

Spinning US Voters to Stay Passive

As public anger toward America's self-interested establishment bubbles into a boil, the mainstream media has grown frantic appealing to the masses to "stay sane," reject populism – especially Bernie Sanders's variety – and renew the establishment's lease on the White House, as Norman Solomon notes.

By Norman Solomon

For a long time, as he campaigned for President, a wide spectrum of establishment media insisted that Bernie Sanders couldn't win. Now they're sounding the alarm that he might. And, just in case you haven't gotten the media message yet – Sanders is "angry," kind of like Donald Trump.

Elite media often blur distinctions between right-wing populism and progressive populism – as though there's not all that much difference between appealing to xenophobia and racism on the one hand and appealing for social justice and humanistic solidarity on the other. Many journalists can't resist lumping Trump and Sanders together as rabble-rousing outliers.

But in the real world, the differences are vast. Donald Trump is to Bernie Sanders as Archie Bunker is to Jon Stewart.

Among regular *New York Times* columnists, aversion to Bernie Sanders has become more pronounced in recent days at both ends of the newspaper's ideological spectrum, such as it is. Republican Party aficionado David Brooks (whose idea of a good political time is Marco Rubio) has been freaking out in print, most recently with a Tuesday column headlined "Stay Sane America, Please!"

Brooks warned that his current nightmare for the nation is in triplicate – President Trump, President Cruz or President Sanders. For Brooks, all three contenders appear to be about equally awful; Trump is "one of the most loathed men in American public life," while "America has never elected a candidate maximally extreme from the political center, the way Sanders and Cruz are."

That "political center" of power sustains huge income inequality, perpetual war, scant action on climate change and reflexive support for the latest unhinged escalation of the nuclear arms race. In other words, what C. Wright Mills called "crackpot realism."

Meanwhile, liberal *Times* columnist Paul Krugman (whose idea of a good political time is Hillary Clinton) keeps propounding a stand-on-head formula for social change – a kind of trickle-down theory of political power, in which "happy dreams" must yield to "hard thinking," a euphemism for crackpot realism.

An excellent rejoinder has come from former Labor Secretary Robert Reich. “Krugman doesn’t get it,” Reich wrote. “I’ve been in and around Washington for almost fifty years, including a stint in the cabinet, and I’ve learned that real change happens only when a substantial share of the American public is mobilized, organized, energized, and determined to make it happen.”

And Reich added: “Political ‘pragmatism’ may require accepting ‘half loaves’ – but the full loaf has to be large and bold enough in the first place to make the half loaf meaningful. That’s why the movement must aim high – toward a single-payer universal health, free public higher education, and busting up the biggest banks, for example.”□

But for mainline media, exploring such substance is low priority, much lower than facile labeling and horseracing, and riffing on how Bernie Sanders sounds “angry.”

On “Morning Edition,”□ this week began with NPR political reporter Mara Liasson telling listeners that “Bernie Sanders’ angry tirades against Wall Street have found a receptive audience.” (Meanwhile, without anger or tirades, “Hillary Clinton often talks about the fears and insecurities of ordinary voters.”□)

The momentum of the Sanders campaign will soon provoke a lot more corporate media attacks along the lines of a *Chicago Tribune* editorial that appeared in print on Monday. The newspaper editorialized that nomination of Trump, Cruz or Sanders “could be politically disastrous,” and it declared: “Wise heads in both parties are verging on panic.”

Such panic has just begun, among party elites and media elites. Eager to undermine Sanders, the *Tribune* editorial warned that as a “self-declared democratic socialist,” Sanders “brandishes a label that, a Gallup poll found, would automatically make him unacceptable to nearly half the public.”

A strong critique of such commentaries has come from the media watch group FAIR, where Jim Naureckas pointed out that voters would not be asked to vote for “a socialist– they’d be asked to vote for Bernie Sanders. And while pollsters don’t include Sanders in general election matchups as often as they do Hillary Clinton, they have asked how the Vermont senator would do against various Republicans – and he generally does pretty well.

“In particular, against the candidate the *Tribune* says is ‘best positioned’ to ‘capture the broad, sensible center’ – Jeb Bush – Sanders leads in polls by an average of 3.0 percentage points, based on polling analysis by the website Real Clear Politics.”□

In mass media, the conventional sensibilities of pundits like Brooks and Krugman, reporters like Liasson, and outlets like the *Chicago Tribune* routinely get the first and last words. Here, the last ones are from Naureckas:

“When pollsters match Sanders against the four top-polling Republican hopefuls, on average he does better than Clinton does against each of them – even though she, like Bush, is supposed to be “best positioned” to “capture the broad, sensible center,” according to the *Tribune*.

“Actually, the elements of Sanders’ platform that elite media are most likely to associate with ‘socialism’ – things like universal, publicly funded healthcare and eliminating tuition at public colleges – are quite popular with the public, and go a long way to explain his favorable poll numbers. But they are also the sort of proposals that make Sanders unacceptable to the nation’s wealthy elite – and to establishment media outlets.”

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Seeking Justice for Guatemalan Slaughter

Brave prosecutors in Guatemala are trying to enforce accountability for government-sponsored rapes, tortures and murders in the 1980s, a time when President Reagan and his administration were complicit in the atrocities but remain respected U.S. figures, as Allan Nairn explained to Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

Comedian-turned-politician Jimmy Morales, who was sworn in as Guatemala’s president on Jan. 14, appears to have close ties to some of the country’s most notorious death squad leaders responsible for killing thousands and uprooting tens of thousands of indigenous people from the Guatemalan highlands and the rest of the country in the 1980s.

Meanwhile, on Jan. 6, eight days before the Morales swearing in, Guatemalan police arrested some 18 former military officers for crimes committed during Guatemala’s 36-year “death squad” war from 1960 to 1996 that is estimated to have killed a total of 200,000 people. Included in the sweeps were some of the key participants in the dirty war, including Manuel Benedicto Lucas Garcia, the brother of Guatemala’s military dictator from 1978 – 1982, Fernando Romeo Lucas Garcia.

The dramatic arrests came as the retrial of another former head of state, Efraim Rios Montt, is scheduled to begin in late January. However there have been repeated delays in the rehearing of the genocide case against Rios Montt who was found guilty in 2013 but his conviction was overturned by Guatemala's Constitutional Court.

I spoke about issues with Allan Nairn, the George Polk Award-winning investigative reporter and human rights activist who has done extensive reporting on the Central American death squads and the U.S. support for them. Nairn was scheduled to testify at the first trial of Rios Montt, but was prevented by the judge.

DB: Let's start with Rios Montt and work our way forward, to the present. Rios Montt and Rodriguez Sanchez, they were tried in 2013; Montt was convicted. What was he convicted of?

AN: Well, Rios Montt was convicted of genocide, and he was sentenced to 80 years in prison. His intelligence chief, Rodriguez Sanchez, was acquitted in that preceding. Rios Montt was placed under house arrest, and then immediately the oligarchs of Guatemala ... went on T.V. and they demanded that the Rios Montt conviction be annulled. So the high court of Guatemala set aside the conviction, suspended the case and only now has it come back again to retrial.

And it's a retrial of both Rios Montt and his intelligence chief. But it's being held under special circumstances. It's closed to the public. Only the judge, and the lawyers, and witnesses can watch the proceedings. And Rios Montt is participating from a distance. He has video link up because supposedly his health is not good enough to be present in the courtroom.

And, as you said, there have been innumerable delays. It's not clear what's going to happen with this retrial. But, in a sense, the blow has already been struck. The original genocide case against Rios Montt included a full hearing of testimony from victims of the slaughter, thousands of pages of internal Guatemalan army documents were introduced into evidence. The court issued a massive and detailed decision of about 900 pages, justifying the 80-year sentence for Rios Montt. And also, demanding that he and the armed forces pay compensation to the massacre victims.

And with that, the acknowledgement was made that this genocide took place, that is was a criminal act, that it was a high crime. And the fact that the sentence has been suspended for the moment is more of a legal technicality. In moral terms, and in political terms, the blow has already been struck against Rios Montt. And there's a pretty fair chance that he will eventually die under house arrest.

DB: Let's talk about how close the U.S. government was to these killers. What did the U.S. officials know about the genocide based on the documents?

AN: Well, they knew, essentially, everything. But, more than that, they were participating in it. Rios Montt and the Guatemalan army were clients of the United States. Reagan personally endorsed Rios Montt at the height of the terror. He said he was getting a bum rap on human rights. He said he was a man of great integrity.

Congress was trying to block U.S. weapons supply to Guatemala, but the administration did a series of end runs to supply weapons, the most important of which involved the government of Israel. The U.S. brought in Israel, which supplied Galils and Uzis and also advisers to the Guatemalan military.

There were actual U.S. military personnel in Guatemala, working with the army as they were doing the massacres. I interviewed one of them, a Green Beret captain, Jesse Garcia, and ... I actually went on a maneuver with him. And he described how his instruction included how to destroy towns.

The U.S. also had CIA personnel, U.S. North American CIA personnel, working directly inside the G2, the military intelligence service which coordinated the assassinations and disappearances. The CIA built a new operations center for the G2 near the Guatemala City airport.

The G2 directors, many of them were carried on the payroll of the CIA. And those included General Perez Molina, who was one of the officers who implemented the Rios Montt massacre policy in the countryside, and who later became president of Guatemala. And who just last year was overthrown by a popular uprising, and is now in jail for corruption.

And you mentioned that General Benedicto Lucas Garcia, the former army chief of staff, was one of those just arrested in this recent sweep by Guatemalan prosecutors. Really a very brave move on the part of those Guatemalan prosecutors, and on the part of the victims who came forward to give their testimony, and the human rights advocates in Guatemala, who are pushing these cases. General Benedicto was the favorite of the U.S. embassy. He was the brother, the right hand man, of the dictator who proceeded Rios Montt, General Lucas Garcia.

And Benedicto worked hand in glove with the U.S. military attaché in Guatemala at the time, Colonel George Manis. And Manis and Benedicto jointly developed the tactic of the sweeps through the north-west highlands, which produced the massacres that got Rios Montt ultimately convicted for genocide.

It was under General Benedicto that these massacres started in a large way, and

what Rios Montt did was he made them absolutely systematic. And Colonel Manis told me that it was he and Benedicto together who jointly developed this tactic.

So these mass killings were really a joint operation between the U.S. government and the Guatemalan army. And now the Guatemalan courts are, as we see, very bravely, step by step, bringing prosecutions. And they are making the argument, and so far, a successful argument, that these were in fact criminal acts.

And in a very interesting and revealing development, just the other day the current chief of staff of the Guatemalan army, General Sosa Diaz, went to court personally and asked the high court of Guatemala to grant legal protection to anyone who has perpetrated forced disappearance or genocide.

There's a current law on the books, the National Reconciliation Law, which grew out of the peace settlement between the guerrillas and the army in Guatemala, a deal that was reached in the 1990s. That deal gives a partial amnesty for some crimes to former guerrillas and former army officers. But it says that no amnesty will be given for anyone who perpetrated forced disappearance or genocide.

But now the current Guatemalan army chief of staff is going to court to try to overturn that part of the law, to basically say "Well, if you committed genocide or if you committed forced disappearance, it's okay. You can't be prosecuted for that." That's what he's trying to accomplish.

DB: Allan, that brings us to the fact that last Thursday, I believe it was, the new president, the former comedian, Jimmy Morales, was sworn in as Guatemala's new president. His election was supposedly a response to the corruption of the former president. Is Jimmy Morales clean? What can we say about him?

AN: Well, Jimmy Morales got elected mainly because of the timing of the Guatemalan presidential election. The election date was set long in advance, and as it happened the popular uprising which toppled General Perez Molina, the previous president, and also his vice president, that culminated just weeks before the scheduled presidential election.

So when the election was held the only candidates available were all members of the system in Guatemala. The system that people had been rising up and rebelling against. They all had the backing, all the major candidates who had a chance of being elected, had the backing of either killer army officers, drug cartels, or oligarchs.

So it was just a question of choosing among them. And I was in Guatemala at the time. And what everyone I spoke to said was that they were choosing Jimmy simply because he had never been in office before. He had not yet had a chance to steal

and abuse the law unlike the other candidates who had already been in there. And also he was a better speaker, he was more articulate. And so he got into office.

It so happened the forces that were backing Jimmy [were] from the political party called FCN. They represent the worst of the massacre officers. The FCN was created by an association of former military officers and when these officers created [it], they said explicitly that they were creating the party in order to shield themselves and their colleagues from prosecution for atrocities. They knew that they had committed massacres, and gang rapes, and forced disappearances, and mass torture. And they knew that they could be prosecuted for that.

So they formed a political party to try to prevent that. And this is the political party that has now brought Jimmy Morales to power. However, it's not clear that that party will succeed in its agenda because a lot of Guatemalan society is on its feet.

And one of the very remarkable aspects of these mass arrests that took place just days before Morales was sworn in as the new president was that they included some people very close to Morales from ... the FCN political party.

And one of those whose initial charges were filed against was Jimmy Morales's right hand man, Colonel Maldonado, who is currently a member of congress. He is the head of Morales's party delegation in congress. The attorney general's office of Guatemala filed initial charges against him, trying to strip his congressional immunity so that he too can be arrested and put on trial with the other officers.

So this legal case is a very serious challenge to the power base of the new president. And it's not clear at this moment that those army officers are going to be able to prevail in protecting themselves, and dominating this new administration. It's a struggle for power. It's a real, ongoing uprising in Guatemala and the outcome is still uncertain.

DB: Allan, I just want to press you a little bit more to lay out the kind of connections that have existed between the U.S. and the mass murderers of Guatemala. I know that you did extraordinary work on the case of Hector Gramajo. Now, Gramajo was very important because, I believe, he was the army chief of staff for the purge of the highlands in Guatemala. He was clearly a mass murderer. He was later welcomed to Harvard and the Kennedy School where I think he was getting either a BA or a Masters in Government to go back and I guess become a politician.

Could you talk more about that close working relationship between the U.S. and

Guatemala that would bring this mass murderer to the Kennedy School for another cleansing to go back home and run for president. It's an extraordinary thing.

AN: Yes, Gramajo was one of the top U.S. protégés. The U.S. was supporting the Guatemalan army as a whole during these mass killings that claimed anywhere from maybe 100,000, to some estimated 250,000 civilians. It's not clear, the exact number, but it was a mass murder of civilians. It employed the tactics that we see today on the ISIS videos. They frequently did decapitations, crucifixions, they enslaved people, particularly women, they violated them sexually. This was the most extreme kind of terror one can imagine.

Gramajo was one of the specific favorites of the U.S. He was the man who did a lot of the operational planning for the Rios Montt massacres of the highlands. The U.S. Pentagon officials I talked to spoke about how they would bring Gramajo to the U.S. for speaking and study tours, where they would bring him around the U.S. bases, to Fort Benning, Fort Bragg, Fort Leavenworth. And after Rios Montt was overthrown, and after Gramajo finished his various posts within the Guatemalan army, the U.S. brought him up to Harvard to get a masters. And they were grooming him to go back to become president of Guatemala.

That plan was derailed when a U.S. federal lawsuit under the Alien Tort Claims Act was filed against Gramajo. This was filed by survivors from Guatemala of massacres and the torture. And he was called to appear in U.S. federal court to defend himself. He refused to do so. I testified as a witness in that case against Gramajo, but Gramajo himself did not show. He fled back to Guatemala.

And the court ultimately ordered him to pay, I believe it was \$13 million in damages to victims. Which he refused to pay. But the case ended up damaging him politically. And it apparently sank his prospects of later becoming the U.S.-sponsored president of Guatemala. But Gramajo is just one of many.

General Benedicto, another of the U.S. protégés who is now on trial, who can now be seen being led into the courtroom and out in handcuffs, once reigned supreme, as the army was launching the massacres in the highlands. And he was doing that hand in hand with his buddy Colonel Manis. Manis would talk about how much he respected and loved General Benedicto. He said "I'd follow that son-of-a-bitch anywhere." This was a collaboration, a joint project between the Guatemalan army and the U.S.

And [] there are two criminal cases that formed the basis of the recent arrests of the Guatemalan officers. One concerns the Guatemalan army base at Coban, where there have been exhumations of more than 550 skeletons, victims of executions by the army.

At least 22 of these skeletons were infants. Many of the adults were still, the skeletons that were exhumed, were still blindfolded. Some still had their wrists bound. Others had their ankles bound together. Even in the decayed condition of these people, forensic anthropologists could still tell in some cases there were signs of torture. In many, [] they could see that they were executed with gunshots to the head; in many cases to the back of the head.

And they were able to trace the DNA from these remains back to the families of some of the massacre survivors. Many of those brought to the Coban base, and later raped, and tortured, and executed were taken from the sites of massacres, surrounding the Chixoy Dam Project. This was a dam project that was sponsored by the World Bank.

And the local managers of the project asked, this was according to testimony in the recent court case, they asked the army to clear the population from local villages. So the army did this by going into the villages and massacring and causing people to flee. And many of those civilians, especially women and children, were captured by the army, taken away on helicopters. Some of those helicopters the pool of helicopters on the job he was working with was supplied by the U.S., by the CIA, or by Guatemalan oligarchs.

They flew them in helicopters to the Coban base. They were then abused in unthinkable ways and executed, their bodies thrown into pits. But now through DNA tracing they've been able to trace these remains back to the survivors in their home villages. And this is one of the pillars of the criminal cases against the Guatemalan officers.

The other case concerns a young man who was 15 years old. He was snatched from his home by army commandos. They threw a bag over his head, they taped his mouth, he was never seen again. They went hunting for him because his sister, his older sister had been held at their base. They had captured her because she had been distributing leaflets criticizing the army.

So they had been holding her as a prisoner, where they had been raping and torturing her, but she had been denied food, and she reportedly was so thin she was able to slip out between bars of one of the cells she was being held in.

DB: Wow.

AN: So, in revenge for her escape, they went and snatched the boy, the young man. And he has never been seen again. And so that case is the second case that forms the basis of the current prosecutions against the officers. Many of those now under arrest are officials of G2, the military intelligence service.

And it's G2 which was the branch of the Guatemalan army that worked, perhaps,

most closely with the U.S. And it was the CIA that handled the G2. At least three of the G2 chiefs were directly on the U.S. payroll. And there were actual North Americans. ...

Guatemalan prosecutors would have the right ... they would have strong legal grounds for subpoenaing the U.S. embassy to produce these individuals as witnesses, or possible subjects for prosecution, in Guatemalan courts.

And, perhaps more significantly, we also know the names of the CIA station chiefs in Guatemala at the time of the atrocities. I published the names in The Nation magazine in 1995. And I was actually able to speak to three of the four CIA station chiefs who were there during the slaughter. And it's figures like that who also could be brought into Guatemalan courts if the U.S. would agree to extradition.

And, of course, even more importantly, the higher-level U.S. figures, those who actually made the policy, that sent these ... CIA personnel into help run these torture units. People like Elliott Abrams, who made the policy. They should be subject to prosecution, as well. It's fitting that people like General Benedicto, Lucas Garcia are now standing trial for the crimes in Guatemala. But people like Elliott Abrams should be sitting in the dark right next to them.

DB: Now, it's still very dangerous in Guatemala to tell the truth about what happened, in terms of an individual telling their truth or a community group. It's still extremely dangerous because of the power that these killers still hold in the country and in the culture.

AN: Yes, it is. In fact, during the Rios Montt genocide trial in 2013, where I was called to testify and was scheduled to testify, but was kept off the stand by pressure from then-President General Perez Molina. During that trial, there were constant death threats against the judges in the case, against the prosecutors, and against the witnesses who were survivors of the massacres, and the families of the witnesses.

And after the case, there was fierce political and legal persecution of the prosecutors and the judges. And, in fact, the judge who presided over the trial in a very tough and courageous manner, and who ultimately issued the 80-year sentence on behalf of the court against Rios Montt, was actually disbarred for a time on completely fake, trumped-up charges, brought against her by the Guatemalan oligarchy.

And the attorney general at the time who had helped to bring the genocide case against Rios Montt, Claudio Paz y Paz, is also being hounded to this day by the Guatemalan oligarchs and the former officers. And they, and especially the

witnesses, especially the people from the villages whose aunts and uncles, and fathers and mothers, and sisters and brothers, those who were slaughtered ... those witnesses who come forward, they are taking a tremendous risk. And that's one of the reasons why, when the attorney general's office drew up these charges against the officers just before the inauguration of President Morales, there was a lot of shock in Guatemala. People were stunned at the boldness of this move.

But as soon as they got into court, a few days later, and they started presenting the evidence. ... They put up slides where they showed the internal army planning documents, they showed pictures of the exhumed corpses, now skeletons, from the Coban army base. They had testimony from former soldiers, some of them speaking anonymously, where they described how they would systematically gang rape, and torture, and execute the civilians they had brought onto the base. As the power of that evidence was presented in court, people could see that, yes, this case has a very strong factual and legal basis.

But the only reason that such cases hadn't been brought on earlier this is now quite a few years after these crimes was because of fear. And because of political power, that held back the enforcement of law. But remarkably, at least on some fronts, Guatemala is now going forward, and they are way ahead of the U.S. anytime.

It's inconceivable still in the U.S. today, that any case of this nature could be brought against, say George W. Bush, for the deaths resulting from the invasion of Iraq, or President Obama, for the civilian deaths resulting from the drone strikes. Or, specifically, against the U.S. officials like Abrams, who played the role of facilitator and accomplice and accessory and intellectual authors to these very same crimes in Guatemala. We can't mount these prosecutions in the U.S. because we're not yet ready to enforce the murder laws in the U.S. against high state officials. But in Guatemala some people are brave enough, and honest enough, to start doing that there. We should learn from them.

[For more on how President Reagan and his administration abetted genocide in Guatemala, see Consortiumnews.com's "[How Reagan Promoted Genocide.](#)"]

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Assessing a Murder Case Against Putin

Once Western media demonizes a foreign leader it becomes hard to assess allegations because if you express doubt, you're dubbed an "apologist." But careful analysis is still crucial as Russia Insider editor Alexander Mercouris offers on the British claim that Russian President Putin "probably" ordered a murder in London.

By Alexander Mercouris

This analysis shows why the Litvinenko Inquiry was a farce and why its report is in the end worthless.

The Judge who headed the Inquiry was obsessed with proving the Russian state murdered Litvinenko. In order to prove what he always believed he threw legal procedure out of the window and interpreted the evidence how he wanted.

In the end even he could not prove that the Russian state murdered Litvinenko, which is why he could only say they "probably" did.

In reality the facts – if looked at objectively – show the Russian state almost certainly did not murder Litvinenko and played no part in his death.

The Inquiry and its report actually say more about the pathological hostility to Russia of some sections of the British establishment than they do about the Litvinenko case.

The first point to grasp about the Public Inquiry that has now delivered its verdict in the Litvinenko case is that it should never have happened at all.

The second point is that Inquiry's decision that the Russian authorities were "probably" behind Litvinenko's murder is unsustainable and makes no sense.

A TRIAL NOT AN INQUIRY

The Public Inquiry was in all essentials a murder trial. Any legal proceedings which examine a case of murder and which pronounce on the guilt or innocence of the individuals accused is in effect a trial.

The Public Inquiry into Litvinenko's death has ended in a pronouncement of guilt for the crime of murder against two individuals: Lugovoi and Kovtun. That makes it a trial of those two men, regardless of what it is called.

THE RIGHT TO FAIR TRIAL

In Britain a trial for murder is conducted in open court with the defendant

present and represented by lawyers of his or her choice.

The defendant is entitled to cross-examine the witnesses and to look at – and challenge – all the evidence.

The final verdict of guilt and innocence is delivered by the jury – twelve citizens selected at random – after they receive directions on legal questions from the judge.

Strict rules apply on what evidence can be presented to the court and how the court is to decide how the evidence is proved. As a general principle only evidence actually presented to the court at the trial can be considered, and only witnesses who physically come and give their evidence to the court – and are cross-examined on it – are heard, though it is now becoming more and more common for evidence to be given by video link.

A court cannot convict on the basis of evidence given anonymously by witnesses who do not disclose their identities to the defendants save in very exceptional circumstances.

The burden of proof lies on the prosecution to prove its case, and it must do so beyond reasonable doubt.

It is a fundamental legal principle that anyone accused of a crime is deemed by the law innocent until the verdict of the court is delivered.

Once the verdict is delivered, a defendant who is found guilty has a right to appeal.

VIOLATION OF THE RIGHT TO FAIR TRIAL

The Public Inquiry that has now delivered its verdict in the Litvinenko case has thrown all this out of the window.

There was no jury.

Part of the evidence was secret and the defendants and their lawyers were denied sight of it. Some of the witnesses gave their evidence to the Judge in secret and their identities were not disclosed to the defendants.

Since technically it was not a trial and the Public Inquiry is not a court there is no right of appeal.

Since the defendants – Lugovoi and Kovtun – were denied sight of part of the evidence, they refused to take part. The judge who tried the case – Sir Robert Owen – commented at length in his judgment about their refusal to take part, but

failed to state the reason for it.

The trial nonetheless proceeded in the absence of the defendants though that is almost unprecedented in Britain. Moreover no lawyers were appointed to represent their interests in their absence as it is perfectly possible to do, and as happens from time to time in other kinds of proceedings.

The result is that the evidence of what we must call the prosecution went entirely unchallenged.

Moreover since what happened was technically speaking not a trial but a Public Inquiry, the Judge felt free to look at evidence that was not produced to the court, including especially the possible evidence of potential witnesses who did not attend the court, but which was provided to him at second hand, whilst engaging in all sorts of speculations on the evidence that he would not have been able to engage in in a proper trial.

Needless to say any notion that the guilt of the accused had to be proved beyond reasonable doubt went out of the window.

VIOLATION OF PRESUMPTION OF INNOCENCE

This extraordinary process has ended in a clearcut verdict of guilt.

With it any pretence of adherence to the principle of the presumption of innocence has gone out of the window. Lugovoi and Kovtun have been declared guilty of murder by a judicial body set up by the British state despite the fact that there has been no proper trial.

This is the single most important thing to say about this Inquiry.

I hold no brief for Lugovoi or Kovtun. There is a possibility they did murder Litvinenko.

However the procedure the British state has used to declare them guilty is profoundly and completely wrong, and has forever prejudiced the possibility of their having a fair trial in Britain – or indeed anywhere else – on this charge in the future.

That is why this Public Inquiry should never have been set up in the first place.

ARE WE CLOSER TO THE TRUTH?

Do the findings of the Public Inquiry – for all the fundamental problems in how it carried its work – take us any further forward in establishing the truth

about Litvinenko's death?

In my opinion they do, though only to a very limited degree, and in ways that actually contradict the final conclusions of the Inquiry.

RUSSIAN REJECTION OF EXTRADITION REQUEST

Firstly, though it is not directly pertinent to the issue of Litvinenko's death, an entirely overlooked fact is that the Inquiry has fully endorsed the reason the Russian authorities gave for refusing to extradite Lugovoi and Kovtun to Britain.

When the British authorities in 2007 demanded Lugovoi's and Kovtun's extradition to Britain, the Russian authorities refused to extradite them on the grounds that this was contrary to Russia's constitution.

The Russian government was widely ridiculed in Britain for saying this, and the British government imposed sanctions on Russia because of the Russian government's refusal to extradite Lugovoi and Kovtun.

The Inquiry Judge has now said the Russians were right all along:

"Refusal of extradition requests

Russia has refused requests made by the British authorities to extradite Mr. Lugovoi and Mr. Kovtun to face criminal charges in the UK. No inferences can be drawn from this. Article 61(1) of the Russian constitution provides that, "A citizen of the Russian Federation may not be deported from Russia or extradited to another state"

Needless to say, in all the flood of commentary that has followed the verdict in Britain, no one has admitted this or said that the sanctions Britain imposed on Russia in 2007 should not have been imposed because the Russians were right on this point all along.

LITVINENKO WAS KILLED BY POLONIUM POISONING

Secondly, it is now conclusively established Litvinenko was killed by polonium poisoning.

Whilst this may seem obvious, one of the unanswered mysteries of the case is why the British authorities delayed for so long to make the evidence of Litvinenko's poisoning with polonium public. They did not for example release the autopsy report until the Judge demanded it.

The evidence that was submitted to the Inquiry – including the autopsy report –

has now put the question beyond doubt. Litvinenko died from polonium poisoning and from no other cause.

LITVINENKO WAS MURDERED

Thirdly, the Inquiry has shown that Litvinenko was almost certainly murdered.

I have never found the various claims of polonium smuggling, accident and suicide various people have come up with to explain Litvinenko's death very convincing. There has never been anything that looked to me remotely like evidence to substantiate any of them.

The one part of the Inquiry report where I fully agree with the Judge – and find his reasoning convincing – is the section where he rejects these theories.

The only convincing explanation for Litvinenko's death is that someone deliberately poisoned him with polonium. That is why he died, and that makes his death murder.

THERE IS A CIRCUMSTANTIAL CASE AGAINST LUGOVOI AND KOVTUN

Fourthly and lastly, there is a circumstantial case that Lugovoi and Kovtun murdered Litvinenko.

Again this has been denied by many people – including of course by Lugovoi and Kovtun – but that there is a case against them on the basis of the traces of polonium they left behind them as they moved around London, and which were found in the Pine Bar at the Millennium Hotel where Litvinenko was probably poisoned, seems to me unarguable.

The case is however entirely circumstantial and is based wholly on the so-called polonium trail. In the absence of a properly contested hearing in which lawyers acting for Lugovoi and Kovtun could challenge and test this evidence, it is impossible to say how strong the case against them is.

WHAT A FAIR DECISION BY THE INQUIRY WOULD HAVE BEEN

If the Inquiry had stopped at this point and had said that Litvinenko was poisoned with polonium, which caused his death, and that this polonium was administered to him intentionally and maliciously in order to cause his death, and that his death was therefore a murder, and that there is a circumstantial case that Lugovoi and Kovtun are the guilty parties, that would have been a good and proper result, and a worthwhile outcome to the Inquiry.

It would have resolved many of the doubts and speculations about the case, and might have set the scene for a future prosecution of Lugovoi and Kovtun in

Russia (see below).

Unfortunately the Inquiry, or rather the Judge, did not stop at this point, and from this point on I am afraid it is downhill all the way.

SPECULATION AND DOUBTFUL EVIDENCE

Since the Inquiry ended with a finding that Lugovoi and Kovtun murdered Litvinenko despite their absence and lack of representation and despite the case against them being circumstantial, the obvious point to start in order to illustrate the problems is to look at the way the Judge handled the case against them in order to reach his verdict of guilty.

The Judge appears to have convinced himself of Lugovoi's and Kovtun's guilt right from the start of the Inquiry, and indeed practically from the moment when he was appointed the coroner to head the inquest which preceded the Inquiry.

The result is that in their absence he was unable to resist the temptation to ginger up the case against them by engaging in speculations and using evidence that in my opinion had no place in his report.

Here are some examples:

(1) The Judge places far too much reliance on the evidence of a German witness identified as D3. This person told the German police that Kovtun asked him for help to find a cook whose help he needed to poison someone. The Judge accepted the truth of this evidence, and treated what D3 told the police Kovtun had told him as an admission of guilt.

In my opinion D3's evidence should never have been considered at all. D3 refused to come to the Inquiry to give his evidence there. The Judge only knew of what he had said to the German police from transcripts of his interviews provided by the police.

People tell all sorts of stories to the police to make themselves appear important, and it is surely possible that that is all that D3 was doing. His refusal to come to the Inquiry to give evidence strongly suggests it. Since he refused to give his evidence to the Inquiry, and since he obviously was not questioned by the Inquiry on it, no reliance should be placed on what he said.

I would add that the idea that a cold-blooded FSB assassin – which is what the Judge says Kovtun is – would ask a friend who was not a member of the FSB – which is what D3 is – to suggest someone else – also not a member of the FSB – to help him commit a high profile political murder in London seems to me frankly bizarre.

If Kovtun really did try to find a cook to help him poison Litvinenko then in my opinion it is evidence against FSB involvement.

In the event Kovtun did contact a cook in London. There is no evidence he brought up the subject of poisoning with this person. The Judge ridicules Kovtun's claim he was looking for a cook to help him set up a restaurant in Moscow, which is what Kovtun claims. Isn't that however a far more likely reason to want a cook than to have his help to poison someone?

(2) The Judge admits Litvinenko did not initially think Lugovoi and Kovtun had poisoned him, and that it took him a very long time to come to that conclusion. He explains this by saying Litvinenko felt professionally humiliated by the fact the murderers – who he supposedly always knew were Lugovoi and Kovtun – had got to him, and that he maintained his silence in order to lure them back to London.

Nothing Litvinenko ever said supports this theory. I do not think it is right or proper to try to enter the mind of a dying man. I also think this theory is farfetched.

I would add in passing that the Judge – rather grudgingly – has confirmed the truth of what the US journalist William Dunkerley has always said about Litvinenko's famous death-bed statement.

It did not originate with Litvinenko but was put together by others who got him – as he was dying – to sign it.

The Judge has nothing to say about the ethics – or lack of them – of this behaviour, though they weighed on some of the people involved, including his widow.

The fact Litvinenko's famous death-bed statement – long accepted as his own words – is in reality the concoction of someone else should make one especially wary of attempts to read Litvinenko's mind as he lay dying.

(3) The Judge treats as evidence against Lugovoi the fact Lugovoi sent Berezovsky a provocatively worded T-shirt that referred to nuclear poisoning. The Judge treats this as a threat and sees it as an admission of guilt.

Whilst that interpretation is possible, so are other interpretations. The T-shirt could for example have been intended to taunt Berezovsky if Lugovoi thought Berezovsky was responsible for the crime and had set him up – as Lugovoi has claimed. Without hearing from Lugovoi himself on this issue how is it possible to form a view?

(4) In Lugovoi's and Kovtun's absence the Judge reconstructed their answers to

specific points on the basis of things they have said in media interviews.

He repeatedly cast doubt on the truth of things they have said and drew attention to various discrepancies he claims to have seen in their comments.

This is to elevate what Lugovoi and Kovtun have said to the media to the level of court testimony.

People speak more freely to the media than they do in court. There is also always the worry the media is not reporting words properly. When discussing the evidence of Dr. Yulia Svetlichnaya (see below) the Judge found the media had misreported some of the things she had told them. Why might the same not be true of things Lugovoi and Kovtun have told the media as well?

If defendants or witnesses say things in court that contradict what they say to the media, it is right and proper to question them about the discrepancy. In their absence it is wrong – and so far as I know unprecedented – to try to reconstruct what might have been their court testimony from what they have said on television and what the media say they have said.

(5) The Judge admits Lugovoi's behaviour at the Pine Bar of the Millennium Hotel – the place where Litvinenko was probably poisoned – is not fully consistent with his being the poisoner.

Lugovoi showed indifference to whether Litvinenko drank the poisoned tea or not. He also introduced to Litvinenko his young son, which he presumably would not have done if he thought there was danger to his son from the polonium.

The Judge gets round this by saying (1) Lugovoi would have felt under no time pressure to poison Litvinenko in the Pine Bar because – if the attempt failed – he could poison Litvinenko later somewhere else; and (2) Lugovoi probably hadn't been told by his FSB controllers how dangerous the polonium was.

Perhaps so, but again these are pure guesses and it is easy to construct contrary arguments.

Would Lugovoi really feel happy chasing after Litvinenko in London with a vial of polonium in his pocket day after day? Would he not be afraid he might be caught? Would he not want the murder over and done with as quickly as possible so he could make his escape?

Would the FSB really send two agents on a secret assassination mission to London without briefing them about the dangers of the poison they were carrying?

Ultimately, since Lugovoi's behaviour depends on his state of mind, how can one reconstruct it without hearing from him?

I don't make these points to prove Lugovoi and Kovtun's innocent. However I think it is wholly wrong in their absence to say they are guilty on the strength of what can only be guesses and on the basis of "evidence", which I don't think is really evidence at all.

RUSSIAN STATE INVOLVEMENT

If the Judge's conduct of the case against Lugovoi and Kovtun was troubling to say the least, the same was far more true of the part of the case where he decided the Russian authorities were "probably" guilty of Litvinenko's murder, and that Lugovoi and Kovtun were acting on their behalf.

SECRET EVIDENCE

The evidence the Judge saw in secret, and which has not been disclosed to the public or the Russians, apparently bears mainly on this issue. There is it seems a whole secret section of the Inquiry report about it, which has not been made public.

That it is wholly wrong for a Judge in what is actually a trial to say that someone or some people are guilty of a crime on the basis of evidence they are not allowed to see should by now be obvious.

It should be said that the British government is in a different position. Since the British government has no judicial role, it is fully legitimate for it to say that on the basis of secret information in its possession, which it cannot disclose because that would compromise intelligence sources, it thinks the Russian authorities were probably involved in the murder of Litvinenko.

Others might wonder how strong that evidence really is, and might question whether the British government is right to form such a view, but that is another matter.

The Judge however, as is clear from the Inquiry report, was performing a judicial or at least a semi-judicial role. His Inquiry not only looked into the facts of Litvinenko's death in much the same way a court would do, but it ended in a clear verdict of guilty against the two men involved in the crime – Lugovoi and Kovtun. That puts anything he says in a different position.

Since we do not know what the secret evidence is, it is impossible to comment on it. However the Judge said in the Inquiry report that his conclusion that the Russian state was "probably" responsible for Litvinenko's death is made out by the publicly disclosed evidence.

It is on that evidence therefore that his conclusions stand or fall, and it is

to that evidence – and the Judge’s handling of it – that I shall now turn.

DID THE RUSSIAN AUTHORITIES OBSTRUCT THE INVESTIGATION

The British police were unhappy that the Russian authorities did not give them the full cooperation that it seems they wanted. The Judge however was in the end unable to see in this evidence of actual obstruction, and decided that the Russian authorities’ guilt could not be inferred from it.

What the Judge does not say is that the reason the Russians have given for their lack of cooperation with the British investigation is that the British refused to cooperate with them.

Specifically the British refused to let the Russian investigators question Litvinenko’s friend, the exiled Russian oligarch Boris Berezovsky.

They also refused Russian requests for the polonium evidence and declined Russian suggestions that Lugovoi and Kovtun be tried in Russia on the basis of evidence provided by the British.

There are rumours that the Russians even suggested that Lugovoi and Kovtun be tried in Russia in a British court with a British Judge and jury that had been physically transported to Russia (there are actually precedents for this).

The reason the British gave for their refusal to consider a trial of Lugovoi and Kovtun in Russia was apparently that the prosecution witnesses would refuse to travel there.

This is to put the wishes of the witnesses above the rights of the defendants. Besides it is not clear why the evidence of witnesses unwilling to travel to Russia could not have been given by video link.

The Russian offer of a trial of Lugovoi and Kovtun in Russia shows what might have happened if the British authorities had been willing to work with the Russian authorities – as opposed to criticising them and looking for ways to declare them guilty. Since however the Judge made no inferences from any seeming lack of cooperation on the part of the Russian authorities, there is nothing more to say about this.

2006 RUSSIAN LAWS AUTHORISING LITVINENKO’S MURDER?

In 2006 – shortly before Litvinenko was killed – the Russian parliament passed two laws that authorise Russia’s security agencies to take action against persons involved in extremism and terrorist activities.

One of these laws gives legal authority to the Russian President to order the

Russian security services to kill persons who are abroad beyond the reach of Russian justice and who are undertaking terrorist acts against Russia.

These two laws are commonly cited by believers in the theory of Russian state involvement as giving the FSB the legal authority it needed to kill Litvinenko.

Two experts on Russian law consulted by the Inquiry – one of them Russian – flatly contradicted this view, and the Judge accepted their advice:

“..

The only legal route to extra-territorial action against Mr Litvinenko was therefore under the Terrorism Law. However, action could only have been taken against Mr Litvinenko under this law had he been involved in, or no doubt suspected of involvement in, some form of terrorist activity. Article 3 of the Terrorism Law contains definitions of terrorism and terrorist acts that are broadly conventional, and certainly not as expansive as the definition of ‘extremism’ in the second of the 2006 laws. Mr Batmanov’s letter (above) states that, “Alexander Litvinenko did not make part of a terrorist organization and was not accused by Russian law enforcement bodies of having committed a terrorist crime.” That accords with my understanding of the evidence

On the basis of the evidence currently before me, and in light of the considerations set out above, I am therefore not persuaded that any action could have been taken by the FSB against Mr Litvinenko in 2006 under the terms of either of the 2006 laws.”

In other words the two laws have no bearing whatsoever on Litvinenko’s death. They did not authorise it or give the green light for it, and they would not have made his killing legal under Russian law.

Though this is a useful finding, something must be said about the strange discussion that followed.

Having heard from two jurists expert on the interpretation of Russian law, and whose opinion ought to be final on such a subject, the Judge also solicited the opinion of Professor Robert Service, a historian who has written a book on Soviet history, and whose qualifications to give advice on how Russian law should be interpreted are not obvious.

I will have more to say later about the extraordinary role Professor Robert Service has played in the Inquiry.

Professor Service appears to be a believer in the theory that though the laws do not actually authorise the FSB to murder someone like Litvinenko, given the

political atmosphere in Russia they could be interpreted by the FSB as giving it the green light to do so.

The Judge sets out Professor Service's speculations on this point at length and without comment, giving the strong impression he agrees with them.

This theory is no more than a guess. It is very unlikely to be true.

If the FSB really were the sort of criminal organisation that routinely murders its enemies why would it need the green light of two laws that do not in fact authorise it to take that action? There is no logic here and the "green light" theory is absurd.

LUGOVOI'S AND KOVTUN'S BACKGROUNDS – A LINK TO THE RUSSIAN STATE?

The entire case of Russian state involvement in the murder of Litvinenko rests on either Lugovoi or Kovtun or preferably both of them being agents of the Russian state – specifically of the FSB. If neither Lugovoi nor Kovtun are agents of the FSB the whole case for Russian state involvement collapses.

The Judge decided that Lugovoi's and Kovtun's backgrounds do show a link between them and the Russian state.

On the contrary, one of the most interesting things that came out of the Inquiry is what unlikely people Lugovoi and Kovtun are to be agents of the FSB, and what unlikely assassins they are for the FSB to employ.

The first and obvious is that there is no evidence – and no suggestion – that either man ever killed anyone before Litvinenko was killed.

Would the FSB send two inexperienced men to carry out a complicated high-profile assassination in a foreign capital? Doesn't the FSB have more professional and experienced people to carry out such a complicated killing?

The picture that emerges of Kovtun is of a shiftless character, characterised by his German family as a charming rogue with a fondness for gambling, women and drink. His only known service for the Russian government was as a soldier in the Soviet army.

Since most Russian men serve in the Russian army nothing can be made of this.

More relevant is the fact Kovtun deserted from the army and fled to West Germany where he claimed asylum – a fact which in itself makes Kovtun a most unlikely person to be an FSB agent.

Life in West Germany was apparently not to Kovtun's liking and he returned to

Russia. He has followed an erratic career as a sometime businessman ever since.

Though the Judge has nothing to say about it, there is in fact no evidence the FSB ever recruited Kovtun, no information he ever attended any of its special schools where the FSB trains its operatives, no blank spaces in his life such as might be expected of a secret agent, no information he has ever carried out anything that looks remotely like a secret mission, and nothing to suggest that prior to meeting with Litvinenko he ever killed anyone.

As the Judge rather grudgingly admits, this hardly looks like the profile of a cold-blooded killer – much less of an FSB agent.

Lugovoi is a more impressive character. He did join the KGB and did rise within its ranks to a senior position in its special protection unit, continuing in that unit after it was separated from the KGB right upon to his eventual retirement in 1996.

Though the Judge does not mention it in his report, it seems that whilst working for this unit Lugovoi provided bodyguard services for various senior Russian politicians.

After leaving the special bodyguard service Lugovoi set up various private security companies providing security and bodyguard services to various high-profile Russian individuals and companies – first and foremost the oligarch Boris Berezovsky. At some point he seems to have become almost entirely dependent on Berezovsky, providing security services for Berezovsky's television station ORT.

Lugovoi is now a successful businessman, as well as a member of Russia's parliament for the opposition Liberal Democratic Party.

Lugovoi has however had no visible connection to the FSB at any time since it was established shortly after the KGB was disbanded in the early 1990s. Contrary to some reports he has never been formally employed by the FSB.

Any claim Lugovoi was an FSB agent therefore requires him to have been recruited into the organisation or employed by it in a covert way.

There is no evidence of it and is it likely?

The fundamental problem with thinking the FSB might have sought to recruit Lugovoi is that his closest and most visible connections since the 1990s were not with the FSB but with the Russian oligarch Boris Berezovsky, whose relations with the FSB were already very bad whilst Berezovsky was a major figure in the Russian politics in the 1990s (as the Judge notes, Berezovsky with Litvinenko's

support, at one point even accused the FSB of plotting to kill him).

After Berezovsky left Russia in 2000 he became an opponent and critic of the Russian government and of President Putin in particular.

A close associate of Berezovsky's after this time is not someone one would naturally assume to be an FSB agent. Lugovoi was such an associate. The Judge admits Berezovsky continued to think of Lugovoi as his friend right up to the moment when Litvinenko was killed.

It also turns out that Lugovoi not only had a close association with Berezovsky right up to the moment of Litvinenko's death, but was also convicted by a Russian court shortly after Berezovsky fled Russia of trying to arrange the escape of Nikolai Glushkov, one of Berezovsky's close associates, from a hospital where he was in pre-trial detention on a fraud charge. It seems that Lugovoi spent 15 months in prison for the crime.

These facts make it very unlikely Lugovoi was an FSB agent.

The Judge tries to cast doubt on Lugovoi's prison sentence, citing Glushkov who says he knows nothing about it, and who also says his attempted escape – supposedly arranged by Lugovoi – was an FSB set-up.

Alternatively, the Judge refers to speculation the FSB might have recruited Lugovoi in prison.

In the absence of information from Russia's prison records the Judge has no grounds to question the hereto publicly acknowledged fact of Lugovoi's prison sentence.

Glushkov's evidence anyway is open to challenge. If he really thought the escape attempt had probably been an FSB set-up why did he not warn Berezovsky about Lugovoi who had arranged it?

It is unlikely Glushkov did warn Berezovsky about Lugovoi. As the Judge admits, Berezovsky continued to trust Lugovoi right up to the moment when Litvinenko was killed. Would he have done so if Glushkov had warned him that he was involved with the FSB in setting up a fake escape attempt?

Glushkov is a former friend of Berezovsky's, is a critic of the Russian government and is a believer in the theory of Russian state involvement in Litvinenko's murder. Given that this theory requires Lugovoi to be an FSB agent, that is a good reason to treat with caution his evidence that the escape attempt was a probably fake.

As for Glushkov's doubts about whether Lugovoi ever went to prison, how would

Glushkov know whether Lugovoi had been to prison or not given that he presumably has no access to Russia's prison records?

As for the suggestion Lugovoi might have been recruited by the FSB whilst in prison, that again is no more than a guess and there is no evidence for it whatsoever.

There is in fact no evidence Lugovoi was ever an FSB agent, and on the face of it, it is very unlikely.

What of the possibility that Lugovoi might have been turned and become an FSB informer?

There is no evidence for that either. The fact Berezovsky continued to trust Lugovoi right up to the moment of Litvinenko's death argues against it.

Here perhaps it is worth pointing out that if Lugovoi really had been turned he would have been a priceless intelligence asset for the FSB at the heart of Berezovsky's organisation.

Would the FSB have risked blowing the cover of such an asset by having Lugovoi murder a secondary character like Litvinenko? If they really had resolved to kill Litvinenko would they not have sought to protect Lugovoi's cover by employing someone else?

In the absence of any actual evidence Lugovoi was an FSB agent, the Judge was forced to fall back on cliches ("once a KGB man, always a KGB man"), and the fact Lugovoi has frequently appeared on television in Russia, has been elected to parliament, has received a state decoration, and has had a successful business career.

The Judge sees in all this evidence that "Putin backs him". Is this however really true?

One of the big problems of the Inquiry is the Judge's obvious and profound ignorance of Russia, and here we have a good example.

The media in Russia – including the television media – are nowhere near as controlled as the Judge thinks they are. It is in fact normal for all sorts of people – including opponents of President Putin – to appear on it.

The fact Lugovoi had a known connection to Berezovsky and had served a prison sentence would not have prevented him from having a successful business career in Russia. Many other associates of Berezovsky still live in Russia and their

businesses thrive.

Lugovoi's expertise in bodyguard services – obtained whilst serving in the KGB – would have made him an obvious person for wealthy Russians seeking such services, and it is not difficult to see why despite his prison term and his connection to Berezovsky his security business might have prospered.

Given Lugovoi's extraordinary celebrity after the British authorities accused him of murdering Litvinenko with polonium, it is completely understandable the Russian media queued up to interview him.

It is also completely understandable – and entirely unsurprising – that Lugovoi has revelled in the attention, and has cashed in on his celebrity by getting himself elected to parliament and wangling for himself a state decoration. Russia is hardly the only country where such things happen.

The fact Lugovoi appears so regularly on Russian television, and gives so many unscripted interviews – including to the foreign media – is in fact a strong reason to doubt he is an FSB agent.

Would the FSB really let an agent who has carried out a top secret assassination mission loose to roam freely the television studios and meet the media – including the foreign media – telling them whatever he wants to say?

Would any secret service anywhere in the world allow that sort of behaviour by one of its agents?

There is a circumstantial case Lugovoi and Kovtun murdered Litvinenko.

The case that either man is an FSB agent is in Kovtun's case non-existent and in Lugovoi's case threadbare. The facts if anything argue against it.

It is difficult to avoid the impression that the reason the Judge thinks Lugovoi and Kovtun are FSB agents is not because there is any evidence that they actually are, but because that is the only way the FSB could have been involved in the murder of Litvinenko.

In truth the improbability Lugovoi or Kovtun are FSB agents is so great that – if they really did kill Litvinenko – it is actually a strong reason to doubt the FSB or the Russian state were involved.

THE POLONIUM EVIDENCE – SOURCE OF THE POLONIUM

The single strongest reason up to now for thinking the Russian authorities might have been responsible for Litvinenko's murder is that he was poisoned with polonium.

The story as it is usually told is that polonium comes exclusively from Russia where it is produced at a single tightly controlled government facility. It has been claimed it contains a trace element that enables it be traced back to this facility.

It has also been said that polonium is extremely expensive. The lawyer representing Litvinenko's widow claimed the cost of the amount used to kill Litvinenko would have run into millions of dollars.

Moreover it has been claimed that the history of Lugovoi's and Kovtun's movements in London made it impossible for them to have polonium in their possession unless they brought it with them from Russia.

If all these claims were true then the case for Russian state involvement in Litvinenko's murder would be compelling.

It turns out that none of them are true.

It seems polonium can be produced – and probably is being produced – in any number of facilities outside Russia.

It turns out that commercially produced polonium contains no trace elements such as would make it possible to identify the facility it comes from – be that facility in Russia or anywhere else.

It turns out polonium is not expensive at all, with a police officer telling the Inquiry that an amount of polonium much greater than the amount used to poison Litvinenko sold in New York for just \$20,000.

Lastly the Judge himself decided that there is simply insufficient information about Lugovoi's and Kovtun's movements in London to say definitely that they must have brought the polonium with them from Russia and could not have obtained it in London.

All this information demolishes the keystone of the case for Russian state involvement.

It turns out that it was not solely the Russian state that could have provided the polonium to murder Litvinenko. Anyone with the right contacts and a few thousand dollars to spare could have obtained it.

The Judge's frustration and disappointment is all too obvious from this truly remarkable comment:

"Although it cannot be said that the polonium 210 with which Mr Litvinenko was poisoned must have come from the Avangard facility in Russia, it

certainly could have come from there.” (Underlining in the original)

Of course in a sense this statement is true. The polonium could have come from Russia. It could also however just as well have come from any of the other places where it is being produced. This comment is neither here nor there and I at this point register my surprise to see a Judge saying it.

Even if the polonium did come from Russia what does that prove? Given how inexpensive polonium turns out to be there is no reason why it could not have passed through any number of different hands before it poisoned Litvinenko.

The case for Russian state involvement because Litvinenko was poisoned with polonium simply cannot be made, and this part of the case – the part that has attracted the most attention – has collapsed.

The way it has collapsed shows something else.

The polonium evidence collapsed because the Inquiry heard the advice of more than one expert.

One expert – Professor Dombey – was instructed by the supporters of the theory of Russian state involvement. Unsurprisingly he supported the claim the polonium could only have come from a single closely guarded facility in Russia and could be traced back there.

The other expert – identified only as A1 – flatly contradicted this advice. Her view is that it is impossible to trace the source of the polonium and that it could have been produced in any one of various facilities around the world.

It is quite clear that A1 – whoever she is – is the more senior scientist, and the Judge was obliged to defer to her.

This gives a glimpse of what might have happened in a proper trial if all the evidence and not just the polonium evidence had been contested in the same way.

MOTIVE – DID THE RUSSIAN STATE HAVE A MOTIVE TO KILL LITVINENKO?

Given the collapse of the polonium evidence, and the lack of any evidence definitely linking Lugovoi or Kovtun to the FSB, the only evidence the Russian authorities were involved in Litvinenko’s murder is that they supposedly were the only party with a motive to kill him.

It is because the case against the Russian authorities ultimately depends on motive that the Judge was only able to say that the Russian authorities were “probably” involved.

This has been widely – and rightly – ridiculed.

However it was the only thing the Judge could say given his determination to say the Russian authorities killed Litvinenko, and the absence of any evidence – apart from motive – to show that they did.

It is in fact impossible to read the text of the Inquiry report without being struck by the extent to which the Judge has absorbed and internalised the typically negative Western view of Russia.

Thus the Judge refers to the Russian government as “Putin’s regime”. He calls a book of Litvinenko’s placing responsibility for the 1999 Moscow apartment bombings “well-researched”. He reels off Litvinenko’s allegations that President Putin is a paedophile, a criminal associate of the Tambov gang, and a heroin smuggler, without comment. He repeats Litvinenko’s claim the FSB has supplied arms to Al-Qaeda, also without comment. He casts doubt on the reality of Lugovoi’s prison sentence purely on the strength of the testimony of an accomplice in the crime. Whilst he admits the claim the Russian government was involved in the murder of various of its opponents has not been proved, he claims nonetheless to see a pattern and says Litvinenko’s murder must be considered in the context of that pattern.

Amazingly, he uses the killing of known or suspected terrorists like the notorious jihadi terrorist Ibn Khattab and the Chechen militant Zelimkhan Yandarbiev to draw inferences about Russian state involvement in the killing of Litvinenko, who was not a terrorist.

As we have seen, he also believes the Russian government tightly controls Russian television and that Lugovoi’s various appearances on Russian television could not have happened without the Russian government’s consent.

In this deeply negative view of Russia he meets his match in Professor Robert Service, the expert the Inquiry consulted about the Russian political scene, who not only shares the Judge’s bleak view of today’s Russia but who actually lends his weight to it.

Professor Service is a historian and well-recognised authority on Soviet history. However his strongly negative view of contemporary Russian realities is not one everyone would share. I can think of various equally well-regarded scholars of Russian affairs who might for example take issue with his claims that Litvinenko’s book on the Moscow apartment bombings is “credible” and “well-researched”, that the Russian government has become more secretive since President Putin came to power (for the record I think the opposite), or that Berezovsky’s former associate Alex Goldfarb is a generally reliable witness.

The trouble however is not so much that the Inquiry heard from Professor Service. It is that on the gigantic subject of the state of politics and society in today's Russia it didn't hear from anyone else.

In saying this I should say that I do not know whether the Inquiry solicited alternative opinions about this subject from other people. Perhaps it did, and perhaps they declined to come. It is however troubling that on this key issue only one view was heard, and one which moreover is not Russian.

The Judge decided that Litvinenko's association with Berezovsky, the circumstances of his leaving the FSB (after supposedly exposing an FSB plot to have Berezovsky killed), his opposition activity in London, his two books about the supposedly criminal practices of the FSB – including its alleged role in the Moscow apartment bombings and in arming Al-Qaeda, and his relentless personal attacks on Putin – whom he has variously called a paedophile, a gangster and a heroin smuggler – would have made him a traitor in FSB eyes, and would have given the Russian authorities the motive to kill him.

An alternative and arguably much better informed view, is that Putin has had to put up with an enormous of criticism – much of it highly personal – ever since he became President, both in Russia and outside, and that the wild and wholly unsubstantiated allegations made by Litvinenko together with his well-known connection to Berezovsky meant that scarcely anyone in Russia took Litvinenko seriously until he was killed.

An alternative view might also question whether the FSB really is the vengeful and ruthless organisation the Judge – and apparently Professor Service – think it is. There are after all any number of former KGB and FSB defectors critical of the Russian government alive and active both in Russia and the West. One of them actually gave evidence to the Inquiry.

An alternative view might also question the degree to which Litvinenko within the FSB was regarded as a traitor.

Litvinenko's work for the FSB was crime investigation. He was – as his family has said – essentially a policeman. He was not a spy or an intelligence or counter-intelligence officer, and he does not seem to have had access to classified material. He was not in possession of any information that might compromise Russian security or an intelligence asset. He was hardly in a position to be a traitor.

The Judge made much of Litvinenko's role in supposedly exposing an FSB plot to kill Berezovsky. The Judge appears to think that exposing this plot would have made Litvinenko a traitor in the eyes of his colleagues in the FSB.

Litvinenko was involved in a bizarre rumpus in 1998 when he accused his colleagues in the FSB of plotting to have Berezovsky killed. Contrary to what the Judge – and some other people – appear to believe, this murder plot was almost certainly an invention of Berezovsky's intended to discredit the new Primakov government that had just come to power in Russia.

Primakov was a known enemy of Berezovsky's who made no secret of his wish to have Berezovsky arrested. He was also a person with a long background in intelligence work who had headed Russia's foreign intelligence agency, the SVR. It suited Berezovsky's purposes at the time to play up Primakov's connections to Russia's intelligence and security establishment by hinting that Primakov was planning to use to them in order to have him killed.

Though some members of the FSB have subsequently claimed that there was indeed some talk in the organisation of having Berezovsky killed, it is clear that there was no formal order, and the gossip of former operatives should be treated with caution.

The whole episode was farcical and embarrassing, but was hardly unusual in the baroque politics of 1990s Russia.

Though Litvinenko's involvement would undoubtedly have annoyed many people within the FSB – and led directly to his dismissal – the problem in seeing in it a motive for his murder is that Litvinenko was under the FSB's control until he eventually left Russia in 2000. No attempt to murder him was made in that time, and nor was such an attempt in the six years he lived afterwards in Britain. It is not obvious why if the FSB considered Litvinenko a traitor because of this episode it waited for so long.

It is in fact most unlikely that this episode did cause Litvinenko's death. In the end it did no damage to the FSB and by 2006 it was receding into the past and was almost forgotten.

No doubt Litvinenko was unpopular with his former comrades in the FSB, but if they thought him a traitor the facts suggest they can't have thought him a very important one.

As for the idea the FSB systematically murders opponents of the Russian government, an alternative view might question whether this is true, and might say that the evidence in the trials of the murderers of Sergey Yushenkov and Anna Politkovskaya – whose killings were mentioned by the Judge – does not implicate the Russian authorities, whilst the facts of the death of Yuri Shchekochikhin – whose death was also mentioned by the Judge – suggest a violent allergic reaction to drugs mistakenly given during medical treatment for

a viral infection.

VIKTOR IVANOV AND THE 'DUE DILIGENCE' REPORT – THE MOTIVE AT LAST?

Perhaps because of doubts Litvinenko's public activities really were sufficiently damning to provoke his murder, a theory was floated in December 2006 – shortly after his death – that he was killed in revenge for a Due Diligence report he had provided which was highly critical of Viktor Ivanov, a senior Russian official who now heads Russia's anti-drugs force.

The theory is that Litvinenko showed or gave the report to Lugovoi who passed it on to Ivanov and the Kremlin, who were in turn so furious they ordered Litvinenko killed.

As with so many other theories that have floated around the Litvinenko case, this theory is exactly that: just a theory with no evidence behind it.

The Inquiry report shows that there is some evidence from some things Litvinenko is reported to have said that he showed or gave the report to Lugovoi, who had helped him with other Due Diligence reports.

There is no evidence however that Lugovoi passed the report on to Ivanov or the Kremlin or told them about it or that they in response ordered Litvinenko killed.

In the end the Judge was reluctant to place much reliance on this theory. The fact Lugovoi could only have forwarded the report – or news of it – to Ivanov and the Kremlin a few short weeks before Litvinenko was killed – leaving them very little time to arrange Litvinenko's murder – argues strongly against this theory – a fact the Judge admitted.

Without hearing from Lugovoi or Ivanov this is all just anyway just a line of speculation, and claiming to see in it a motive for the Russian authorities to want Litvinenko killed is unwarranted.

For the record, Viktor Ivanov has categorically denied any role in Litvinenko's case. Everything I have heard about him suggests he is telling the truth.

BEREZOVSKY – NO MOTIVE TO KILL LITVINENKO?

What of the Judge's argument that it must have been the Russian authorities who killed Litvinenko because only they – and no one else – had any motive for wanting him killed.

The short answer to that is that though the Judge argues otherwise, the facts show if anything an over-abundance of motive on the part of lots of other people

to want to have Litvinenko killed.

Though the Judge tries to downplay the fact, it is clear for example that Litvinenko and Berezovsky had a major quarrel shortly before Litvinenko was killed.

There is some dispute about what this quarrel was about – despite what some of the witnesses said it was probably about money – but that the quarrel happened is beyond doubt.

The Judge tries to get round this by saying that Berezovsky and Litvinenko had patched up their quarrel before Litvinenko was killed.

Possibly, but the evidence for that is hardly compelling. Besides might not Berezovsky – if he had decided to have Lugovoi killed – want to appear to have made up with him, if only to give himself an alibi and to draw attention away from himself?

Here it is worth saying that though the Judge – backed by Professor Service – apparently believes the FSB routinely murders people, and that Lugovoi is an FSB agent, the evidence that Berezovsky was involved in political killings and that Lugovoi – the presumed assassin – was his agent, is actually far more compelling.

Berezovsky for example admitted financing elements of the Chechen insurgency against the Russian government, whilst Lugovoi's long and close association with Berezovsky is a matter of public record.

BLACKMAIL

Then there is the well-substantiated fact that in the months before his death Litvinenko was talking about blackmailing people.

This evidence of this was provided by Dr. Yulia Svetlichnaya, a postgraduate student at Westminster University, who interviewed Litvinenko no fewer than 6 times before he was killed. She says that during these meetings Litvinenko harped on continuously about the blackmail he was going to carry out.

This evidence provides a good example of the way in which investigation of Litvinenko's murder has been thrown off-course by the obsession with Russian state involvement.

Though Dr. Svetlichnaya's evidence has been known about since just after Litvinenko's death, her evidence has been largely ignored, with some casting doubt on the truth of it.

The Inquiry report shows that Dr. Svetlichnaya was closely questioned by the Inquiry, and it is clear from the report that she came through the cross-examination well. The Judge never casts doubt on her truthfulness, and there is no reason to doubt therefore that her story is true.

We know therefore that in the months leading up to his death Litvinenko was talking about blackmailing someone.

Unlike the nebulous claims of motive that have been made against the Russian authorities, blackmail is a classic motive for murder. If one chooses to use motive as a guide to the solution of a murder, then the obvious thing to do in Litvinenko's case would be to try to identify the person or persons he was blackmailing or intending to blackmail.

The obsession with the issue of Russian state involvement means this has not been done.

The Judge in the end decided that Dr. Svetlichnaya's evidence is irrelevant since Litvinenko's talk of blackmail cannot explain his murder. The reason the Judge gave for this is that Litvinenko's words show he never put his threat to blackmail someone into practice.

The Judge also rejected the theory the person Litvinenko was intending to blackmail was Berezovsky on the grounds that Litvinenko gave the impression that more than one person was involved and that those persons had some connection to the Kremlin, which Berezovsky at the time did not.

Again it is very easy to construct contrary arguments.

Would Litvinenko really tell Dr. Svetlichnaya that he was actually blackmailing someone – as opposed to just intending to do so? It is already astonishing that he told Dr. Svetlichnaya that he was intending to blackmail someone. Would he have taken her so far into his confidence as to tell her he was actually doing it?

The Judge said that at the time he was killed Litvinenko was looking for alternative sources of income following a reduction of the funds he was getting from Berezovsky. Might that not give him a motive to blackmail someone? Might that not mean he was actually doing it?

As for Berezovsky, given that it was Berezovsky who had put Dr. Svetlichnaya in touch with him, would Litvinenko have told her it was Berezovsky he was blackmailing? Might he not have tried to disguise the fact it was Berezovsky he was blackmailing by hinting that he was blackmailing more than one person?

As for Berezovsky having no connection to the Kremlin, a book was published which called him "The Godfather of the Kremlin" (its author – the US journalist Paul Khlebnikov – was subsequently killed).

As it happens, if one wants to construct a theory it was Berezovsky Litvinenko was blackmailing, the timing of some of the events in the last months of Litvinenko's life might actually support it.

Litvinenko appears to have first told Dr. Svetlichnaya that he intended to blackmail someone in April 2006. At some point that spring or summer he had a major row with Berezovsky. Might that have been because he was blackmailing Berezovsky – as he might have been hinting to Dr. Svetlichnaya that he was?

OTHER POSSIBLE SUSPECTS

Alternatively, if it was not Berezovsky Litvinenko was blackmailing, he might have been blackmailing any number of other people, any one of whom might have wanted him killed. Litvinenko's previous work as a policeman might have given him knowledge about all sorts of people he might try to blackmail.

One possibility is the now destroyed Tambov gang in St. Petersburg, whose activities Litvinenko had investigated in the 1990s. If he was trying to blackmail them then their reputation suggests they would not have hesitated to kill him.

In 2004 – two years before Litvinenko was killed – a St. Petersburg businessman called Roman Tsepov with a shady reputation and alleged links to organised crime died suddenly showing symptoms that seem suspiciously like polonium poisoning. As in Litvinenko's case Tsepov's postmortem found he had died from poisoning by a radioactive material, which might have been polonium.

Contrary to claims that are sometimes made Tsepov was not close to Putin, and there is no reason to think the Russian authorities killed him. Though Tsepov's case has never been solved, it seems likely he was killed by some of his criminal associates in St. Petersburg.

If Tsepov was killed with polonium, then that might suggest polonium poisoning was a favoured method for eliminating enemies in the mid 2000s in the underworld in St. Petersburg, the city where the Tambov gang was based. That might connect Litvinenko's murder to St. Petersburg and to his previous work there.

The Judge also mentioned work Litvinenko carried out – or was in the process of carrying out – preparing Due Diligence reports that touched on individuals like the alleged Russian gangster Semion Mogilevich (an individual also without links to Putin despite numerous claims to the contrary). On the eve of his death

Litvinenko was also helping the British and Spanish authorities investigate various Russian gangsters or alleged gangsters in Spain.

The Judge doubts these people could have known anything about this work because none of the people Litvinenko was working for would have leaked it to them.

The obvious answer to that is that of course they would have known about it if Litvinenko had told them about it because he was blackmailing them.

Then there is the Chechen connection. As the Judge himself admits Litvinenko had got very close to the Chechen independence movement, which he was actively supporting for some years before his death. Supposedly he even converted to Islam just before he died.

The Chechens have a reputation for ruthless action against people they fall out with. If Litvinenko was unwise enough to try to blackmail them – or betray them in some other way – then it is not difficult to believe they might have taken steps to put him out of the way.

Last but not least there is Lugovoi himself.

The Judge dismissed the possibility that Lugovoi – the presumed killer – might have been acting on his own behalf, saying Lugovoi had no possible motive to kill Litvinenko.

Again it is difficult to understand how the Judge can be so sure.

Lugovoi has a long history of close association with Litvinenko, who would have presumably known a great deal about him. Lugovoi's background is shady and he has a criminal past. He has a record of providing bodyguard services to senior Russian politicians so to say he is connected to the Kremlin might not be too much of a stretch. Lastly, at the time of Litvinenko's death he was a successful businessman and a wealthy man.

On the face of it Lugovoi seems to fit rather well the profile of the persons Litvinenko told Dr. Svetlichnaya he was blackmailing.

Lugovoi's trips to London to meet with Litvinenko might in that case have been to discuss the blackmail. If so that might explain why he brought his trusted friend and sidekick Kovtun with him – to support him in the meetings with Litvinenko where they discussed the blackmail.

The Judge was baffled at what went on at the various meetings Lugovoi and Litvinenko had together – many of which appear to have been rather aimless. He also questioned the reasons for Kovtun's trips to London.

If Litvinenko was blackmailing Lugovoi at these meetings that might explain why they happened and why there is so little information about them and why Kovtun was coming to London and attending some of these meetings.

As it happens Lugovoi's meetings with Litvinenko in London do have the look of a negotiation about them. If Lugovoi was not being blackmailed at these meetings, then it is not impossible he was acting as the representative of someone else who was.

If Lugovoi was being blackmailed by Litvinenko, then his wealth and security connections might have made it possible for him to get hold of the polonium he needed to get Litvinenko out of the way. If he was representing someone else, then presumably that person could have obtained it.

All this of course is sheer speculation. How is it more so however than the speculation the Judge has himself indulged in to prove Russian state involvement?

As speculation goes, I would suggest that any one of my speculations is altogether more plausible than the Judge's speculations that Litvinenko was killed because he said some bad things about Putin and the FSB – things which were said and repeated by lots of other people many other times both in Russia and elsewhere before Litvinenko was killed.

I do not know whether Litvinenko was blackmailing anyone, or if he was blackmailing someone whether the person or persons he was blackmailing were any of the persons I have mentioned.

Perhaps Litvinenko was killed for some completely different reason unconnected to blackmail at the behest of somebody whose identity is completely unknown.

The point is that the Judge was wrong to say only the Russian authorities had a possible motive for Litvinenko's murder, just as he was wrong to use motive as a means to identify his killer.

Motive can only be used safely as a guide to the identity of the killer in very straightforward cases. As should by now be obvious, this is not a straightforward case.

SHOULD THE RUSSIANS HAVE COOPERATED WITH THE INQUIRY DESPITE ITS FLAWS?

All this begs the question whether anything could have been done to make the outcome of the Inquiry different?

Throughout the Inquiry report the Judge repeatedly laments Lugovoi's, Kovtun's and the Russian authorities' refusal to participate in the Inquiry. Might the

outcome have been different if they had participated as the Judge says he wanted them to?

Unfortunately the short answer is almost certainly no. If Lugovoi, Kovtun and the Russian authorities had been present, they might have been able to challenge the evidence. It is well-nigh impossible however to believe they would have changed the outcome.

The US journalist William Dunkerley has described Sir Robert Owen – the Judge in the case – as a “man with a mission” and in the light of how he conducted the Inquiry it is impossible to disagree.

The mission the Judge set himself – obvious to anyone observing him from the moment he was first appointed coroner – was to do, as he saw it, justice to Litvinenko’s widow by exposing the murderers of her husband – who it is quite clear he always believed were the Russian authorities acting through Lugovoi and Kovtun.

The Judge has pursued this objective with a single-mindedness worthy of a better cause, despite the British government’s attempts to rein him in.

It was the Judge – not the British government – who decided to convert what was originally an Inquest into a Public Inquiry, and who then converted the Public Inquiry into what amounts to a trial.

It was the Judge – not the British government – who insisted on looking at the secret evidence – denying it to Lugovoi, Kovtun and the Russians – in order to help him decide that they were guilty.

I have already spoken of the extent to which his report shows the Judge has internalised the typically bleak Western view of Russia.

What is perhaps even more striking is his extreme partiality towards anyone who believes in the theory of Russian state involvement.

Thus the extraordinary action of presenting a concocted death-bed statement to a dying man goes by without censure. The evidence of people like Goldfarb, Glushkov and Shvets is accepted uncritically and called reliable despite their obvious interest as opponents of the Russian government in a finding that the Russian state was responsible for Litvinenko’s death.

Theories about Litvinenko’s and Lugovoi’s state of mind coming from these people are eagerly seized on when they offer ways out of evidential difficulties that stand in the way of what the Judge believe is the truth. Even Berezovsky – a person whom the Judge admits Mrs. Justice Gloster in the High Court found had no

regard for truth – receives posthumous recognition as a reliable witness.

As for Litvinenko himself, he can do no wrong.

His history of moonlighting for Berezovsky whilst working for the FSB, his bizarre claims that Putin is a paedophile, a heroin smuggler and a gangster, his peculiar death-bed conversion to Islam, and his repeatedly stated intentions to blackmail people (explained away as just wild talk) count for nothing.

In the Judge's eyes he is a truth-teller (his book on the subject of the Moscow apartment bombings is "not just a political tract" but is "well-researched"), a man "remarkable for his devotion to his adopted country" (ie. Britain) and someone who the Judge clearly thinks is a fearless fighter against crime and tyranny who has paid a fearsome price for his ideals.

The Judge even repeats with seeming approval the claim of a witness that Litvinenko was not financially acquisitive – a comment which in light of Litvinenko's longstanding association with Berezovsky would in Russia raise a hollow laugh.

Given such opinions it is completely understandable that Lugovoi, Kovtun and the Russian authorities decided to have nothing to do with the Inquiry fearing that their presence would simply legitimise a process that was fundamentally flawed and which was predestined to find them guilty.

THE WAY FORWARD FROM HERE?

Since the Inquiry is not a court there is no appeal against its findings.

Lugovoi and Kovtun might conceivably try to get the European Court of Human Rights to set the findings of the Inquiry aside on the grounds that the Inquiry has violated the presumption of innocence and was conducted in a way that has violated their rights to a fair trial.

The problems involved in doing that seem to me overwhelming, and if I was them I wouldn't bother.

Having said that one should not overstate the political importance of what has happened.

Far from welcoming the Inquiry's report the British government is deeply embarrassed by it, as the tepid tone of the statement from Home Secretary Theresa May purporting to welcome it shows.

Though there has been a predictable flood of angry commentary in the British and US media, the only action the British government has taken is to protest to the

Russian ambassador, and to impose asset freezes on Lugovoi's and Kovtun's non-existent assets in Britain.

As for the British public – now hardened by US and British drone attacks to state sponsored killings – the Litvinenko affair is for them simply a real life James Bond story. It has if anything enhanced their cynical but nonetheless real respect for Putin and Russia as a man and a country not to be trifled with.

The Russian government for its part has simply shrugged its shoulders at an outcome it always expected.

That does not mean that the Litvinenko affair is entirely without significance.

What it has revealed – not for the first time – is the pathological Russophobia of a large part of the British establishment – including not just the media and the political class but as it turns out a part of the British judiciary and legal establishment, which has willingly set aside some of its most cherished principles in order to find Russia guilty of the murder of a single man.

It is in fact the British legal system which has come out worst from this affair.

As for who murdered Litvinenko, I am fairly sure the Russian authorities by now know the truth, though I doubt the British authorities do.

One day we may find out from the Russian archives what the truth is. I suspect that will be a long time in the future, when it will only be of interest to historians.

Until then the only thing we can say with reasonable confidence is that the Russian authorities almost certainly had nothing to do with Litvinenko's murder, even if Lugovoi and possibly Kovtun perhaps did.

That is not perhaps a very satisfactory conclusion to this case, but it is the most we can say as we finally draw down the curtain on the whole affair.

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The Iraq War's Known Unknowns

Exclusive: In September 2002, as the Bush-43 administration was rolling out its ad campaign for invading Iraq because of alleged WMD, the Joint Chiefs of Staff received a briefing about the paucity of WMD evidence. But the report was shelved and the war went on, as ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern explains.

By Ray McGovern

There is a lot more than meets the eye in the newly revealed Joint Chiefs of Staff intelligence briefing of Sept. 5, 2002, which showed there was a lack of evidence that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction (WMD) just as President George W. Bush's administration was launching its sales job for the Iraq War.

The briefing report and its quick demise amount to an indictment not only of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld but also of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Richard Myers, who is exposed once again as a Rumsfeld patsy who put politics ahead of his responsibility to American soldiers and to the nation as a whole.

In a Jan. 24 [report](#) at Politico entitled "What Donald Rumsfeld Knew We Didn't Know About Iraq," journalist John Walcott presents a wealth of detail about the JCS intelligence report of Sept. 5, 2002, offering additional corroboration that the Bush administration lied to the American people about the evidence of WMD in Iraq.

The JCS briefing noted, for example: "Our knowledge of the Iraqi (nuclear) weapons program is based largely perhaps 90% on analysis of imprecise intelligence."

Small wonder that the briefing report was dead on arrival in Rumsfeld's in-box. After all, it proved that the intelligence evidence justifying war was, in Rumsfeldian terms, a "known unknown." When he received it on Sept. 5 or 6, the Defense Secretary deep-sixed it but not before sending it on Sept. 9 to Gen. Richard Myers (who he already knew had a copy) with a transparently disingenuous CYA note: "Please take a look at this material as to what we don't know about WMD. It is big. Thanks."

Absent was any notation such as "I guess we should tell the White House to call off its pro-war sales campaign based on Iraq possessing WMD since we don't got the goods." Without such a direct instruction, Rumsfeld could be sure that Gen. Myers would not take the matter further.

Myers had already proven his "company man" mettle by scotching a legal inquiry that he had just authorized to provide the armed forces with guidance on

permitted interrogation techniques. All that it took to ensure a hasty Myers retreat was a verbal slap-down from Rumsfeld's general counsel, William James Haynes II, as soon as Haynes got wind of the inquiry in November 2002. (More on that below.)

The more interesting story, in my view, is not that Rumsfeld was corrupt (yawn, yawn), but that so was his patsy, Air Force Gen. Richard Myers, the country's top uniformed military officer at the time. Myers has sported a well-worn coat of blue Teflon up until now.

Even John Walcott, a member of the Knight-Ridder team that did the most responsible pre-Iraq-War reporting, lets the hapless Myers too easily off the hook in writing: "Myers, who knew as well as anyone the significance of the report, did not distribute it beyond his immediate military colleagues and civilian boss, which a former aide said was consistent with the role of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs."

Principal Military Adviser to the President

That "former aide" is dead wrong on the last point, and this is key. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs works directly for **two** bosses: the President of the United States, whom he serves as the principal military adviser, and the Secretary of Defense. The JCS Chairman has the statutory authority indeed, the duty to seek direct access to the President to advise him in such circumstances, bearing on war or peace.

Indeed, in his 2009 memoir, *Eyes on the Horizon*, Gen. Myers himself writes, "I was legally obligated to provide the President my best military advice, not the best advice as approved by the Secretary of Defense."

But in reality, Myers wouldn't and he didn't. And that quite simply is why Rumsfeld picked him and others like him for leading supporting roles in the Pentagon. And so the Iraq War came and, with it, catastrophe for the Middle East (with related disorder now spreading into Europe).

Could Gen. Myers have headed off the war had he had the courage to assert his prerogative to go directly to President Bush and tell him the truth? Sad to say, with Bush onboard as an eager "war president" and with Vice President Dick Cheney and Rumsfeld intimidating the timid Secretary of State Colin Powell and with National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice and CIA Director George Tenet fully compliant, it is not likely that Myers could have put the brakes on the rush to invade Iraq simply by appealing to the President.

After all, the JCS briefing coincided with the start of the big sales pitch for the Iraq War based on alarming claims about Iraq possessing WMD and possibly

developing a nuclear bomb. As White House chief of staff Andrew Card explained the September timing of the ad campaign, "From a marketing point of view, you don't introduce new products in August."

Just three days after the date of the JCS intelligence report depicting the shallowness of the intelligence on the issue of WMD in Iraq, the White House, with the help of The New York Times and other "mainstream media," launched a major propaganda offensive.

On Sept. 8, 2002, a New York Times front-pager headlined "US Says Hussein Intensifies Quest for A-Bomb Parts" by Judith Miller and Michael Gordon got the juggernaut rolling downhill to war. Their piece featured some aluminum tubes that they mistakenly thought could be used only for nuclear centrifuges (when they were actually for conventional artillery). Iraq's provocative behavior, wrote the Times, has "brought Iraq and the United States to the brink of war."

Or as NSC Advisor Rice summed it up on the Sunday talk shows later that day, "we don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud."

But it was clear the fix was in even earlier. The British "Downing Street Minutes" of July 23, 2002, show that Tenet told his British counterpart, Richard Dearlove, that as Dearlove described the message to Prime Minister Tony Blair that "Military action was now seen as inevitable. Bush wanted to remove Saddam, through military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD. But the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy."

However, despite the obstacles, Richard Myers, like so many of us, took a solemn oath to support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies foreign and domestic. For many of us who wore the uniform and took "duty, honor, country" seriously, it is hard to give Myers a get-out-of-jail-free card when it comes to blame for the Iraq War.

No matter the odds against success, his duty was to go directly to the President and make the case. If he was rebuffed, he should have quit and gone public, in my view. (How long has it been since anyone of high rank has quit on principle?)

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs quitting over plans for an unnecessary war? Not even The New York Times and The Washington Post as fully in the tank as they were for the Iraq War would have been able to suppress that story in 2002. And, had Myers gone public he might have succeeded in injecting slippery grease under the rollout of Card's "new product."

Imagine what might have happened had Myers gone public at that point. It is all too easy to assume that Bush and Cheney would have gotten their war anyway. But

who can tell for sure? Sometimes it takes just one senior official with integrity to spark a hemorrhage of honesty. However the outcome would have turned out at least Myers would have been spared the pain of looking into the mirror every morning and thinking back on what might have been.

A Modern Rumsfeld General

This was not the first time that Myers, who served as JCS chairman from 2001 to 2005, was derelict in duty by playing the toady. He had acquiesced in Bush's and Rumsfeld's approval of torture in February 2002, even before going along with a gross violation of international law launching the attack on Iraq absent any imminent threat and without the required approval by the UN Security Council.

On torture, the seldom mentioned smoking gun was a two-page executive memorandum signed by George W. Bush on Feb. 7, 2002, in which the President declared that Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions did not apply to Al Qaeda and Taliban detainees. Instead, they would be treated "humanely and, to the extent appropriate and consistent with military necessity, in a manner consistent with the principles of Geneva," the memo said, using vague and permissive language that, in effect, opened the door to torture and other abuses. Gen. Myers was one of eight addressees.

On May 11, 2009 Myers was in Washington peddling his memoir *Eyes on the Horizon* and spoke at a Harvard Business School Alumni dinner. I seldom go to such affairs, but in this case I was glad I had paid my dues, for here was a unique opportunity to quiz Myers. I began by thanking him for acknowledging in his book "the Geneva Conventions were a fundamental part of our military culture." Then I asked what he had done when he received Bush's Feb. 7, 2002 memorandum unilaterally creating exceptions to Geneva.

"Just read my book," Myers said. I told him I had, and cited a couple of sentences from my copy: "You write that you told a senior Pentagon official, Douglas Feith, 'I feel very strongly about this. And if Rumsfeld doesn't defend the Geneva Conventions, I'll contradict him in front of the President.' Did you?"

Myers claimed that he had fought the good fight before the President decided. But there was no tinge of regret. The sense the general left with us was this: if the President wanted to bend Geneva out of shape, what was a mere Chairman of the Joint Chiefs to do?

Pushing my luck, I noted that a Senate Armed Services Committee report, "Inquiry Into the Treatment of Detainees in U.S. Custody," had been issued just two weeks earlier (on April 23, 2009). It found that Myers had abruptly aborted an in-

depth legal review of interrogation techniques that all four armed services had urgently requested and that he authorized in the fall of 2002. They were eager to get an authoritative ruling on the lawfulness of various interrogation techniques some of which were already being used at Guantanamo.

Accordingly, Myers's legal counsel, Navy Captain Jane Dalton, had directed her staff to initiate a thorough legal and policy review of interrogation techniques. It had just gotten under way in November 2002 when Rumsfeld's general counsel, William James Haynes II, ordered Myers to stop the review.

Haynes "wanted to keep it much more close-hold," Dalton told the Senate committee, so she ordered her staff to stop the legal analysis. She testified that this was the only time in her career that she had been asked to stop working on a request that came to her for review.

I asked Gen. Myers why he halted the in-depth legal review. "I stopped the broad review," Myers replied, "but I asked Dalton to do her personal review and keep me advised." When Senate committee members asked him about stopping the review, Myers could not remember.

On Nov. 27, 2002, shortly after Haynes told Myers to stop Dalton's review despite persisting legal concerns in the military services Haynes sent Rumsfeld a one-page memo recommending that he approve all but three of 18 techniques requested by the interrogators in Guantanamo.

Techniques like stress positions, nudity, exploitation of phobias (like fear of dogs), deprivation of light, and auditory stimuli were all recommended for approval. On Dec. 2, 2002, Rumsfeld signed Haynes's recommendation, adding a handwritten note referring to the use of stress positions: "I stand for 8-10 hours a day. Why is standing limited to 4 hours?"

A Different JCS Chairman

Other JCS chairmen have not been as compliant as Myers was. For instance, a decade after Myers acceded to Bush's rush to war in Iraq, JSC Chairman Martin Dempsey smelled a rat when Secretary of State John Kerry along with neocons, liberal hawks and the mainstream media rushed toward full-scale war on Syria by pinning the blame on President Bashar al-Assad for the fatal sarin gas attack outside Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013.

Comparisons can be invidious, but Dempsey is bright, principled, and no one's patsy. It did not take him long to realize that another "regime change" scheme was in play with plans to get the U.S. directly involved in a shooting war with Syria. As more intelligence came in, the sarin attack increasingly looked like a false-flag attack carried out by radical jihadists to draw the U.S. military in

on their side.

This new war could have started by syllogism: (a) get President Barack Obama to draw a "red line" against the use of chemical weapons in Syria; (b) stage a chemical attack that would be quickly blamed on Assad for violating the red line; and (c) mousetrapping Obama into making good on his threat of "enormous consequences."

That Obama pulled back at the last minute was a shock to those who felt sure they had found a way to destroy the Syrian army and clear the way for Assad's violent removal even if the result would have been a likely victory for Al Qaeda and/or the Islamic State. After all, neocon/liberal-hawk thinking has long favored "regime change" whatever the consequences, as the wars in Iraq and Libya have demonstrated.

But Gen. Dempsey became a fly in the regime-changers' ointment. In contrast to Myers, Dempsey apparently saw the need to go directly to the President to head off another unnecessary war. The evidence suggests that this is precisely what he did and that he probably bypassed Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel in the process since time was of the essence.

Dempsey had already told Congress that a major attack on Syria should require congressional authorization and he was aware that the "evidence" adduced to implicate the Syrian government was shaky at best. Besides, according to investigative reporter Seymour Hersh, British intelligence told the JCS that they had obtained a sample of the sarin used in the Aug. 21 attack and it did not match the sarin known to be in Syrian army stocks.

Actually, it is no secret that Dempsey helped change President Obama's mind between when Kerry spoke on the afternoon of Aug. 30, accusing Damascus of responsibility and all but promising an imminent U.S. attack on Syria, and when Obama announced less than a day later that he would not attack but rather would seek authorization from Congress.

On the early afternoon of Aug. 31, Obama was unusually explicit in citing Dempsey as indicating why there was no need to rush into another war. Obama said, "the [JCS] Chairman has indicated to me that our capacity to execute this mission is not time-sensitive: it will be effective tomorrow, next week, or one month from now."

The failure to stampede Obama and the U.S. military into a bombing campaign against Syria was a major defeat for those who wanted another shot at a Mideast "regime change," primarily the neocons and their "liberal interventionist" allies who still hold sway inside the State Department as well as Washington's

top think tanks and the mainstream U.S. news media not to mention the Israelis, Saudis, Turks and others who insist that "Assad must go."

Not surprisingly, on Sept. 1, 2013, as the plans to bomb, bomb, bomb Syria were shoved into a drawer at the Pentagon, Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham were in high dudgeon particularly at Dempsey's audacity in putting the kibosh on their clearly expressed desire to attack Syria post-haste.

(By happenstance, I was given a personal window into the widespread distress over the outbreak of peace, when I found myself sharing a "green room" with some of the most senior neocons at CNN's main studio in Washington. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[How War on Syria Lost Its Way.](#)"])

Ray McGovern works with Tell the Word, a publishing ministry of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. He served as an Army infantry/intelligence officer in the Sixties and then for 27 years as a CIA analyst. He is co-founder of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS).

The Limits of Jihadi Nihilism

The West has committed many sins against the Muslim world, making moral pronouncements from Washington, London or Paris ring hollow, but more and more Muslims are recognizing that the violent nihilism of jihadi terror is morally reprehensible and must be stopped, says ex-CIA official Graham E. Fuller.

By Graham E. Fuller

It is hard to find even the smallest silver lining in the ongoing series of jihadist outrages that now proliferate with each daily news report. The immoral and cynical exploitation of religion (a constant of human history) is ultimately about power and intimidation. The phenomenon shows no signs of coming to an end and at this point in history happens to most dramatically center in the Muslim world.

We now have the murder of the Istanbul tourists, and Pakistan's two terrible recent attacks on educational institutions as merely the latest. Boko Haram in Nigeria may even lead the pack in wanton killings by zombie packs.

Political violence has always existed. But what are its "natural limits?" We know about the negative legacies of colonialism and the impact of countless Western invasions and wars and the struggle to control developing world energy

resources. We know about U.S. wars that have killed over a million Muslims over the past decade.

We understand that the sources of political, economic and social desperation and rage still exist. We understand the suffering of Palestinians, over half a century now, under harsh and unyielding Israeli occupation. We understand resistance by any peoples, in any country, to foreign invasion and occupation.

But not even the most militant political vision can justify the wanton killing of civilians simply for the sake of spectacle and show of power. Most moral ideas almost anywhere, religious or non-religious, can be pushed to levels of blind fanaticism that discredit the original moral concept. Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, yes, all do it.

And take socialism, the vision of an economically just society. In the Soviet Union under Stalin and in China under Mao abstract socialist principles ended up justifying the deaths of more than 40 million people, mainly in the quest for power.

The realities of those withering experiences forced Western socialists to acknowledge how even their own idealistic principles could be perverted into an orgy of death and brutality. In a different way the concept of sacrosanct free markets may be reaching the outer limits of economic and social tolerance in the U.S.

Is the tide of jihadi violence cresting in the Muslim world? Muslims themselves are of course the primary victims of these nihilistic acts today. And as the violence grows, there are lessons to be learned. Muslim declarations as well as anecdotal evidence makes it clear to that the vast majority of Muslims are horrified at what is being done in the name of their faith by these groups.

Still, in the end it will only be Muslims who are able to rein in such fanatical excesses within their own communities and mosques. They are the only ones with the moral and cultural credibility to pass judgment on the theology, ideology, and the acts of their fellows. U.S. government or Israeli interpretations of Islam count for nothing, and are seen only as self-serving.

“Why don’t Muslims ever condemn terrorism?”□ That is a refrain we regularly hear in the West. Yet try googling “muslim condemnation of terrorism” and look at the near half-a-million hits that come up.

When and how will Muslims be able to seize some degree of their own destiny in these developments? In many places Muslim communities, such as in Syria, are often pawns in a greater game beset by warring militias. Ditto in Iraq. Or Yemen, or Libya.

In large parts of the Muslim world today, it is dangerous for your health to speak out on issues of moral limits in implementing political Islam. As long as the Middle East is caught in domestic struggles and foreign wars, a high degree of religious, political and moral bravery is required to speak up, and risk assassination.

Muslims in the West, while safer, also pay for such jihadi-inspired terrorism: they are often held collectively responsible for any Muslim act of terror anywhere. It's tough to be a Muslim in the West these days. We've all heard about FWM, Flying While Muslim, something akin to Driving While Black.

Still, for these Muslims in the West the relatively safe environment imposes new intellectual and moral responsibilities upon them to openly discuss the implications of the perversions of their faith that now seem to be probing the outer limits. Only they can do it.

In fact, it is highly likely that the greatest intellectual breakthroughs in the contemporary interpretation of Islam and condemnation of its current outrages will take place specifically among Muslims in the West, not in the tortured Middle East. But even here, Western Muslims can be accused by some as "failing to offer support to the Muslim cause." (Just as many American Jews are deeply hesitant about public criticism of Israel even as they privately condemn Netanyahu's policies.)

And let's face it, "condemning terrorism" is not enough. Trying to define terrorism in some objective way agreeable to all has proven a near impossible task as each observer finds the political agenda of one group more "understandable" than others.

Indeed, while all killing is bad, human society has long created legal hierarchies of immorality (evil) even within the spectrum of killing. The state kills its own with near impunity. Internationally, war is war and "understandable." Murder may be murder, but even murder is still ranked by first, second and third degrees, along with various shades of manslaughter and criminal negligence, all with differing legal and social responses and penalties.

Muslims and other observers may differ on which elements of terrorism or political violence are more justifiable than others. But the wanton acts of the Boko Haram, ISIS, Al Qaeda branches, and Taliban rogue groups (among others) have to rank near the top of the list for outright moral condemnation, whatever one's views of politics. The first precondition in the Muslim world is to lower the heat whereby such discussions become permissible.

Sadly, we are going to witness many more horrors from these murderous jihadi groups even as these movements move towards the point of self-collapse. The clock would seem to be running out on them, their level of social acceptance exhausted; they have stretched their “principles” to the breaking point. The backlash from fellow Muslims, the only one that really counts in the long run, is underway. The West should “lead from behind” to the extent possible on rolling this stuff back.

As the Chinese say, “things that move to extremes must inevitably return to center.”

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>

US Abets Saudi War Crimes in Yemen

U.S. officials are quick to decry “human rights violations” in “enemy” states, but different rules apply to “allies” such as Saudi Arabia, which is committing war crimes in Yemen and executing dissidents at home while the Obama administration aids and abets the atrocities, writes Marjorie Cohn for TeleSUR.

By Marjorie Cohn

Saudi Arabia has engaged in war crimes, and the United States is aiding and abetting them by providing the Saudis with military assistance. In September 2015, Saudi aircraft killed 135 wedding celebrants in Yemen. The air strikes have killed 2,800 civilians, including 500 children. Human Rights Watch charges that these bombings “have indiscriminately killed and injured civilians.”

This conflict is part of a regional power struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Saudis are bombing Yemen in order to defeat the Houthi rebels, who have been resisting government repression for a long time. Iran has been accused of supporting the Houthis, although Iran denies this. Yemen is strategically located on a narrow waterway that links the Gulf of Aden with the Red Sea. Much of the world’s oil passes through this waterway.

A United Nations panel of experts concluded in October 2015 that the Saudi-led coalition had committed “grave violations” of civilians’ human rights. They include indiscriminate attacks; targeting markets, a camp for displaced Yemenis, and humanitarian aid warehouses; and intentionally preventing the delivery of

humanitarian assistance. The panel was also concerned that the coalition considered civilian neighborhoods, including Marra and Sadah, as legitimate strike zones. The International Committee of the Red Cross documented 100 attacks on hospitals.

Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions prohibits the targeting of civilians. It provides that parties to a conflict “shall at all times distinguish between the civilian population and combatants and between civilian objects and military objectives and accordingly shall direct their operations only against military objectives.”

Saudi Arabia is also engaging in serious individual human rights violations. In January 2016, the Saudi government executed 47 people, including a prominent pacifist Shia cleric, who had been a leader of the 2011 Arab Spring in Saudi Arabia. Many of those executed were tortured during their detention and denied due process. Most were beheaded.

This horrifies us when ISIS does it. Yet State Department spokesman John Kirby protested weakly, “We believe that diplomatic engagement and direct conversations remain essential in working through differences.”

Also in January 2016, Palestinian artist and poet Ashraf Fayadh, a Saudi citizen whose family is from Gaza, was sentenced to death by beheading. His alleged crimes: “apostasy,” or renouncing Islam, and photographing women. “Throughout this whole process,” Amnesty International UK found, “Ashraf was denied access to a lawyer, a clear violation of international human rights law.”

Both Saudi Arabia and the United States are parties to the Geneva Conventions, which define as grave breaches willful killing, willfully causing great suffering or serious injury to body or health, and torture or inhuman treatment. Grave breaches are considered war crimes.

Also prohibited are “the passing of sentences and the carrying out of executions without previous judgment pronounced by a regularly constituted court, affording all the judicial guarantees which are recognized as indispensable by civilized peoples.”

Although neither the United States nor Saudi Arabia is party to the Rome Statute for the International Criminal Court, that statute sets forth standard aider and abettor liability provisions. It says that an individual can be convicted of war crimes if he or she “aids, abets or otherwise assists” in the commission or attempted commission of the crime, “including providing the means for its commission.”

The U.S. government is the primary supplier of Saudi weapons. In November 2015,

the U.S. sold \$1.29 billion worth of arms to Saudi Arabia. It included more than 10,000 bombs, munitions, and weapons parts manufactured by Raytheon and Boeing, as well as bunker busters, and laser-guided and “general purpose” bombs.

A month earlier, the United States had approved a \$11.25 billion sale of combat ships to Saudi Arabia. The U.S. also provides intelligence and logistical support to the Saudi-led coalition. During the past five years, the U.S. government has sold the Saudis \$100 billion worth of arms. These sales have greatly enriched U.S. defense contractors.

Why has the United States “usually looked the other way or issued carefully calibrated warnings in human rights reports as the Saudi royal family cracked down on dissent and free speech and allowed its elite to fund Islamic extremists,” in the words of *New York Times*’ David Sanger? “In return,” Sanger writes, “Saudi Arabia became America’s most dependable filling station, a regular supplier of intelligence, and a valuable counterweight to Iran.” Saudi Arabia, and close U.S. ally Israel, opposed the Iran nuclear deal.

In April 2015, the U.S. government prevented nine Iranian ships loaded with relief supplies from reaching Yemen. President Barack Obama also sent an aircraft carrier to the area to enforce the Saudi embargo on outside supplies. According to UN estimates, 21 million people lack basic services, and over 1.5 million have been displaced. UNICEF notes that six million people don’t have enough food.

Moreover, the U.S. government seeks to prevent scrutiny of Saudi human rights abuses in Yemen. In October 2015, the United States blocked a UN Security Council sanctions committee proposal that would have required the committee’s chair to contact “all relevant parties to the conflict and stress their responsibility to respect and uphold international humanitarian law and human rights law.”

The U.S. government is also violating domestic law by providing the Saudis with military aid. The Leahy Law prohibits U.S. assistance to foreign security forces or military officers “if the Secretary of State has credible information that such unit has committed a gross violation of human rights.”

Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vermont, for whom the law was named, told *Foreign Policy*: “The reports of civilian casualties from Saudi air attacks in densely populated areas [in Yemen] compel us to ask if these operations, supported by the United States, violate” the Leahy Law.

Furthermore, 22 U.S.C. section 2304 provides that “no security assistance may be provided to any government which engages in a consistent pattern of gross

violations of internationally recognized human rights.”

The Arms Trade Treaty obligates member states to monitor exports of weapons and make sure they do not end up being used to commit human rights abuses. Although the U.S. has not ratified the treaty, we have signed it. Under the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, a signatory is prohibited from taking action inconsistent with the object and purpose of the treaty.

The U.S. government should immediately halt arms transfers and military support to Saudi Arabia and support an independent investigation into U.S. arms transfers and war crimes in Yemen. The United States must stop participating in and call for an end to the de facto blockade so that humanitarian assistance can reach those in need, engage in diplomatic efforts to end the conflict, and ratify the Arms Trade Treaty.

In an interesting twist, the Saudis contributed \$10 million to the Clinton Foundation before Hillary Clinton became Secretary of State. In 2011, the year after the State Department had documented myriad serious human rights violations by Saudi Arabia, Hillary Clinton oversaw a \$29 billion sale of advanced fighter jets to the Saudis, declaring it was in our national interest.

The deal was “a top priority” for Secretary Clinton, according to Andrew Shapiro, an assistant secretary of state. Two months before the deal was clinched, Boeing, manufacturer of one of the fighter jets the Saudis sought to acquire, contributed \$900,000 to the Clinton Foundation.

Hillary Clinton now says the U.S should pursue “closer strategic cooperation” with Saudi Arabia.

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[<http://www.telesur.tv/english/opinion/Saudi-Arabia-Is-Killing-Civilians-with-US-Bombs-20160125-0004.html>]

Yemen as Vietnam or Afghanistan

From the Archive: With U.S. weapons, Saudi Arabia is waging a brutal air war on impoverished Yemen, turning a long-simmering civil war into a proxy fight with regional rival Iran, a scenario that reminded retired U.S. emissary William R.

Polk of his work for President Kennedy on an earlier Yemeni war.

By William R. Polk (Originally published on April 1, 2015)

As the events unfold with the Saudi and Egyptian engagement in Yemen, I was reminded of my discussion with Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser on "his" Yemen war, sometimes called the North Yemen Civil War that began in 1962, became a stalemate and finally ended in 1970. As Mark Twain may have said, "history doesn't repeat but sometimes it rhymes." The rhymes, at least, seem unmistakable.

In the course of our first lengthy talk on Yemen, Nasser (rather angrily) replied to one of my comments, "you don't think I will win the war, do you?"



"No, Mr. President," I replied, "I don't."

"Well, you would be surprised to know that I have acquired your [America's] secret analyses of guerrilla warfare."

"Oh, Mr. President," I shook my head, "I know the people who wrote those reports. They are rubbish. I would throw them away if I were you."

He just looked at me, even more angrily, thinking I suppose, that having pulled off an intelligence coup, I was trying to trick him by claiming that it was really not a coup but a mistake. Then he said, "I know how to use helicopters, too." (Their use was then being touted by our military as our great weapon against the Viet Minh fighters in Vietnam.)

"And you lost one yesterday, didn't you?" I jibed.

"How did you find out about that?"

"Well, Mr. President, we spend a lot of money on the CIA finding out about such things and one way or another they usually do. That is what the CIA is supposed to do. They don't always succeed but sometimes they do."

"Well," Nasser retorted, "you American's think you know all about everything, and you don't even have any of your people in Sanaa and none up in the north where the fighting is going on. You don't know anything about Yemen." Then, without thinking of the implication, I suppose, he said, "You should go see."

"Mr. President," I quickly said. "I regard that as an invitation." Impolitely, I then stood up. He looked at me with narrow, angry eyes. He obviously had not meant what I had inferred.

"All right, go see," he said. "I will give instructions that you can go anywhere you want, talk to anyone you want, see everything."

"But, of course, I cannot even get there without your help," I said.

"You can have my plane."

Rather off-handedly and not warmly, we shook hands. I said goodbye and rushed back to our embassy and wrote an "eyes only" message to President John Kennedy. I did not want it scattered around our government so I prevailed upon the CIA station chief to send it by his rather more restricted route. It was encrypted and sent in three batches. Before the second batch got sent, a reply came back: "go."

Off to Yemen

So I went, and Nasser was as good as his word. I spent hours with his military commander, Abdul Hakim Amr who gleefully unfolded the huge map of showing the planned Egyptian sweep of the mountains to the east (while Anwar Sadat, then rather on the fringes of the Egyptian Establishment, angrily protested against Amr's indiscretion with a foreigner. He never forgave me for being there).

I went up to the supposed battle zone, near Saada, went out to all the villages where the war was, according to the CIA and British intelligence, being fought, met with the new Yemeni Leader Sallal and all the new Yemeni leaders, and then flew back to Cairo.

Disclosure (as they like to say in the media): I was bribed. As a going-away present, I was given 500 pounds of Yemeni coffee. Nothing so welcome to a traveler as 500 pounds of anything! But thanks to me, our Cairo embassy was "in coffee" for years!

I did not see President Nasser on my return but sent him a message through the

Governor of Cairo, Salah Dessouki, that I hoped to go down to the Saudi-Yemen frontier to meet with the guerrilla leaders, and somewhat jokingly I said to my friend Salah, "I want to be very sure that President Nasser knows exactly where I am going. And, Salah, please tell the President not to do anything silly."

Salah burst out laughing and said, "Bill, I certainly will not say that to the President!"

So I flew to Riyadh and, with the permission of then Crown Prince Faisal, with whom I had a rather close relationship, I took the American ambassador's airplane and flew down to Najran where I spent an evening with a group of the guerrilla leaders.

As we sat around a campfire, outside of Najran, we drank tea, ate a lamb roast and then, in a fairly typical desert encounter, we had a poetry duel. By pure luck, I happened to know the poem being recited and I capped the verse of one of the men. In their terms, that was like a passport for me. And we could then have a serious and frank discussion on the war, the strengths and weaknesses of the royalist forces and what might bring the war to a conclusion.

Our talk went on almost all night. Finally, just at first light, I had barely gotten to sleep when the first of four Egyptian but Russian-piloted TU 16 jet bombers arrived overhead from Luxor. They dropped 15 200 kg bombs on the oasis and on us. My pilot was just worried about his plane. The rest of us had other worries!

The biggest danger, in fact, was from the shrapnel falling from the anti-aircraft cannon. They were totally ineffective against the TU 16s as they could not reach them. (One of my aides, an Air Force colonel informed me that the TU-16s were at about 23,000 feet and the 90 mm cannon would reach about 18,000 feet.)

But a few people around us were killed. Another of my aides, a Marine Colonel, presented me with a wicked looking piece of one of the bombs. It had fallen or been blown not far from the place I was lying.

On our return flight to Riyadh, I wrote Nasser a "thank you" note, saying "Mr. President, I am most grateful for your kind hospitality in Egypt and Yemen, but I don't think you needed to entertain me in other countries."

Our ambassador, my good and old friend, John Badeau, was not amused. He said, "Bill, just say thank you and, please, don't hurry back!"

It was a few months later when I next saw President Nasser. We had a long and very frank talk then about Yemen. I compared it to Vietnam which I was already

sure would be a disaster. I pointed to the huge cost to us of Vietnam, how it disrupted all our domestic social goals and how it poisoned Americans trust in one another. I warned that in my opinion, Yemen might do the same to Egypt, disrupting what Nasser was trying to do to uplift his people and end their tragic poverty.

In our talk, Nasser said, "I certainly didn't agree with you, Bill, but I knew you would tell me the truth as you saw it." Somehow, the Israelis found out about this and later the chief of Prime Minister Golda Meir's cabinet, Mordachai Gazit told me, "We know that President Nasser trusts you."

As I was leaving, Nasser took me out to my car and even opened the car door for me. His guards were as astonished as I was, Apparently, he had never before done this. As we shook hands, he said, "Well, Bill, where are you off to this time?"

"This time, Mr. President, I am not going to tell you!"

He burst out laughing as did I. We did not meet again but our frankness and respect later enabled me to work out the 1970 ceasefire on Suez with him shortly before his death.

It is hard to believe that history now seems to be repeating with Egypt and Saudi Arabia again engaged in a counter-guerrilla war in Yemen! For Nasser, it was Egypt's Vietnam. Will the new Yemen war be Egypt's (and Saudi Arabia's) Afghanistan? I think it is very likely. All of the signs point in that direction.

And, as I have laid out in numerous essays on Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Somalia, Mali and Algeria, and in my little book *Violent Politics*, guerrilla wars are almost never "won" but usually drain the supposedly dominant power of its wealth, moral position and political unity.

William R. Polk is a veteran foreign policy consultant, author and professor who taught Middle Eastern studies at Harvard. President John F. Kennedy appointed Polk to the State Department's Policy Planning Council where he served during the Cuban Missile Crisis. His books include: *Violent Politics: Insurgency and Terrorism*; *Understanding Iraq*; *Understanding Iran*; *Personal History: Living in Interesting Times*; *Distant Thunder: Reflections on the Dangers of Our Times*; and *Humpty Dumpty: The Fate of Regime Change*.

Can US Break with Jihadist Allies?

Exclusive: The Obama administration finds itself caught in the contradictions of its Syrian policy, having backed radical jihadists to achieve another “regime change” but now finding that its opportunism is spreading chaos beyond the Mideast into Europe. But can the U.S. adjust course and abandon its jihadist clients, asks Joe Lauria.

By Joe Lauria (Updated on Jan. 25 with new last two paragraphs)

The passage of a major U.N. Security Council resolution is like a cheap high: the euphoria wears off pretty quickly. Such was last month’s unanimous adoption of a “peace plan” to end nearly five years of Syrian bloodshed.

With Monday’s start date for a planned ceasefire and the launch of negotiations already put off, it’s looking increasingly unlikely that the talks will start any time soon. The major obstacle is deciding who will represent the opposition across the table from the government. And that hinges on the question of who is a terrorist in Syria. It doesn’t help that world governments have failed since the League of Nations to agree on a treaty legally defining terrorism.

Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov met in Geneva on Wednesday and the two were unable to decide who the Syrian terrorists are that should be excluded from the negotiations.

They agree on excluding the Islamic State and al-Nusra Front (Al Qaeda’s affiliate) who have already been eliminated from participation. But what about the myriad other opposition groups, some of whom collaborate closely with Nusra and other extremists?

A hundred of them were melded together by Saudi Arabia in Riyadh last November. But they want Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to step down immediately. That’s a complete non-starter as the U.N. plan would allow him to stay on for six months making way for a transitional government until a new constitution is written and a general election held in 2017. Kerry has been blasted by neoconservatives for agreeing to this compromise and for allowing Assad to run again in that election.

The U.S. compromised on that point after being spurred on by the refugee crisis that is spreading disorder into Europe and by Russia’s entry into the war against the Islamic State and other jihadist groups. But there is so far little compromise on the question of terrorism.

Putin’s Challenge

Moscow's and Washington's disagreement goes back to the beginning of the Syrian civil war, as I reported more than three years ago. In September, Russian President Vladimir Putin went a step further in accusing the U.S. of supporting terrorists in Syria in his address to the U.N. General Assembly.

"The Islamic State itself did not come out of nowhere," Putin said. "It was initially developed as a weapon against undesirable secular regimes." He said it was irresponsible "to manipulate extremist groups and use them to achieve your political goals, hoping that later you'll find a way to get rid of them or somehow eliminate them."

He made it clear he was speaking of the U.S., when he added: "I'm urged to ask those who created this situation: do you at least realize now what you've done? But I'm afraid that this question will remain unanswered, because they have never abandoned their policy, which is based on arrogance, exceptionalism and impunity."

Putin did not mention clear evidence he was certainly aware of from the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency. An August 2012 DIA document declassified by a judge says that Washington, Ankara and the Gulf States were helping to establish a Salafist principality in eastern Syria to pressure Assad and that it could team up with extremists on the Iraqi side of the border to form an Islamic State, the document uses that exact phrase. Then DIA chief Gen. Mike Flynn later told Al Jazeera that this was a "willful decision in Washington," not the U.S. merely turning a blind eye to what was happening.

The U.S. has long supported unsavory groups to reach short-term U.S. interests. Washington argues it is vetting what groups it supports, but even the Daily Beast (a big supporter of neoconservative regime-change strategies) has called this into question, reporting that CIA-backed rebels fight in tandem with Al Qaeda.

In his speech Putin called for a coalition similar to the Soviet-U.S. alliance in the Second World War to fight the most fearsome terrorist force in history, Adolf Hitler's Nazis. Putin argued that Syria's military is the only effective ground force (along with the Kurds) against the Islamic State and that all nations who really want to defeat it should work with Assad's army and fight the groups trying to overthrow him.

"Similar to the anti-Hitler coalition, it could unite a broad range of parties willing to stand firm against those who, just like the Nazis, sow evil and hatred of humankind," Putin said.

Russia presented a draft resolution at the Security Council that would have

authorized such a grand coalition. But the U.S. flatly rejected it because it still plots Assad's overthrow with groups that Russia says are terrorists. It wasn't a surprise then that two days after Putin spoke that Russia launched its first airstrike was against a CIA-backed group threatening the Assad government. It was a strong message from Moscow to Washington: if you keep supporting extremists in Syria we will strike them.

The U.S. government and its corporate media accused Russia of hitting "moderate" groups instead of the Islamic State (which Russia has repeatedly also targeted). Washington leveled the tired charge that Putin is trying to reestablish the Soviet Empire and takeover the Middle East from the U.S.: a duplicitous case of projecting imperial designs onto another. Perhaps Russia really is worried about terrorism spreading from Syria and really wants to do something to stop it.

Defining Terrorism

Having an international agreement legally defining terrorism would be useful in this circumstance, but coming up with one codified in a treaty has long bedeviled governments. The League of Nations tried and failed. A month after 9/11 the U.N. General Assembly met to agree on an international convention against terrorism, but failed because it couldn't agree on defining terrorism.

Terrorism is only a tactic. But governments seem to conflate it with a cause. It's okay when their side uses it, but not when their enemy does. This has spawned the cliché, "One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter."

If you can objectively isolate the tactic from the cause, an agreed definition may be possible. It would be along the lines of terrorism is an act of violence carried out by non-state actors, targeting civilians for any cause, whether just or not.

The cause of the Palestinians under occupation is just, for instance, but blowing up Israeli civilians in a bus is terrorism. The cause of the Islamic State, as an occupying force, is clearly unjust, and it commits terrorism when it targets civilians. The target is essential to the definition. A non-state actor, even the Islamic State, attacking military targets is using guerilla tactics not terrorism. Some groups, like ISIS, use both.

The lack of a definition has helped states to continue sponsoring terrorism, though they do not directly commit acts of terrorism themselves, as many people contend. States commit war crimes, which is worse. Only non-state actors employ terrorism, which is not under the jurisdiction of the war-crimes International Criminal Court and could only in some instances be considered a war crime.

Without a common understanding of what terrorism is, it is difficult to imagine

agreement between Moscow and Washington to get the Syrian talks started without some extremely deft diplomatic maneuvering. That may still happen amid [reports](#) that the U.N. will invite two sets of opposition groups to satisfy both the U.S. and Russia.

Without such a compromise to get talks started, however slim the chance they will succeed, there is no prospect in sight of an end to the Syrian war until one side wins it militarily.

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Encountering a Sophisticated Putin

Pretty much all that Americans and much of the West get to hear about Russian President Putin is heavy-handed propaganda often read over images of him riding shirtless on a horse. He's either a bully or a buffoon. But editors of a popular German newspaper encountered a much more sophisticated figure, writes Gilbert Doctorow.

By Gilbert Doctorow

I was hesitant to write about Vladimir Putin's recent interview in Germany's mass-circulation *Bild* newspaper because I have published many analytical essays of Putin's speeches and public appearances over the past couple of years and do not wish to provide further justification for those who would view me as a composer for one string violin, an inveterate apologist for the Russian president.

Moreover, when a fellow member of the anti-war movement, Alexander Mercouris, published an appreciation of the interview in *Russia Insider* under the heading "Congrats Germans! This Is How You Do a Putin Interview," it seemed churlish to go against his take on the subject.

However, a couple of additional articles on the *Bild* interview subsequently published in *Russia Insider* have challenged Mercouris's kindly view of the German journalists as being "well-informed and intelligent."

"Putin Schools Top German Journalist Who Smeared Him" makes it clear that *Bild's* chief political editor Nikolaus Blome, formerly with *Der Spiegel*, would never

have consciously done Putin a favor. And the latest *RI* article, a translation from *Sputnik Deutschland* entitled "How Putin Turned the Tables on German Magazine 'Bild'" delivers what I had from the beginning considered to be the reality of this interview: that Putin's impressive showing came in spite of and not because of the journalists' predisposition to him and Russia generally.

The Russia expert Alexander Rahr explains here the logic of Putin agreeing to enter the lion's den for the sake of reaching the tabloid's multi-million readership who, by their demographics, are not easily accessible via the internet and electronic media.

To this I would add something that Rahr seems to have overlooked: the German press is incestuous and newspapers regularly give space to articles coming from their "competitors." Thus, the saucier chunks of the Putin interview also appeared on the front page of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* and other leading newspapers read by the German elites.

In particular, none could ignore the tantalizing message from Putin that Russia was ready to give asylum to Bashar Assad, if necessary, and that it would be less disruptive of relations with the U.S. and other powers than the asylum it had granted to Edward Snowden.

By the same token, excerpts from the televised segments of interview shown on Russian state television also appeared on *Euronews* in Germany and across the Continent, so that the audience that Putin reached with his calm and well-considered statements on the thinking guiding Russian foreign policy was still greater.

Now that I have been drawn into the discussion of the *Bild* interview, I propose to reconsider it using a research tool that no one so far seems to have used: textual analysis. I have compared the transcript published in the German daily with the transcript published by the Russians on kremlin.ru. There were cuts in the German publication as one might well expect given that it is a tabloid with racy photos and a readership having limited patience for serious material.

Insofar as I could tell, the cuts were fairly administered and did not affect the quality of Putin's responses to questions. That, all by itself, is quite extraordinary in our age of dirty tricks. I contrast this upright behavior of the *Bild* editors with *Foreign Affairs* magazine's gutting an article offered in spring 2007 by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in response to the article by Yulia Tymoshenko "Containing Russia," cuts explained at the time with reference to limited space in the journal.

What one might not have expected from *Bild* was the publishers' addition to the

transcript of explanatory remarks (not carried in kremlin.ru) which reveal something important about the personal dynamics between interviewee and interviewers, and in passing illustrate why Vladimir Putin is where he is, at the apex of international politics.

Namely, the editors note repeatedly where Putin slipped into German. This made the strongest impression on them when, towards the end of the interview, the interpreter could not keep up and was given some moments to rest. In that pause, we are told: "Putin begins to spontaneously recite in German the beginning of Heinrich Heine's 'Lorelei,' written in 1824, a German classic. Then Putin abruptly and impassively continues in Russian."

Coincidentally, in an article entitled "This is What Impressed Bild During Its Interview With Putin" published by Sputnik International we find *Bild's* chief political editor Blome acknowledging: "Although I was aware of that, I was still surprised by how well [Putin] speaks German and understands the subtleties of the language." Here, too, Blome mentioned the recitation from "Lorelei."

As Alexander Mercouris observed, Vladimir Putin came to the interview with fresh archival material relating to the meetings that senior SPD politician, and author of Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik* policy Egon Bahr had in Moscow in 1990, when the two countries were still feeling their way towards a post-Cold War security architecture for Europe.

He also came to the meeting fully briefed on a wide range of other important issues including details of the Minsk II accords and the obligations of all parties. From the transcript, it is clear that in question after question Putin was better prepared than the journalists and dealt calmly and authoritatively with each in succession.

But cold intellectual superiority would not have had the effect on his interlocutors that his going the extra mile and reaching out to them in German did, all the more so in an area of high culture that revealed his respect. This was in counterpoint to his critical words at the start of the interview about the unconstructive role played by *Bild* and the German media generally in the conduct of bilateral relations. With Heine, he touched them in a human way and won them over, despite themselves.

It is precisely this combination of intellectual rigor and ability to adapt his message to the mentality of his interlocutors that sets Putin apart as a consummate politician.

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

The Game of Demonizing Putin

Official Washington influences the opinions of the American people about world affairs by demonizing certain foreign leaders, making them objects of both revulsion and ridicule, thus justifying “regime change” strategies, a particularly dangerous game when played against nuclear-armed Russia, as John Ivens explains.

By John Ivens

On the morning of Jan. 16 at Hillary Clinton’s campaign headquarters in Clinton, Iowa, I met Madeleine Albright. She looked different than I remembered her as the first woman to serve as U.S. Secretary of State during Bill Clinton’s second term. She looked less imposing than before, more like a little barn owl seeking refuge from a bitterly cold Iowa winter.

Secretary Albright was acting as a surrogate for Hillary’s campaign. That Saturday, she was motivating volunteers to canvas and make phone calls for Hillary. I sensed that Secretary Albright came to Clinton, Iowa, to energize older folks on the same weekend Chelsea Clinton was in Davenport appealing to voters of younger generations.

But I thought Secretary Albright might be a good source of insight into Hillary’s perspectives on foreign policy. In Clinton’s 2014 memoir, *Hard Choices*, Hillary identified Albright as her “longtime friend and partner in promoting rights and opportunities for women.”

I asked Secretary Albright how she would advise Hillary Clinton when negotiating with Russian President Vladimir Putin. She replied that we should keep talking to Putin, but we should be wary that he expands Russian influence at every opportunity. Secretary Albright said we should “draw the line” when “little green men” invade other countries (a reference to events in Crimea in 2014, I presume).

Secretary Albright told about when she accompanied Bill Clinton to a summit in June 2000 with Putin. She wore a button showing three monkeys, “Hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil.” Putin asked why she was wearing this button: “We

always watch what pins Secretary Albright wears. Why are you wearing those monkeys?"

And Albright said, "because of your evil Chechnya policy." Putin was not amused. He protested, "You shouldn't be dealing with the Chechens." President Bill Clinton gave Albright this look like "Are you out of your mind? You have just screwed up the summit."

In retrospect, the monkey pin incident might be thought of as a humorous aside, but perhaps Secretary Albright besmirched both nonhuman primates and Russians, a dubious example of tact and diplomacy in one of Bill Clinton's first summits with the new Russian President.

The fighting on both sides of the Chechnyan conflict deserves a great deal of scrutiny by a war crime tribunal; nonetheless, Putin was fighting an insurgency of violent Islamic jihadists in league with Osama bin Laden. This is why Putin was among the first national leaders to express support and sympathy for the United States after 9/11. That is the sad irony of Madeleine Albright's monkey button.

At a \$1,500/plate fundraiser in March 2014 during the early phase of the crisis in Ukraine (after a U.S.-backed putsch had overthrown elected President Viktor Yanukovich and as ethnic Russians in Ukraine's south and east were under attack from the new regime and seeking protection from Russia), Hillary was quoted in regards to Putin's response: "Now if this sounds familiar, it's what Hitler did back in the 30s. All the Germans that were ... the ethnic Germans, the Germans by ancestry who were in places like Czechoslovakia and Romania and other places, Hitler kept saying they're not being treated right. I must go and protect my people and that's what's gotten everybody so nervous."

In 2014, Bill Clinton was quoted, "Putin wants to re-establish Russian greatness, not in Cold War terms, in Nineteenth Century -empire terms."

In *Hard Choices*, Hillary devotes an entire chapter titled "Russia, Reset and Regression," dealing with her issues with Putin. She narrates her awkward experiences negotiating with Putin, and she seems frustrated about her working relationship with Putin as a negotiating partner. But oddly enough, she makes no such comparisons of Putin to Hitler anywhere in this chapter. Instead, she recommends a "pause" button instead of a "reset" button, adding:

"But we should hit the pause button on new efforts. Don't appear too eager to work together. Don't flatter Putin with high level attention. And make it clear that Russian intransigence wouldn't stop us from pursuing our interests and policies regarding Europe, Central Asia, Syria and other hotspots. Strength and

resolve were the only language that Putin would understand.”

I thought, “Enough Already! Enough dark arts of demonizing leaders of other countries! Enough references to ‘He who’s name must not be spoken, the dark lord Vladimir.’”

Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, despite his notoriety, is an accomplished negotiator. He has recently advised that such demonization reveals a failure in foreign policy.

As Americans, we don’t get to vote for a Russian president. That particular right to vote belongs to Russians who live in the largest nation on the planet, spanning ten time zones and possessing an arsenal of nuclear weapons comparable in numbers to ours.

Russian national history begins four centuries before American natives had their first encounter with Columbus. Russians are as well educated and typically speak more languages than Americans. There are three nations that need to join together in agreements to address urgent climate change problems in the Arctic: the United States, Canada and Russia.

What Americans can do, is to vote for a president who can make peace with Russian leaders. More questions about peacemaking and diplomacy need to be asked and answered in the 2016 election cycle.

John Ivens is a retired psychology professor and now peace activist, living in DeWitt, Iowa. As a member of Veterans for Peace, he recently helped to organize a speaking tour, “Barnstorming in Iowa” – Sept. 24-30, 2015, by Ray McGovern and Coleen Rowley. During the Vietnam War John was an Air Force pilot, flying C-141 jet transports on global airlift missions.
