry diseases. "There are already signs of emergence of diseases that are highly dangerous and have not been seen in Europe for a long time: cholera on the Greek islands, dysentery in Vienna. There is also talk about other, even more severe diseases," he [said](#), though European health authorities have not reported any widespread outbreak of infectious diseases connected to the migrants.

Poland also has been quick to take a "we told you so" stand on the New Year's Eve mass violence and sexual assaults allegedly perpetrated by youths from North Africa and the Middle East, including asylum seekers, outside the Cologne main train station in Germany. Polish media cited the five-day blackout in Germany on

news about the New Year's Eve violence to question the autonomy and social responsibility of German journalism.

There are other reasons behind Polish vehemence on the refugees. First, from the standpoint of its population, Poland is already overrun by refugees and economic immigrants from Ukraine, which has suffered from civil war and economic collapse since February 2014 when a violent putsch toppled the government of President Viktor Yanukovych and created a crisis with Russia.

Official statistics put the number of Ukrainian refugees in Poland at about 400,000, as of May 2015, but unofficial estimates are much higher, more than a million today. The Ukrainians are putting pressure on the local job market at a time when there is still a net outflow of ethnic Poles going abroad in search of work. Secondly, admitting Muslims runs directly against the new government's stress on protecting and nurturing traditional Catholic religious values.

But Merkel's allies are hitting back against Poland's new leadership for its apparently anti-democratic actions to tighten government control over the public news media. A controversial new law allows the Polish government to appoint the directors of the public TV and radio services, as well as civil service directors.

This control of public media will be the subject of a European Commission examination into Poland's possibly violating the E.U.'s Rule of Law provisions, scheduled for Jan. 13 in Brussels. The charges are being pressed by a *German* commissioner-designate, Guenther Oettinger, who is taking charge of European Digital Economy and Society.

If a determination is made that Poland's law violates Europe's rules, the penalty could be to suspend Warsaw's voting rights in the European Council. That would be particularly awkward because Poland's own former premier, Donald Tusk, from what's now the opposition party, happens to be the Council's president.

To be sure, such an outcome would come only after a period of "supervision" during which Poland's conduct of affairs would be subject to ongoing review by the Commission. But the notion of such European supervision raises hackles in Warsaw, as reported by the country's leading daily newspaper, *Gazeta Wyborcza*.

It also should be noted that suspension of Poland's voting rights is unlikely given the vocal support for Poland now coming from Hungarian President Viktor Orban. Resolutions in the E.U. institutions must pass unanimously, which Orban's veto threatens.

The more likely penalty that Poland could face is a cutback in E.U. financial assistance to the great variety of Polish infrastructure projects now benefiting

from the largesse of Brussels. Poland is, in fact, the single largest beneficiary. Any cutbacks could be made simply as an administrative matter.

Poland also was scolded by President of the European Parliament Martin Schulz, a German Social Democrat and thus representative of Merkel's ruling coalition. He decried the new Polish government in Russophobic terms, meant to insult Poland's leaders by comparing them to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

In statements about Poland's new press laws, quoted by the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* newspaper on Jan. 9, Schulz hurled the following grenade: "The Polish government treats its electoral victory as a mandate to subordinate the wellbeing of the state to the interests of the victorious party, including personnel. This is controlled democracy à la Putin, a dangerous Putinization (*Putinisierung*) of European politics."

The underlying resentments and condescension expressed by Schulz's remarks come from historically tense relations between Germany and Poland, even if those conflicts now play out not on battlefields but in the non-violent universe of European institutions in Brussels, a system that many Member States view as German-controlled. Jean-Claude Juncker, the president of the European Commission (from Luxembourg) and Donald Tusk, the ex-Polish premier at the Council, both owe their positions to the strong backing of Angela Merkel. And Schulz at the European Parliament comes from her coalition.

But the image of German hegemony in Europe is something that Berlin strongly rejects. On Monday, Merkel's spokesman explained to journalists that the Chancellor hopes for continued good working relations with Poland and looks forward to the forthcoming visit to Berlin of Poland's new prime minister. Any differences over policy are with the European Institutions, he said, where Germany is just one of 28 Member States.

Both founders of the 14-year-old Law and Justice Party, Jaroslaw Kaczyński and his brother Lech, the Polish president who died in a plane crash outside Smolensk in 2010, often vented publicly their bitter feelings towards Germany going back to World War II atrocities. Relations with Berlin were fraught under their administration last decade, and their party's return to power in 2015 was based on campaign promises to free the Polish economy from foreign, meaning German, domination.

The net result of the growing public row may be to unravel one of the key foreign policy achievements of Merkel's 10 years in power consolidating her country's hold over Central Europe. It also has implications for the E.U.'s current anti-Russian stance and sanctions, all of which have depended on Germany's explicit support for adventurous Polish-written policies to woo

Ukraine at the expense of Russian interests.

The passions of the Old World also have spilled over to the United States, where Polish-Americans have taken a close interest in the contest of wills between Warsaw and Berlin and Brussels. One political association in New York, the Polish Patriotic Discussion Club, issued Open Letters to the presidents of the European Institutions, and to Dr. Oettinger, sounding the alarm over what they see as "interference in the matters of the Republic of Poland as a sovereign country."

Gilbert Doctorow is the European Coordinator, American Committee for East West Accord, Ltd. His latest book *Does Russia Have a Future?* (August 2015) is available in paperback and e-book from Amazon.com and affiliated websites. For donations to support the European activities of ACEWA, write to eastwestaccord@gmail.com © Gilbert Doctorow, 2015

Surprised by Erratic Erdogan

In a volatile world, predictions are a risky business. But they are required in the intelligence community where analysts are called on not only to assess what happened but to anticipate what will happen, a process that ex-CIA official Graham E. Fuller continues as he assesses his last year's accuracy.

By Graham E. Fuller

Prediction on Turkey: (I was considerably off base on this one)

2015 Prediction: *President Erdoğan in Turkey will find his influence beginning to crumble in 2015. After a brilliant prime-ministership for the first decade of AKP power, he has become mired in corruption charges and has lashed out in paranoid fashion against any and all who criticize or oppose his increasingly irrational, high-handed, and quixotic style of rule. He is in the process of damaging institutions and destroying his and his party's legacy. I continue to have faith that Turkey's broader institutions, however weakened by Erdoğan, will nonetheless suffice to keep the country on a basically democratic and non-violent track until such time as Erdoğan loses public confidence, which could be sooner rather than later.*

2016 Assessment: Instead of politically declining as I believed he would, Erdoğan went on to hold a plurality in the June 2015 elections, and, dissatisfied with that, quickly maneuvered to call for yet new elections in November in which he managed to win back enough of a majority to enable him to

form a single-party government. I did not anticipate that.

In the process Erdoğan increased intimidation of his opponents, and went on to arrest or detain large numbers of journalists, close down newspapers, and to manipulate and pressure the judiciary. He continues to act on the assumption that an electoral majority has given him carte blanche to rule arbitrarily with virtually no obligations of consultation with the rest of the political spectrum.

Most dangerously, after having done more to resolve the Kurdish situation than any other Turkish leader in the past decade, faced with an uncertain electorate this time he went on to create an atmosphere of insecurity in the country, and stepped up confrontation with the armed Kurdish movement inside Turkey (PKK); this policy of fear-mongering led to an increase in terrorist acts and stirred increased domestic anxiety that strengthened his party at the November polls.

Erdoğan, meanwhile, still persists in following his ruinous and failing quest to overthrow the Assad government in Syria, even as both Washington and the European Union are retreating from that policy, finally coming to understand that a victory by opposition jihadi forces in Syria poses greater dangers than the continued rule of Assad.

In his zeal, Erdoğan had been willing to indiscriminately support (directly or indirectly) all armed opposition against Assad, including elements of al-Qaeda and ISIS.

Russia's arrival on the Syrian scene with military power proved to be a major turning point in the Syrian civil war. Moscow has used its air power to take on all armed opposition in a campaign that has essentially rescued the Assad regime.

In doing so, Russian President Vladimir Putin has left Erdoğan's strategy in tatters and dealt a major blow to Turkish influence on all fronts within Syria. In recently shooting down an errant Russian fighter aircraft on the Turkish border, Erdoğan unleashed a sharp diplomatic and economic riposte from Russia in which he will inevitably emerge the loser.

Flailing around in desperation for alternative tactical measures, he has had to defer more to U.S. concerns (for the moment), even seeks a nominal rapprochement with Israel (to please Washington), and aligned himself with Saudi Arabia's essentially meaningless new "counter-terrorist" coalition of 34 countries.

Erdoğan's relations with Iraq and Iran have seriously deteriorated. Thus, although Erdoğan has managed to gain domination over the policies of the Turkish state, it has been marked by poor judgment and dangerous tactics. Mr.

Erdoğan, you have reversed nearly all the successful foreign policy principles you innovated in your first ten years of office; would you go back to them please?

I'm going to go out on limb and say that Erdoğan's losing game will increasingly undermine his authority, but not his power, over the next year. When the Turkish electorate will decide that he is a danger to the country is unpredictable, but his party is not up for reelection until 2019. If he continues to seek to amass power and rule in arbitrary and quixotic fashion, the damage to Turkish institutions could be grave.

Internal tensions in Turkey will rise, demonstrations and movements against him will increase. He will not lose power, but growing autocracy and heavy-handed treatment of all opposition is rapidly destroying his legacy and guarantees Turkey a very tense year to come. At this point he is virtually without foreign allies, except perhaps Saudi Arabia and Qatar which may be able to provide some investment support, but little political support.

My 2015 Prediction on Iran: *The role of Iran as an actor in the region will grow. Despite all the hurdles, I feel optimistic about U.S. negotiations with Iran. Both parties desperately need success in this regard. Normalization is ludicrously long overdue and necessary to the regional order. Furthermore, Iran and Turkey are the only two "real" governments in the region today with genuine governance based on some kind of popular legitimacy, for all their faults. Turkey is democratic, Iran semi-democratic (presidential and parliamentary elections are real, while not fully fair, but they really matter.) These two states espouse many of the aspirations of the people of the region in ways no Arab leader does. The Gulf will be forced to accommodate itself to the reality of a normalized Iran; the two sides have never really been to war, despite all the occasional bellicose noises that have emerge from them periodically over the past century. Iran is post-revolutionary power with a vision of a truly sovereign Middle East free of Western domination none of the Arab states truly are. Iran's influence in the region will also grow in supporting growing regional challenges to Israel's efforts to keep the Palestinians under permanent domination.*

My 2016 Assessment: U.S.-Iran relations indeed did take a stunning step forward this year with the signing of the international nuclear agreement with Iran under U.S. leadership, Obama's virtually sole (but impressive) success in the Middle East arena in eight years.

Rear-guard actions are underway by hard-line conservatives in both the U.S. and Iran to destroy the agreement, their ideological fervor mirrors each other. Israel and its Israel-firster allies in the U.S. are equally committed to

undermining the agreement.

My guess, however, is that these reactionary Iranian and American elements will not succeed in reversing the treaty, but they will set up lots of roadblocks complicating its implementation. There is still much room for military incidents in the Gulf, but as long as Obama is president such incidents will likely be handled with restraint. (There are no guarantees on this score with any next U.S. president.)

Saddest of all, opposition to the treaty essentially undermines the prospect of more serious (and potentially valuable) cooperation between the U.S. and Iran in other areas. Cooperation in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria will thus be harder to attain. But the treaty will hold and gradually take on greater significance and importance. It has already shifted the balance of power in the region in unpredictable directions.

The Gulf states led by Saudi Arabia of course loathe the return of Iran to a significant role in the region, but they will not publicly or explicitly oppose the treaty. In fact, they are condemned to live with it, as they have accommodated themselves countless times in the past to Gulf realities. (More on Saudi Arabia next time.)

The conservative establishment in Iran, while seeking the lifting of the sanctions, are determined to hold the line against any additional cooperation or warming of relations with the U.S., and to crack down against social and ideological looseness in Iran.

These efforts to maintain the status quo will continue, but in the end they are a losing game: the new political and economic emergence of Iran will inexorably begin to weaken the hard-liners and their control over the life of the nation. They indeed sense such trends, hence the struggle to freeze the internal scene. It's not about nukes but about maintenance of conservative clerical domination of the nation.

Graham E. Fuller is a former senior CIA official, author of numerous books on the Muslim World; his latest book is *Breaking Faith: A novel of espionage and an American's crisis of conscience in Pakistan*. (Amazon, Kindle)

<http://grahamefuller.com> . [To read Part One, [click here](#).]

A US Media Lost in Propaganda

There was once a time perhaps just a brief moment in time when American

journalists were cynical and responsible enough to resist being jerked around by U.S. government propaganda, but that time has long since passed if it ever existed, a reality that William Blum describes.

By William Blum

Vulgar, crude, racist and ultra-sexist though he is, Donald Trump can still see how awful the American mainstream media is.

I think one of the main reasons for Donald Trump's popularity is that he says what's on his mind and he means what he says, something rather rare amongst American politicians, or politicians perhaps anywhere in the world. The American public is sick and tired of the phony, hypocritical answers given by office-holders of all kinds.

When I read that Trump had said that Sen. John McCain was not a hero because McCain had been captured in Vietnam, I had to pause for reflection. Wow! Next the man will be saying that not every American soldier who was in the military in Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq was a shining hero worthy of constant media honor and adulation.

When Trump was interviewed by ABC-TV host George Stephanopoulos, former aide to President Bill Clinton, he was asked: "When you were pressed about [Russian president Vladimir Putin's] killing of journalists, you said, 'I think our country does plenty of killing too.' What were you thinking about there? What killing sanctioned by the U.S. government is like killing journalists?"

Trump responded: "In all fairness to Putin, you're saying he killed people. I haven't seen that. I don't know that he has. Have you been able to prove that? Do you know the names of the reporters that he's killed? Because I've been you know, you've been hearing this, but I haven't seen the name. Now, I think it would be despicable if that took place, but I haven't seen any evidence that he killed anybody in terms of reporters."

Or Trump could have given Stephanopoulos a veritable heart attack by declaring that the American military, in the course of its wars in recent decades, has been responsible for the deliberate deaths of many journalists. In Iraq, for example, there's the Wikileaks 2007 video, exposed by Chelsea Manning, of the cold-blooded murder of two *Reuters* journalists; the 2003 U.S. air-to-surface missile attack on the offices of *Al Jazeera* in Baghdad that left three journalists dead and four wounded; and the American firing on Baghdad's Hotel Palestine the same year that killed two foreign news cameramen.

It was during this exchange that Stephanopoulos allowed the following to pass his lips: "But what killing has the United States government done?"

Do the American TV networks not give any kind of intellectual test to their newscasters? Something at a fourth-grade level might improve matters.

Prominent MSNBC newscaster Joe Scarborough, interviewing Trump, was also baffled by Trump's embrace of Putin, who had praised Trump as being "bright and talented.". Putin, said Scarborough, was "also a person who kills journalists, political opponents, and invades countries. Obviously that would be a concern, would it not?"

Putin "invades countries" Well, now there even I would have been at a loss as to how to respond. Try as I might I don't think I could have thought of any countries the United States has ever invaded. [Editor's Note: Sarcasm aside, Blum has compiled comprehensive lists of U.S. invasions and interventions in his books, including *Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II.*]

To his credit, Trump responded: "I think our country does plenty of killing, also, Joe, so, you know. There's a lot of stupidity going on in the world right now, Joe. A lot of killing going on. A lot of stupidity. And that's the way it is."

As to Putin killing political opponents, this too would normally go unchallenged in the American mainstream media. But earlier this year, I listed seven highly questionable deaths of opponents of the Ukraine government, a regime put in power by the United States, which is used as a club against Putin. This of course was non-news in the American media.

So that's what happens when the know-nothing American media meets up with a know-just-a-bit-more presidential candidate. Ain't democracy wonderful?

Trump has also been criticized for saying that immediately after the 9/11 attacks, thousands of Middle Easterners were seen celebrating outdoors in New Jersey in sight of the attack location. An absurd remark, for which Trump has been rightfully vilified; but not as absurd as the U.S. mainstream media pretending that it had no idea what Trump could possibly be referring to in his mixed-up manner.

For there were in fact people seen in New Jersey apparently celebrating the planes crashing into the World Trade Center towers. But they were Israelis, which would explain all one needs to know about why the story wasn't in the headlines and has since been "forgotten" or misremembered.

On the day of the 9/11 attacks, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was asked what the attacks would mean for U.S.-Israeli relations. His quick reply was: "It's very good. Well, it's not good, but it will generate immediate

sympathy (for Israel).” There’s a lot on the Internet about these Israelis in New Jersey, who were held in police custody for months before being released. So here too mainstream newsmen do not know enough to enlighten their audience.

Russian Propaganda?

There is a [Russian website](#) [inosmi = foreign mass media] that translates propagandistic russophobic articles from the Western media into Russian and publishes them so that Russians can see with their own eyes how the Western media lies about them day after day.

There have been several articles lately based on polls that show that anti-Western sentiments are increasing in Russia, and blaming it on “Putin’s propaganda.” This is rather odd because who needs propaganda when the Russians can read the Western media themselves and see firsthand all the lies it puts forth about them and the demonizing of Putin.

There are several political-debate shows on Russian television where they invite Western journalists or politicians; on one there frequently is a really funny American journalist, Michael Bohm, who keeps regurgitating all the Western propaganda, arguing with his Russian counterparts.

It’s pretty surreal to watch him display the worst political stereotypes of Americans: arrogant, gullible, and ignorant. He stands there and lectures high-ranking Russian politicians, “explaining” to them the “real” Russian foreign policy, and the “real” intentions behind their actions, as opposed to anything they say. The man is shockingly irony-impaired. It is as funny to watch as it is sad and scary.

The above was written with the help of a woman who was raised in the Soviet Union and now lives in Washington. She and I have discussed U.S. foreign policy on many occasions. We are in very close agreement as to its destructiveness and absurdity.

Just as in the first Cold War, one of the basic problems is that Exceptional Americans have great difficulty in believing that Russians mean well. Apropos this, I’d like to recall the following written about the late George Kennan:

“Crossing Poland with the first US diplomatic mission to the Soviet Union in the winter of 1933, a young American diplomat named George Kennan was somewhat astonished to hear the Soviet escort, Foreign Minister Maxim Litvinov, reminisce about growing up in a village nearby, about the books he had read and his dreams as a small boy of being a librarian.

“We suddenly realized, or at least I did, that these people we were dealing with

were human beings like ourselves,” Kennan wrote, “that they had been born somewhere, that they had their childhood ambitions as we had. It seemed for a brief moment we could break through and embrace these people.”

It hasn't happened yet.

Kennan's sudden realization brings George Orwell to mind: “We have now sunk to a depth at which the restatement of the obvious is the first duty of intelligent men.”

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/> .]

How Debt Conquered America

Special Report: America presents itself to the world as “the land of the free” but for the vast majority it is a place of enslaving indebtedness, a reality for much of “the 99%” that has deep historical roots hidden or “lost” from our history, as Jada Thacker explains.

By Jada Thacker

Since its center-stage debut during the Occupy Wall Street movement, “the 99%” a term emblematic of extreme economic inequality confronting the vast majority has become common place. The term was coined by sociology professor David Graeber, an Occupy leader and author of the encyclopedic *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, published just as the Occupy movement captured headlines.

What Graeber's monumental work did not emphasize specifically, and what most Americans still do not appreciate, is how debt was wielded as the weapon of choice to subjugate the 99% in the centuries before the Occupy protesters popularized the term. Like so many aspects of our Lost History, the legacy of debt has been airbrushed from our history texts, but not from our lives.

The original 99% in America did not occupy Wall Street in protest. They occupied the entire Western Hemisphere as original inhabitants of North and South America. After 20,000 years of Occupy Hemisphere, an Italian entrepreneur appeared, having pitched an investment opportunity to his financial backers in

Spain.

Soon after Columbus launched his business enterprise on the pristine beaches of the New World, each native discovered there above the age of puberty was required to remit a "hawk's bell's worth" of gold dust to the Spaniards every two weeks. The hands of all those failing to do so were cut off and strung about their necks so that they bled to death, thus motivating the compliance of others.

Bartolome de las Casas, a contemporary slave-owning priest-turned-reformer, reported three million natives were exterminated by Spanish entrepreneurship in only 15 years. His population figures were guesstimates, but modern researchers confirm that 80 to 90% of the Taino people in the Hispaniola-Cuba region died within 30 years of Spanish contact, the majority from disease.

In the century following Hernan Cortés's extreme "hostile takeover" of the admittedly brutal Aztec regime (1519-21) the native population of the entire region also declined by 90%. The same story generally followed the Spanish march across Central and South America.

Spanish conquistadors rationalized that their colonial business model, however brutal, was morally necessary: without religious conversion to the Church, pagan natives would have been condemned to an everlasting Christian hell. Ostensibly to save pagan souls, Spaniards destroyed pagan persons with the draconian *encomienda* system, in essence a debt-based protection racket.

The *encomienda* dated from the Roman occupation of Iberia (Spain), but had more recently metastasized from the practice of Christians exacting tribute from Muslims during the so-called Spanish *Reconquista*, which ended the year Columbus sailed. Under this medieval debt obligation, the native 99% were deemed to owe their labor and resources (not their land, which was expropriated by the Crown) to Spaniards in exchange for "protection" and religious education.

The system's legitimacy in the New World depended upon the useful fiction that the native labor force was not composed of sentient human beings. Thus, it was not lawful to impose *encomienda* upon persons of mixed-race (mestizo) presumably because they had enough European blood to be considered human.

In practice, this debt-labor system devolved into slavery and butchery of the most brutal sort imaginable, as witnessed by de las Casas. Though the *encomienda* was eventually abolished, it was replaced only by the *hacienda* system.

Haciendas were Spanish plantations on which natives worked as landless peasants, who owed a share of their produce to the landowner for the privilege of living lives similar only to those of Southern plantation slaves in the U.S. a century

or two hence.

Spanish mines were the scene of even worse atrocities. In *The Open Veins of Latin America*, Eduardo Galeano details the horrors: native mothers in the notorious Bolivian Potosi silver mine murdered their own children to save them from lives spent as slave troglodytes.

Although some Potosi miners were nominally "free" laborers, they worked under a debt-peonage system that forbade them to leave the mine while still indebted to employers who loaned them the tools of their trade. Not even death extinguished their debt: upon the death of the indebted miner, his family was required to repay the debt with their own perpetually-indebted labor.

The tragedy of the Spaniards' devastation of untold millions of native lives was compounded by seven million African slaves who died during the process of their enslavement. Another 11 million died as New World slaves thereafter.

The Spanish exploitation of land and labor continued for over three centuries until the Bolivarian revolutions of the Nineteenth Century. But even afterward, the looting continued for another century to benefit domestic oligarchs and foreign businesses interests, including those of U.S. entrepreneurs.

Possibly the only other manmade disasters as irredeemable as the Spanish Conquest in terms of loss of life, destruction and theft of property, and impoverishment of culture were the Mongol invasions of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth centuries. The Mongols and the Spaniards each inflicted a human catastrophe fully comparable to that of a modern, region-wide thermonuclear war.

The North American Business Model

Unlike Spaniards, Anglo-American colonists brought their own working-class labor from Europe. While ethnic Spaniards remained at the apex of the Latin American economic pyramid, that pyramid in North America would be built largely from European ethnic stock. Conquered natives were to be wholly excluded from the structure.

While contemporary North Americans look back at the Spanish Conquest with self-righteous horror, most do not know the majority of the first English settlers were not even free persons, much less democrats. They were in fact expiration-dated slaves, known as indentured servants.

They commonly served 7 to 14 years of bondage to their masters before becoming free to pursue independent livelihoods. This was a cold comfort, indeed, for the 50% of them who died in bondage within five years of arriving in Virginia this according to *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia*

by the dean of American colonial history, Edmund S. Morgan.

Also disremembered is that the Jamestown colony was founded by a corporation, not by the Crown. The colony was owned by shareholders in the Virginia Company of London and was intended to be a profit-making venture for absentee investors. It never made a profit.

After 15 years of steady losses, Virginia's corporate investors bailed out, abandoning the colonists to a cruel fate in a pestilential swamp amidst increasingly hostile natives. Jamestown's masters and servants alike survived only because they were rescued by the Crown, which was less motivated by Christian mercy than by the tax it was collecting on each pound of the tobacco the colonists exported to England.

Thus a failed corporate start-up survived only as a successful government-sponsored oligarchy, which was economically dependent upon the export of addictive substances produced by indentured and slave labor. This was the debt-genesis of American-Anglo colonization, not smarmy fairy tales featuring Squanto or Pocahontas, or actor Ronald Reagan's fantasized (and plagiarized) "shining city upon a hill."

While the Spaniard's ultimate goal was to command native labor from the economic apex, the Anglo-American empire would replace native labor with its own disadvantaged 99%. The ultimate goal of Anglo colonization was not intended so much to put the natives under the lash as to have rid of them altogether.

Trade deficits and slavery would answer their purpose quite nicely. By the 1670s New England Puritans were already rigging the *wampum* market at their trading posts in order to pressure the Wampanoag into ceding land thus in part precipitating the Narragansett War, King Philip's War, the ensuing genocide of some natives, and the mass enslavement of others to be sold abroad.

As chronicled by Alan Gally in *The Indian Slave Trade: The Rise of the English Empire in the American South, 1670-1717*, Carolina colonists concurrently sold Indian slaves to the God-fearing Puritans and trading others for African slaves at a 2:1 exchange rate while wielding trading-post debt against local Indians, precipitating the Yamasee War which proved to be a major disaster for natives and whites alike.

For half a century, the Carolina colonists' export of tens of thousands of Indian slaves exceeded imports of black slaves. This was the origin of Southern plantation agriculture.

The institution of North American Indian slavery was necessarily based upon debt. English law forbade colonists from enslaving free persons, but it conceded

that prisoners of war could be considered slaves. Because captives owed their lives to their captors, the latter could dispose of the debt as they saw fit, to include transferring the debt to a third party for goods and services.

The captive-to-slave pipeline was sanctioned by none other than John Locke, the renowned philosopher who directly inspired Jefferson's composition of the Declaration of Independence, and who is often championed today by libertarians and no wonder! as an oracle of private property rights.

All along the westward frontier, American colonists continued to foreclose on natives' land with debt machinations perhaps less overtly brutal, but far more devious than the Spanish *encomienda*: to remove the self-reliant 99% from their land, it was necessary first to remove their self-reliance.

Here is how President Thomas Jefferson explained the process to future president William Henry Harrison in 1803: "To promote this disposition to exchange lands [] we shall push our trading uses, and be glad to see the good and influential individuals among them run in debt, because we observe that when these debts get beyond what the individuals can pay, they become willing to lop them off by a cession of lands.

"As to their fear, we presume that our strength and their weakness is now so visible that they must see we have only to shut our hand to crush them, and that all our liberalities to them proceed from motives of pure humanity only. Should any tribe be foolhardy enough to take up the hatchet at any time, the seizing the whole country of that tribe, and driving them across the Mississippi, as the only condition of peace, would be an example to others, and a furtherance of our final consolidation."

Debt more so than firepower, firewater, or even disease provided the economic weapon by which Anglo-Americans designed to privatize the Indians' means of self-reliance. "How the West Was Won" in the "Land of the Free" was a saga of debt moving inexorably westward in what Jefferson called "our final consolidation." He might well have said "final solution," but he did not.

As debt expanded westward, desperate Anglo settlers believed the frontier land was "free for the taking" for those with the stamina to seize it. This belief ultimately proved illusory, as land "squatters" and homesteaders were evicted or forced into paid tenancy through debt or the legal maneuvering of wealthy land speculators.

George Washington secured the eviction of pioneer families from western Pennsylvania land he claimed to own in absentia, although those he forced from

the land possessed a deed that pre-dated his own, as related in Joel Achenbach's *The Grand Idea: George Washington's Potomac & the Race to the West*.

On the other hand, Daniel Boone, famed for leading pioneers westward through the Cumberland Gap, died landless, all his land claims having been picked off by legal sharpshooters. Also landless, Davy Crockett died at the Alamo in an attempt to secure Texas acreage he never survived to claim.

The final illusion of free soil vaporized when in 1890 the United States census declared the American Frontier closed. Much of what was left had at any rate been monopolized by railroad, ranching, mining, and forestry corporations after the Dawes Act had privatized most of the natives' "protected" reservation lands in 1887. For most white and black Americans, meanwhile, free tenancy homesteads had never materialized in the first place.

Debt vs. Self Reliance

Jefferson's "final consolidation" was accomplished by a system he admitted offered debt with one hand but held a sword in the other. The estimated 3,000,000 families who lost their homes during the Great Recession that began in 2007 understand this principle intimately.

The debt system is in fact more powerful in the Twenty-first Century than ever before because the 99% are far less self-reliant now than ever before. To understand why this is so, we must first think seriously about the term "self-reliance."

Although we may casually refer to someone as being self-reliant, such people do not actually exist. Human beings simply are not equipped to survive, much less prosper, strictly as self-reliant individuals. As infants and children we cannot survive without familial care, and as adults we cannot prosper without the cooperation and support of peers.

There has never been, and never will be, such a thing as a "self-made man."



On the other hand, the 99% was self-reliant the day before Columbus arrived. They possessed the means of production of the energy and food resources needed for their group's long-term survival and biological propagation, all without significant contact with others. Had the culture of Columbus been equally self-reliant, he would never have needed to set sail.

Judged by modern standards, American native groups were intensely cooperative, extremely egalitarian, and inherently (if informally) democratic. Government as a coercive force did not exist in these groups as we know it today, though leadership and traditional mores were vital to group survival.

Similarly, the concepts of money and monetary debt were unknown, as was the concept of an economic "class" that reserved economic privileges or property to itself at the expense of all. Interpersonal behavior within native groups, by eyewitness accounts, was respectful and peaceful.

Behavior *between* native groups usually was not peaceful. Persistent low-level warfare was the norm. It could be brutal indeed, but rarely if ever rose to the scale of civilized "total war."

Indeed, since a "warrior class" did not exist and could not be conscripted, native combatants were necessarily volunteers who otherwise were needed at home to help provide for their families. Consequently, the severity and duration of native warfare were limited as it is for all human groups everywhere to what society at large can economically afford.

Among the original 99%, all men mostly performed the same sort of occupational tasks. All women did the same. Both sexes had a common goal: food production and the reproduction and rearing of children. While all human groups must achieve these basic goals, civilized peoples do so within a complex hierarchical labor system, wherein some occupational tasks are considered more worthy than others and are compensated accordingly.

Civilized division of labor inevitably has metamorphosed into a hierarchy of economic classes, ultimately resulting in the private ownership of the means of production by the “haves” and the lack of private ownership by the “have-nots.” This was unknown in uncivilized native society.

Native land, for example, was not actually “owned” in the contemporary sense at all. Natives were acutely aware that they, themselves, were products of the land; for them, claiming ownership of the land would have made as much sense as children claiming ownership of parents.

This is not to say that natives were not territorial, for they were highly territorial. But their territoriality was not based upon legalistic titles of private property. Access to communally-held food resources not ownership of real estate was their *sine qua non* for sustainable survival.

What natives shared in common they defended in common. Having no economic hierarchy, no one in their society could control the food supply of others, simply because no individual could claim exclusive ownership of the collective means of food production. Abundant resources were therefore abundant for all; if scarce, they were scarce for all.

True enough, when the Europeans arrived, they found native societies everywhere in conflict with their neighbors, but nowhere did they find endemic poverty, famine, disease or social degeneracy. Indeed, it was the self-reliant natives who helped feed the first generation of starvation-prone English colonists both at Jamestown and at Plymouth.

Once private ownership clamped down upon the landscape, virtually nobody would control their own food supply without some form of indebtedness to another. But since the resource stock of self-reliant food production the land itself would remain in place, private monopolist-owners required an economic mechanism to *keep* what remained within their grasp forever out of reach of others.

The Hand That Gives

As self-reliant native societies were decimated by debt, disease, and sword, ownership of the previously un-owned land was usurped by the conquerors. But it was not to be usurped equally by all of them.

Economic-class domination was problematical in British North America, because the economic pyramid that supplanted the communal native system was composed largely by people in the same Anglo ethnic group. It is one thing to justify violent economic domination of those with a “foreign” language, culture, religious sensibility and physical appearance; it is quite another to justify overlordship of those virtually indistinguishable from oneself.

Nevertheless, class domination was a stark fact of life in Colonial America where the economic division between masters and servants was sharp and where all land titles originally flowed down from the Crown to a short list of royal favorites, sycophants and lackeys. After the Revolution, however, maintaining economic class domination proved especially tricky, eventually requiring the drafting of an "all-American" document for that specific purpose.

Yet the solution to the problem of elite domination of a supposed "republic" had been imported, disease-like, from the Old World. In the centuries preceding Columbus's arrival, two critical economic developments had transpired in Europe: the rise of an economy based upon metallic currency and the de facto repeal of the Biblical prohibition on loaning currency at interest.

The upshot of these quiet revolutions was the replacement of the sovereign currency owned by kings and emperors by that of private currency owned by the new economic elite known as bankers. In Antiquity, currency was owed by subjects to the monarch as tax. This was the reason for Joseph and Mary's celebrated journey to Bethlehem.

But by the time of Columbus (and continuing to the present day) currency was to be owed to private persons by the monarch, who borrowed from them at interest to finance wars to protect and defend monarchical control over the means of food production.

To be sure, government still levied taxes as in the days of Jesus, but the tax revenue was not exchanged directly to conduct war, but to repay principal and interest to bankers only too obliging to finance wars for personal gain.

Indeed, war and bank-indebted sovereigns are inseparable. The very first European bank to loan at interest was established during The Crusades by the Knights Templar; Spanish king Charles I squandered the vast majority of his conquistadors' New World gold on paying crushing interest charges incurred during his long war in the Netherlands; King William's War against France was made possible by the establishment in 1694 of the Bank of England, the world's first central bank.

Wherever modern war exists, governments are indebted to bankers. This is what prompted a cash-strapped Napoleon to observe: "When a government is dependent upon bankers for money, they and not the leaders of the government control the situation, since the hand that gives is above the hand that takes. Money has no motherland; financiers are without patriotism and without decency; their sole object is gain."

It is hardly coincidental that the first bank in North America was chartered to

supply arms for the American Revolution, and the first central bank of the United States was chartered specifically to fund Revolutionary War debt. Although no banks had existed in British North America during the 174 years preceding the Declaration of Independence, America's first commercial bank sprang forth in 1781, literally before the smoke had cleared from the American Revolution nearly a decade ahead of Constitutional government.

This fact alone suggests where real economic power had been vested, long before the words "We the People" ever went to press.

Unlike the days of Antiquity, wealth taken by force was not to be held by those who wielded the sword, but by those who financed the supply of swords. The means of North American food production, first expropriated under the banner of European imperial power, would be owned thereafter in Republican America as in monarchical Europe alike by new conquistadors called creditors.

Scarcity, Debt, and "Necessitous Men"

Monopoly of the food supply of the 99% was accomplished by replacing self-reliance with debt bondage. The second step was to reserve private land ownership to *particular* individuals within the dominant class. This would be accomplished by imposing upon the land a wholly arbitrary number called a "price."

The prime function of a monetary price was to render land unaffordable for all except a few creditor-entrepreneurs. Under the precious-metal-based system then in place, currency had been endemically scarce in North America, making this an easy task.

If American land so recently filched from its native inhabitants, then re-filched from its imperial British overlords were to be had by freedom-loving American common folk, it would be had on credit, and on the creditor's terms. The fate of the Ohio land of the Old Northwest Territory provides a case in point.

In 1749, King George II granted Ohio land to a private corporation, the Ohio Land Company, whose shareholders included George Washington's paternal uncles. Tellingly, the grant was bestowed 15 years before Britain actually established sovereignty over that land by winning the French and Indian War.

That war which became the first World War in all of human history was ignited, not incidentally, by George Washington himself when he ordered the murder of Indians and a French nobleman upon Ohio land Washington likely considered private property, possibly his own.

It would yet require the American Revolution, three more Indian Wars all under Washington's presidential authority plus a good deal of diplomatic treachery, finally to "open" the land for Anglo settlement.

But its first owners were not to be hardy frontiersmen and their growing families. In the meantime, select government committees, again not incidentally, had priced the land out of reach of those most in need, so ownership fell into the hands of well-heeled real estate speculators, to include of course Washington, himself.

With the Ohio land grab as background, let us consider the principle of scarcity as it relates to trade. All trade is predicated upon exchanging something one possesses for something one would prefer to possess instead. If there were no such thing as scarcity that is, if all persons already possessed sufficient quantities of the stuff they need nobody would have the inclination to trade anything at all.

What, then, about debt? No self-regarding person would voluntarily borrow currency at interest if they already possessed enough currency to exchange for the stuff they need to live. If this is so, then for creditors to profit by lending at interest, a single condition is always necessary: persons should *not* be allowed a sufficient quantity of currency to complete the desired exchange. When currency is scarcer than the goods for which it is to be exchanged, prospective buyers have only two legal options: do without, or borrow.

If the consequences of doing without (starvation or homelessness, for example) are sufficiently unacceptable, and if a creditor is available, then a debtor is certain to emerge. This emphatically does not imply that the debtor is always a willing party to a debt obligation.

Indeed, the entire logic of indebtedness implies the opposite. *No rational entities businesses, governments, or individual persons put themselves into interest-bearing debt if they need not do so.* Put simply: debtors are the needy who can no longer afford self-reliance.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt expressed this reality eloquently in 1944 when he declared to the nation, "Necessitous men are not free men." He was mostly preaching to the choir. The American 99% had known this truth since indentured-servant pioneers had waded ashore at Jamestown in 1607 only to find upon their emancipation that all the valuable land had already been monopolized by the planter elite.

Having failed to learn the history debt played in the exploitation of the New World, modern Americans fail to perceive they have inherited the same debt-

system foisted upon the natives by colonizing Europeans and later by American elites upon their own people. Consequently, we think of debt only as a contract made voluntarily between two consenting adults.

But in America today every newborn child is a predestined debtor, no matter what he or she will consent to in the future. Once the free land tenure of communal native societies was destroyed, it was never to return, not even for the progeny of the destroyers.

Debt-bondage today takes a more subtle form. If Americans are no longer debt-peons, forced to slave away on the landlord's estate or starve, it is only because the landlords no longer care where we slave away. Landlords extract their monthly payments regardless. Today about 25% or more of the earnings of workers flows as rent to landlords or as debt payments to mortgagees.

Indeed, fully half of the debts held by commercial banks alone are tied to real estate. Nor do Americans conceive the staggering price tag affixed to land: for example, economist Michael Hudson reports the dollar valuation of real estate in New York City alone is higher than that of the industrial plant of the entire nation.

As 2016 arrived, American households owed about \$13.8 trillion in home mortgage debt, which effectively is a rent payment to the mortgagee who holds the title to the property. All persons without a mortgage must pay rent to a landlord. All persons without mortgages or landlords must still pay property taxes until death, at which time any unpaid taxes in an echo of the Potosi miners' debt-peonage system must be paid by their indebted heirs.

Thus, the entire landmass of the Western Hemisphere, which for over 20,000 years had been the source of self-reliance for all its human inhabitants, remains hostage to the same debt system that seized it and which now extracts ransom from the 99% who would claim the least corner of it as home.

Debt vs. Dollars

In Early America, the scarcity of precious-metal coinage (specie) was a perennial problem. So scarce was gold that the first coinage act passed by Congress in 1792 defined the U.S. dollar as "each to be the value of a Spanish milled dollar as the same is now current, and to contain four hundred and sixteen grains of standard silver."

Thus the United States dollar was literally established on a "silver standard," and it was Spanish silver at that! The now oft fetishized American "gold standard" for currency would not officially materialize until the Twentieth Century with the passage of the Gold Standard Act in 1900. It did not last long.

After only 33 years, the Gold Standard was abandoned by the Emergency Banking Act of 1933, which was passed to remedy what else? the scarcity of currency during the Great Depression. (All the world's major currencies dropped the gold standard during this crisis.)

Subsequently, the gold standard never was reemployed domestically in the U.S. And even the dollar's international convertibility to gold finally was declared extinct, courtesy of President Richard Nixon, in 1971.

It was appropriate for gold to tread the path of the dinosaur, for it had come to resemble one. Though it is evident that currency must be scarce to some degree in order to maintain its exchange-value purchasing power, all precious-metal-backed currencies suffer from their dinosaur-like tendency of becoming *increasingly* scarce.

As the volume of trade increases in a growing economy, any medium of exchange based upon a finite quantity of metal cannot keep pace. The result is a constant increase in the purchasing power of the metal-backed currency, which becomes ever-more scarce in proportion to the number of persons needing to possess it.

This, in turn, leads to "necessitous men" becoming debtors to those in possession of the metal sometimes to governments, sometimes to businessmen, but always to bankers.

Historically, American currency has usually consisted of a mish-mash of specie, paper money, and debt, often accompanied by copious reserves of flimflammy. Thus, purchasing power has always been based partially upon some form of debt obligation, not just gold or silver coin.

During the Colonial Era, "bills of exchange" essentially IOUs of transferrable debt served as currency for the wealthy and the merchant class. Later, "bills of credit," un-backed fiat currency issued by the Continental Congress as paper money, financed the Revolution, along with some \$60 million of private domestic lending.

Finally, under the National Banking Act of 1862, paper currency issued by national banks was backed by the amount of federal debt IOUs owned by the bank. This officially made the most popular medium of exchange broadly based upon national (war) debt. In addition, the government spent into existence Greenback fiat money, which was backed by nothing at all.

When in 1913 the Federal Reserve Bank (the Fed) began issuing Federal Reserve Notes, they were at first redeemable either in gold or "lawful money," but their redemption was soon cancelled by the Emergency Banking Act noted above. Since then, all "backed" currency has been withdrawn from circulation, leaving

Federal Reserve Notes (dollar bills), exchangeable only for debt owned by the privately-owned Fed as the sole legal tender of the United States.

Although the gold standard is long gone, “necessitous men” remain. This is not happenstance.

This is the result of applying the mentality of gold-standard scarcity to the modern creation of financial debt, which is but the latest scheme by which the means of production of food that is, the vast landscape of North America is owned by the few and rented out to the rest at interest.

“Gold Bug” libertarians decry the absence of a federal statute defining the value of a U.S. dollar but they miss the point. No doubt the “value” of a dollar matters a great deal to those who hoard them by the billions; but dollar “value” is less a concern for the 99%, who are allowed to earn so few dollars they are forced to borrow them at interest from the hoarders.

As it applies to the 99%, our wages are the source of the currency we all must possess in order to live. But none of us actually controls how much currency we earn (or quite often how much of it we must spend); as a result, we do not control how much we may be forced to borrow.

Finally, we certainly do not control the conditions that will be imposed upon us if we must borrow (or whether we will be allowed to borrow at all). Put bluntly, the economic lives of wage earners are not in their own hands, but rest in the “hand that gives.”

We have only to be thankful we live in a “free country,” whatever in the world that is supposed to mean.

How the West Was Owed: Redux

In the years following the Revolution, some 90% of the American population subsisted as farmers. American women in the coming century would, on average, give birth to eight children who lived into adulthood. Accordingly, not only did population double every 30 years, the demand for additional farms more than trebled every generation.

Moreover, uninformed agricultural practices rapidly destroyed topsoil, sending “dirt poor” farmers streaming westward in search of land more fertile than their wives. As the frontier chased the setting sun, speculators and corporate agents raced ahead like locusts, devouring the landscape on the cheap, renting or re-selling at the price dictated by the demographics of desperation.



When American school kids are taught about Conestoga wagon “prairie schooners” creaking along the Oregon Trail or the Oklahoma “Sooners” land grab or the California Gold Rush, they are encouraged to view these events as technicolor visions of a unique American Opportunity unavailable to lesser mortals.

In truth, the 99% headed west simply because there was no place left for them to go. These economic refugees no doubt saw opportunity before them, but a great many of them must have perceived it the same way the many Third Class passengers on the Titanic viewed the opportunity offered by a lifeboat with an empty seat.

In 1893, historian Frederick Jackson Turner enunciated his famous “Frontier Thesis.” He claimed that the American Frontier experience had produced a unique form of democratic culture, increasingly more hostile to social and economic hierarchy as it spread from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The Frontier Thesis is a powerful idea, especially in its view of the frontier as an evolutionary process, which it was.

But Turner’s thesis perhaps unintentionally reinforced both the preexisting theocratic Puritanical creed of American Exceptionalism and the ordained racism of Manifest Destiny both of which were based upon a belief in the sanctity of Anglo-American economic domination of the New World.

For 40 years, Turner continued to proselytize his prototype of Hollywood Americanism as the rapidly industrializing United States rose to world-power status, and he became a celebrity doing so. Had Turner spent an hour or two of that time pondering the deeper implications of his own home mortgage, he might have discovered a more profound reality.

While the American frontier had indeed fundamentally and irrevocably revolutionized the economic relationship between human beings and their control of the North American landscape, the revolution was not achieved by *abandoning* European principles of social and economic hierarchy, but by *transplanting* them to the Western Hemisphere.

To view the conquest of North America as the triumphant flowering of democratic liberty and affluence over bestial savagery and abject poverty is so factually vacant, so morally and economically perverse, as to be considered hallucinatory.

Native people literally had no words to describe the cataclysm that had destroyed them. It was left to follow-on generations of “necessitous men” to learn the vocabulary of servitude needed to describe their economic lives.

Here is only a part of the terminology “necessitous men” needed to learn: poverty level, payday loans, food stamps, interest rate, surcharges, eviction, unemployment rates, lock-outs, foreclosure, bankruptcy, credit scores, down payment, damage deposits, credit limit, collection agency, mortgages, user fees, closing costs, title loans, bail outs, insolvency, title insurance, origination fee, installment plans, tax levy, deed restrictions, market crashes, illiquidity, non-sufficient funds, minimum payment due, late fees, lay-offs, property lien, pawn tickets, collateral, tax withholding, service fees, forfeiture, inflation, deflation, stagflation

Is this the vocabulary of free people?

As of January, 2016, Americans (government, business and individuals) owed an estimated \$65,000,000,000,000 (\$65 trillion) in total debt, with the average citizen’s share about \$200,000. Of course, these are aggregate figures: many individuals and businesses owe more, many owe less, but *everybody* owes.

Now consider: the annual median income (mid-point, not the average) of American citizens is \$29,000; that median family savings is below \$9,000; and that the median price of a new home is over \$294,000. Personal debt (not including national and business debt) per citizen is \$54,000, or about twice the median income.

It does not require Napoleonic genius to grasp the fact that the “hand that gives” can load more debt onto the 99% than they can ever possibly repay. This is not a mistake or a “conspiracy”; it is simply a business plan. For every citizen’s \$200,000 share of debt, some other entity or citizen expects to collect \$200,000 plus interest. Will such a business plan succeed? Ask a Taino or a Wampanoag if you can find one handy.

There is an historical anecdote of a question posed long ago by a Cherokee. “White Brother,” he said, “when you first came to this land, there were no debts. There were no taxes. And our women did all the work. Do you expect me to believe you can make this situation better?”

The 99% should know the answer. And women still do most of the work.

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Taking Aim at the Israeli Boycott

Mainstream U.S. presidential candidates are lining up behind Israel's demand that the next "leader of the free world" take aim at Americans who express their contempt for Israel's persecution of Palestinians through a boycott, as Lawrence Davidson describes.

By Lawrence Davidson

Most readers will know that the United States has served as the patron of Israel for decades. Why has it done so?

The commonly given reasons are suspect. It is not because the two countries have overlapping interests. The U.S. seeks stability in the Middle East (mostly by supporting dictators) and Israel is constantly making things unstable (mostly by practicing ethnic cleansing against Palestinians, illegally colonizing conquered lands and launching massive assaults against its neighbors).

Nor, as is often claimed, is the alliance based on "shared Western values." The U.S. long ago outlawed racial, ethnic and religious discrimination in the public sphere. In Israel, religious-based discrimination is the law. The Zionist state's values in this regard are the opposite of those of the United States.

So why is it that a project that seeks to pressure Israel to be more cognizant in foreign affairs of regional stability, and more democratic and egalitarian in domestic affairs, is now under fire by almost every presidential candidate standing for the 2016 election?

That project in dispute is BDS, the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, promoted by civil society throughout the Western world. BDS is directed at Israel due to its illegal colonization of the Occupied Territories and its general apartheid-style discrimination against non-Jews in general and Palestinians in particular.

The Candidates and BDS

With but two exceptions, every presidential candidate in both parties is condemning the BDS Movement. Let's start with the two exceptions.

The first exception is the Green Party candidate Jill Stein, who has taken the accurate position that “the United States has encouraged the worst tendencies of the Israeli government.” She has pledged to use both diplomatic and economic means to change Israeli behavior, behavior which she rightly believes is in contravention of international law and violates human rights.

The second exception is the Republican candidate Donald Trump, who recently told a meeting of Jewish Republicans that he didn’t think Israel is serious about peace and that they would have to make greater efforts to achieve it. When he was booed he just shrugged and told the crowd that he did not care if they supported him or not, “I don’t want your money.” Unfortunately, this appears to be the only policy area where Mr. Trump is reasonable.

Jill Stein gets absolutely no media coverage and Donald Trump gets too much. And neither is in the “mainstream” when it comes to American political reactions to BDS. However, the rest of the presidential candidates are. Here is what is coming out of the “mainstream”:

, Jeb Bush (Republican), Dec, 4, 2015: “On day one I will work with the next attorney general to stop the BDS movement in the United States, to use whatever resources that exist” to do so.

, Ted Cruz (Republican), May 28, 2015: “BDS is premised on a lie and it is anti-Semitism, plain and simple. And we need a president of the United States who will stand up and say if a university in this country boycotts the nation of Israel than that university will forfeit federal taxpayer dollars.”

, Marco Rubio (Republican), Dec. 3, 2015: “This [BDS] coalition of the radical left thinks it has discovered a clever, politically correct way to advocate Israel’s destruction. As president, I will call on university presidents, administrators, religious leaders, and professors to speak out with clarity and force on this issue. I will make clear that calling for the destruction of Israel is the same as calling for the death of Jews.”

Hillary Clinton (Democrat), July 2, 2015: In a letter to Haim Saban, who is a staunch supporter of the Zionist state and also among the biggest donors to the Democratic Party, she said, “I know you agree that we need to make countering BDS a priority, I am seeking your advice on how we can work together – across party lines and with a diverse array of voices – to fight back against further attempts to isolate and delegitimize Israel.”

Bernie Sanders (Democrat), Oct. 20, 2015: “Sanders’ fraught encounter with BDS supporters who challenged his defense of Israel at a town hall meeting in Cabot [Vermont] last year was captured on YouTube.” Sanders told them to “shut up.”

The Legitimacy of Boycott

This hostility to the tactic of boycott runs counter to both U.S. legal tradition and the country's broader historical tradition.

For instance, advocating and practicing BDS can be seen as a constitutionally protected right. It certainly is more obviously protected by the First Amendment's guarantee of free speech than is the use of money to buy elections.

Thus, if Zionist lobbyists can use money to buy support for Israel, why can't anti-Zionists use their free speech rights to challenge that support? It should be noted that, in this regard, most Americans of voting age think it is the Zionists, and not the anti-Zionists, who have gone too far.

According to a December 2015 Brookings Institute poll, 49 percent of Democratic voters and 25 percent of Republican voters think that Israel has too much influence with U.S. politicians. Those supporting BDS in the United States might give some thought as to how to use these numbers to uphold their cause.

Then there is the fact of well-established historical tradition. The war for American Independence was built upon a framework of boycott. In November 1767, England introduced the Townshend Acts, requiring the colonists to pay a tax on a large number of items. The reply to this was both a boycott of British goods by many colonial consumers which was eventually followed by a boycott on the importation of such goods on the part of colonial merchants.

Subsequently, Americans have used the tactic of boycott against:

, (1930s) Goods produced by Nazi Germany , (1960s and 1970s) California-grown grapes in support of the United Farm Workers , (1970s and 1980s) All aspects of the economy and cultural output of South Africa , (1980) The Moscow-hosted Olympics of 1980 , Myriad number of boycotts of various companies and products ranging from Nestle (baby formula) to Coca Cola. See the list given by the Ethical Consumer.

The reality is that the tactic of boycott has long been as American as the proverbial apple pie.

Apple pie notwithstanding, the legal and historical legitimacy of boycott no longer has much impact on the attitudes of presidential candidates or, for that matter, members of Congress. Nor does the fact that the changes the BDS movement seeks to make in Israeli behavior would be to the benefit of U.S. interests in the Middle East.

Instead what the positions of the candidates seem to indicate is that there will

be an almost certain attack on the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, coming from the very highest levels of U.S. power, sometime soon after the 2016 elections.

How is it that such a contradiction between national interests and established tradition on the one hand, and imminent government policy on the other can exist? The answer is not difficult to come by. It is just a matter of fact that constitutional rights, historical tradition, and indeed the very interests of the nation, can be overridden by special interest demands.

The demands of what George Washington once called “combinations and associations” of “corrupted citizens” who would “betray or sacrifice the interests of their own country” in favor of those of some other “favorite nation.” It is exactly such demands that are now given priority by the politicians in Washington.

This form of corruption will go on as long as the general public does not seem to care that it is happening. And it is sadly clear that the BDS activists alone cannot overcome this indifference. Thus, the politicians can dismiss the Brookings Poll numbers mentioned above. They can shrug and say, So what?

As long as that majority does not express their opinion by actively demanding a change in the situation, as long as they are not successfully organized to do so, their opinion cannot compete with the millions of special interest dollars flowing into political campaigns.

In many ways our greatest enemy is our own indifference to the quiet erosion of important aspects of the democratic process. Allowing the attack on BDS only contributes to this disintegration of rights.

A combination of localness and ignorance sets us up for this feeling of indifference. However, in the end, there can be no excuse for not paying attention. One morning you will wake up to find that valued rights and traditions are no longer there for you.

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