

The Battle over Dr. King's Message

From the Archive: Martin Luther King Day is a rare moment in American life when people reflect on the ideals that guided Dr. King's life and led to his death. Thus, the struggle over his message is intense, pitting a bland conventional view against a radical call for profound change, said Brian J. Trautman in 2014.

By Brian J. Trautman (Originally published on Jan. 20, 2014)

Most Americans know Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as one of the Twentieth Century's most revered voices for racial equality, the charismatic leader of the American Civil Rights movement, who gave the famous "*I Have A Dream*" speech at the Lincoln Memorial. Perhaps they even know a thing or two about his role in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Birmingham Campaign.

This knowledge, by and large, derives from compulsory education and mainstream media. It is significantly less likely, however, that very many Americans know much at all, if anything, about King's radical and controversial activities related to the issues of poverty and militarism, particularly the latter.

King highlighted three primary forms of violence, oppression and injustice in American society and across the world: poverty, racism and militarism. He referred to these as the "triple evils," and considered them to be interrelated problems, existing in a vicious and intractable cycle, and standing as formidable barriers to achieving the Beloved Community, a brotherly society built upon and nurtured by love, nonviolence, peace and justice. King posited that when we resisted any one evil, we in turn weakened all evils, but that a measurable and lasting impact would require us to address all three.

King's work to educate about and eradicate poverty was among his greatest passions. In "*The Octopus of Poverty*," a statement appearing in *The Mennonite* in 1965, King observed, "There is nothing new about poverty. What is new, however, is that we now have the resources to get rid of it." Accordingly, "the time has come for an all-out world war against poverty."

He strongly believed "the rich nations," namely the United States, had a moral responsibility to care for its most vulnerable populations, noting that such "nations must use their vast resources of wealth to develop the underdeveloped, school the unschooled, and feed the unfed." King held, "ultimately a great nation is a compassionate nation," and maintained that "no individual or nation can be great if it does not have a concern for 'the least of these.'"

In late 1967, King announced the Poor People's Campaign, an innovative effort designed to educate Americans on poverty issues and recruit both poor people and

antipoverty activists for nonviolent social change. The priority of the project was to march on, and to occupy, if you will, Washington and to demand the Congress pass meaningful legislation to improve the social and economic status of the poor, through directed measures such as jobs, unemployment insurance, health care, decent homes, a fair minimum wage, and education.

Alas, Dr. King was assassinated only weeks before the actual march took place. And while the march went ahead as planned in May of 1968, it is thought that the lack of substantive change to result was due in large part to King's absence. Still, a positive outcome of the initiative was a heightened public awareness of the nation's growing poor population.

Perhaps most controversial were King's positions on militarism and U.S. foreign policy. In *"Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?"* published in 1967, King said of war and its consequences: "A true revolution of values will lay hands on the world order and say of war- 'This way of settling differences is not just.' This way of burning human beings with napalm, of filling our nation's homes with orphans and widows, of injecting poisonous drugs of hate into the veins of peoples normally humane, of sending men home from dark and bloody battlefields physically handicapped, psychologically deranged, cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice and love." He cautioned that "a nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death."

King's most pointed speech against militarism was *"Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence,"* delivered at Riverside Church in New York City on April 4, 1967, a year to the day before he was assassinated. While King's popularity among political allies and his inner circle was already beginning to wane because of his increasing public criticism of U.S. foreign policy and the growing war in Vietnam, the *Beyond Vietnam* speech was to become his most public dissent of the war to date, a war still largely unopposed by the majority.

To speak out in opposition to the war, he acknowledged, was personally necessitated, asserting, "because my conscience leaves me no other choice." With such a call to conscience, "a time comes when silence is betrayal." And in the present day, argued King, "that time has come for us in relation to Vietnam."

In the speech King calls the United States "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today" and questions why money is being spent to wage war on foreign lands against foreign people while the war on poverty at home was being neglected, financially and otherwise. The major media of the time denounced the speech and King lost a great deal of support among his colleagues and the American people for it.

We owe it ourselves and our children and grandchildren, as well as our communities and nation to learn and teach about and take up King's efforts focused not only on ending racism but all three of the evils against which he untiringly stood. Only then will we find ourselves closer to achieving King's dream of the Beloved Community.

A small but important step toward this goal is to volunteer, as my family and I do, with a charitable and progressive cause on the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday, a national day of service.

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MLK and the Curse of 'Moderation'

From the Archive: When Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. went to jail to focus national attention on the injustice of segregation, he was stung by criticism from Christian clergy who feared upsetting the status quo and urged "moderation," prompting his historic rejoinder from the Birmingham jail, as Rev. Howard Bess recalled in 2014.

By Rev. Howard Bess (Originally published on Jan. 24, 2014)

Martin Luther King Jr. was my contemporary, a person whom I supported in his demand for full inclusion of people of color in the life of America. Yet, as that history played out, I did not fully realize the greatness of King and the significance of the events of the late Fifties and the early Sixties.

As we look back on those events, there are an endless number of reasons why Dr. King's statue stands on the Tidal Basin across from the Jefferson Memorial in Washington DC, and why King's birthday is a national holiday.

I have read his writings, and his "I Have a Dream" speech is etched on my heart and mind. But I believe his letter to clergy, "Letter from Birmingham Jail," is his greatest communication articulating his cause and one of the great documents of American history.

I marvel at the document because it was written from a jail cell where King had no access to reference materials. The date of the letter was April 16, 1963, when the modern civil rights movement for people of color was still relatively young, but the movement was becoming stronger and the opposition was becoming

more entrenched.

The letter came from what was stored in King's maturing mind. He wrote on whatever scraps of paper he could find, addressing the letter to "My Dear Fellow Clergymen," a group of clergy who had written a letter to King to discourage his coming to Birmingham. These clergy counseled patience and moderation and questioned why King, as an "outsider" had come to their Alabama community.

In the letter, King wrote, "While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities 'unwise and untimely.'" Then, he responded by saying that Negroes had waited long enough and that "moderation" was not useful in righting wrongs of segregation that had been inflicted on African-Americans over generations:

"I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their 'thus saith the Lord' far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid."

In the letter, King called not for moderation or patience but for non-violent and peaceful extremism, arguing that clergymen, the very people who should be at the forefront calling for justice in the name of Jesus, were betraying the Christian gospel by calling for moderation and gradualism. King wrote:

"We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was 'well timed' in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word 'Wait!' It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This 'Wait' has almost always meant 'Never.' We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God given rights."

Disappointing Churches

King's letter moves on to express his "disappointment with the churches." King was an ordained Baptist minister, the son and grandson of Baptist ministers. He had been nurtured and educated by churches and their institutions. He loved the churches, knew church history, and knew that movements to reform society and to deliver society from injustice many times had come from churches and clergy. He wrote:

"I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers.

First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: 'I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action'; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a 'more convenient season.'

"Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

"I must honestly reiterate that I have been disappointed with the church. I do not say this as one of those negative critics who can always find something wrong with the church. I say this as a minister of the gospel, who loves the church; who was nurtured in its bosom; who has been sustained by its spiritual blessings and who will remain true to it as long as the cord of life shall lengthen.

"When I was suddenly catapulted into the leadership of the bus protest in Montgomery, Alabama, a few years ago, I felt we would be supported by the white church. I felt that the white ministers, priests and rabbis of the South would be among our strongest allies. Instead, some have been outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its leaders; all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained glass windows.

"In spite of my shattered dreams, I came to Birmingham with the hope that the white religious leadership of this community would see the justice of our cause and, with deep moral concern, would serve as the channel through which our just grievances could reach the power structure. I had hoped that each of you would understand. But again I have been disappointed.

"I have traveled the length and breadth of Alabama, Mississippi and all the other southern states. On sweltering summer days and crisp autumn mornings I have looked at the South's beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward. I have beheld the impressive outlines of her massive religious education buildings.

"Over and over I have found myself asking: 'What kind of people worship here?'

Who is their God? Where were their voices when the lips of Governor Barnett dripped with words of interposition and nullification? Where were they when Governor Wallace gave a clarion call for defiance and hatred? Where were their voices of support when bruised and weary Negro men and women decided to rise from the dark dungeons of complacency to the bright hills of creative protest?’

“Yes, these questions are still in my mind. In deep disappointment I have wept over the laxity of the church. But be assured that my tears have been tears of love. There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love.”

Pinnacle of a Message

Most reviewers of the life of Martin Luther King Jr. see his “I Have a Dream” speech as the high point of his career. I beg to differ. Birmingham and the letter may have been the pinnacle of his career as he confronted not simply society but Christian churches and their clergy.

The Letter from Birmingham Jail was published in leading Christian publications and in the nation’s most read newspapers. His confrontation with moderation was blunt yet gracious. Segregation and injustice were not his primary targets, rather he turned his searchlight of truth-telling on all those who took refuge in moderation.

Not many of those clergy in Birmingham may have understood the significance of King’s rejoinder, but a large part of the nation took note. Many believe that it was the Letter from Birmingham Jail that pushed President John F. Kennedy to initiate civil rights legislation.

Moderation in the face of injustice has been the great disease of Christian churches. The vast majority of Christian clergy are hiding behind the mission of saving souls while ignoring the social teachings of Jesus, the one they claim to serve as their Lord. These clergymen play the game of advocating the cause of social justice but only with great moderation.

Justice was a centerpiece of the life work of Jesus. As Americans we confess that justice is for all, even in the NFL. Yet, “moderates” will never make the dream of justice-for-all a reality. It turns out that the path to hell is not paved with good intentions; it is paved with moderation.

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Playing Games with War Deaths

There's a double standard in how the U.S. mainstream media reports civilian deaths depending if the U.S. military is fighting the wars or not, accepting absurdly low numbers when the U.S. is at fault and hyping death tolls when "enemies" are involved, a manipulation of human tragedy, says Nicolas J S Davies.

By Nicolas J S Davies

How many people have been killed in the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Somalia? On Nov. 18, a [UN press briefing](#) on the war in Yemen declared authoritatively that it had so far killed 5,700 people, including 830 women and children. But how precise are these figures, what are they based on, and what relation are they likely to bear to the true numbers of people killed?

Throughout the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan, the media has cited UN updates comparing numbers of Afghans killed by "coalition forces" and the "Taliban." Following the U.S. escalation of the war in 2009 and 2010, [a report by McClatchy](#) in March 2011 was headlined, "UN: U.S.-led forces killed fewer Afghan civilians last year." It reported a 26 percent drop in U.S.-led killing of Afghan civilians in 2010, offset by a 28 percent increase in civilians killed by the "Taliban" and "other insurgents."

This was all illustrated in a neat pie-chart slicing up the extraordinarily low reported total of 2,777 Afghan civilians killed in 2010 at the peak of the U.S.-led escalation of the war.

Neither the UN nor the media made any effort to critically examine this reported decrease in civilians killed by U.S.-led forces, even as U.S. troop strength peaked at 100,000 in August 2010. Pentagon data showed a [22 percent increase in U.S. air strikes](#), from 4,163 in 2009 to 5,100 in 2010, and [U.S. special forces "kill or capture" raids](#) exploded from 90 in November 2009 to 600 per month by the summer of 2010, and eventually to over 1,000 raids in April 2011.

Senior U.S. military officers quoted in Dana Priest and William Arkin's book, *Top Secret America*, [told the authors](#) that only half of such special forces raids target the right people or homes, making the reported drop in resulting civilian deaths even more implausible.

If *McClatchy* had investigated the striking anomaly of a reported decrease in civilian casualties in the midst of a savagely escalating war, it would have raised serious questions regarding the full scale of the slaughter taking place

in occupied Afghanistan. And it would have revealed a disturbing pattern of under-reporting by the UN and the media in which a small number of deaths that happened to be reported to UN officials or foreign reporters in Kabul was deceptively relayed to the world as an estimate of total civilian war deaths.

The reasons for the media's reluctance to delve into such questions lie buried in Iraq. During the U.S. military occupation of Iraq, controversy erupted over conflicting estimates of the numbers of Iraqis killed and details of who killed them. If more UN officials and journalists had dug into those conflicting reports from Iraq and made the effort to really understand the differences between them, they would have been far better equipped to make sense of reports of numbers of people killed in other wars.

The critical thing to understand about reports on numbers of civilians killed in wars is the difference between "passive reporting" and scientific "mortality studies."

When I was investigating the conflicting reports of civilian deaths in Iraq, I spoke with Les Roberts, an epidemiologist at Columbia University's School of Public Health and one of the co-authors of two comprehensive mortality studies conducted in occupied Iraq in 2004 and 2006.

Les Roberts had conducted mortality studies in war zones for many years, including studies in Rwanda in 1994 and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in 2000 that are still widely cited by the media and Western politicians without the taint of controversy that was immediately attached to his and his colleagues' work in Iraq.

In 2004, Roberts and his colleagues conducted a scientific epidemiological study of mortality in Iraq since the U.S. invasion. They concluded that "about 100,000 excess deaths, or more" had resulted from the first 18 months of U.S.-led invasion and occupation. They also found that, "Violent deaths were mainly attributed to coalition forces," and, "Most individuals killed by coalition forces were women and children."

Both Nancy Youssef of *McClatchy* (then *Knight Ridder*) and John Simpson of the BBC also reported that U.S.-led forces, not Iraqi resistance fighters, were probably responsible for most civilian deaths in Iraq, based on figures published by the Iraqi Health Ministry.

On Sept. 25, 2004, the *Miami Herald* carried a report by Youssef under the headline, "U.S. attacks, not insurgents, blamed for most Iraqi deaths." A Health Ministry official told Youssef, "Everyone is afraid of the Americans, not the

fighters. And they should be.”

But after John Simpson noted the same pattern in the next Health Ministry report on the BBC’s flagship *Panorama* news program, the BBC received a phone call from the occupation government’s Health Minister disavowing his own ministry’s published data on who was killing who in Iraq. The BBC retracted its story and subsequent Health Ministry reports no longer assigned responsibility for civilian deaths to either party in the conflict.

Les Roberts and his colleagues completed an even larger mortality study in Iraq in 2006, by which time they found that an estimated 650,000 Iraqis had died in the first three years of the war. Both their studies revealed much higher mortality rates than had been reported by Iraqi hospitals, the Health Ministry, the Western media or “Iraq Body Count”, a much-cited Western compilation of data from such “passive” sources.

As each of their studies was released, Roberts and his colleagues became targets of blistering campaigns by U.S. and British officials to dispute and dismiss their findings. The critics didn’t make educated critiques of their methodology, which was state-of-the-art in their field, but mostly just insisted that they were out of line with other reports and so must be wrong.

These campaigns were so successful in throwing mud in the water and confusing the media and the public that corporate media became very reluctant to attach any credibility to this otherwise solid evidence that the U.S.-led war in Iraq was far more deadly than most people in the West had realized. Corporate media took the easy way out and began referring to numbers of civilian deaths in Iraq only in vague, politically safe terms, if they mentioned them at all.

In reality, the huge discrepancy between the results of these mortality studies and “passive reporting” was exactly what epidemiologists expected to find in a conflict zone like occupied Iraq.

As Les Roberts and his colleagues have explained, epidemiologists working in war zones typically find that passive reporting only captures between 5 percent (in Guatemala, for example) and 20 percent of the total deaths revealed by comprehensive mortality studies. So their finding that passive reporting in Iraq had captured about one in 12 actual deaths was consistent with extensive research in other war-torn countries.

In the U.K., Prime Minister Tony Blair dismissed the “Lancet survey ” out of hand, claiming that, “Figures from the Iraqi Ministry of Health, which are a survey from the hospitals there, are in our view the most accurate survey there is.”

But in 2007, the BBC obtained a set of leaked documents that included a memo from Sir Roy Anderson, the chief scientific adviser to the U.K.'s Defense Ministry, in which he described the epidemiologists' methods as "close to best practice" and their study design as "robust."

The document trove included emails between worried British officials admitting that the study was "likely to be right" and that "the survey methodology used here cannot be rubbished, it is a tried and tested way of measuring mortality in conflict zones." But the very same official insisted that the government must "not accept the figures quoted in the *Lancet* survey as accurate."

Other mortality surveys conducted in Iraq have produced lower figures, but there are legitimate reasons to regard the work of Les Roberts and his colleagues as the gold standard, based on their experience in other conflicts and the thoroughness of their methods.

Other surveys were conducted by the occupation government, not by independent researchers, inevitably making people reluctant to tell survey teams about family members killed by occupation forces. Some studies excluded the most war-torn parts of Iraq, while one was based only on a single question about deaths in the family as part of a lengthy "living conditions" survey.

The authors of the most recent study, published in the *PLoS* medical journal in 2013, a decade after the invasion, have acknowledged that it produced a low estimate, because so much time had elapsed and because they did not interview any of the more than 3 million people who had fled their homes in the most devastated areas. They made adjustments to compensate for such factors, but those adjustments themselves were deliberately conservative. However, their estimate of 500,000 violent civilian deaths is still four times the highest numbers passively reported.

Gilbert Burnham, a co-author of both the *Lancet* studies and the *PLoS* study, does not find the results of the three epidemiological studies incompatible, emphasizing that, "These represent estimates, and that's what we've always said."

In 2015, Physicians for Social Responsibility co-published a report titled *Body Count: Casualty Figures After 10 Years of the "War on Terror,"* with a new estimate of 1.3 million total war deaths in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan between 2001 and 2011.

This 97-page report meticulously examines and evaluates mortality studies and other evidence from all three countries, and the authors conclude that the studies published by the *Lancet* are still the most accurate and credible studies

conducted in Iraq.

But what can all this tell us about the figures cited by the UN and the media for civilian deaths in other war-torn countries since 2006?

As noted in *Body Count*, the only reports on civilian mortality in Afghanistan, including those published by the UN, are based on passive reporting. To accept these figures as actual estimates of war deaths would be to believe that the most heavily bombed country in the recent history of warfare (over 60,000 air strikes in 14 years) has been a safer place to live than most Western cities, with only 5.9 violent deaths per 100,000 inhabitants per year, compared to 6.9 in Frankfurt and 48 in Detroit.

As the authors explain, “The problem in determining the number of killed civilians is the ‘passive’ research method itself. It can capture only a fraction of all cases. In order to get more reliable approximations, on-site research and scientific polls would be necessary. In Afghanistan, these simply do not exist.”

The authors of *Body Count* very conservatively estimate the number of Afghan civilians killed at 5 to 8 times the number passively reported, giving an estimate between 106,000 and 170,000. At the same time, they acknowledge the conservative nature of this estimate, noting that, “compared to Iraq, where urbanization is more pronounced, and monitoring by local and foreign press is more pronounced than in Afghanistan, the registration of civilian deaths has been much more fragmentary.”

If the ratio of actual deaths to passively reported deaths in Afghanistan is in fact somewhere between those found in Iraq (12:1) and Guatemala (20:1), the true number of civilians killed in Afghanistan would be somewhere between 255,000 and 425,000.

As in Guatemala, the UN and Western reporters have little access to the remote resistance-held areas where most air strikes and special forces raids take place, so the true number of Afghan civilians killed could well be closer to the higher of these numbers.

Paradoxically, the Syrian government’s role as an “information victim” of U.S. information warfare may have led to more comprehensive reporting of civilian deaths in Syria than in Iraq or Afghanistan, by the UN, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and other human rights groups.

But even without Western political pressure to under-report civilian deaths (except in U.S.-led air strikes), passive reporting in Syria is still just passive reporting. The ratio of actual deaths to the numbers being reported may

be lower than in Iraq or Afghanistan, but even the most thorough passive reporting is unlikely to capture more than 20 percent of actual deaths.

As in Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Guatemala and Iraq, only serious, scientific mortality studies can expose the full scale of the slaughter endured by the people of Afghanistan, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Somalia and other war-ravaged countries.

The politically contrived controversy surrounding mortality estimates in Iraq has deterred the U.S. corporate media from making any attempt to gain a more accurate picture of the scale of the slaughter in these other wars.

This has left average Americans in almost complete ignorance of the human cost of modern war, and has served to shield our political and military leaders from accountability for appalling decisions and policies that have resulted in catastrophic losses of human life.

Deaths counted by “passive reporting” cannot be an estimate of total deaths in a war zone because they are fragmentary by nature. But serious researchers have developed scientific methods they can use to make realistic estimates of total war deaths.

As with climate change and other issues, UN officials and journalists must overcome political pressures, come to grips with the basic science involved, and stop sweeping the vast majority of the victims of our wars down this Orwellian “memory hole.”

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How Neocons Banished Realism

The grip that neocons and liberal interventionists have on Official Washington’s opinion circles is now so strong that “realists” who once provided an important counterbalance have been almost banished from foreign policy debates, a dangerous dilemma that James W Carden explores.

By James W Carden

In a widely remarked upon article for the online version of *Foreign Policy* last

week, Harvard's Stephen Walt asked a very good question. Why, Walt asked, are elite outlets like the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times* "allergic to realist views, given that realists have been (mostly) right about some very important issues, and the columnists they publish have often been wrong?"

Walt then went on to do something pundits are generally loath to do: he admitted that he'd didn't really know the answer. This is not to say that I do, but I think Walt's question is worth exploring.

Why indeed? My own hunch is that we realists are a source of discomfit for the Beltway armchair warrior class not so much because we have been right about every major U.S. foreign policy question since the invasion of Iraq, but because we dare to question the premise which undergirds the twin orthodoxies of neoconservatism and liberal interventionism.

The premise, shared by heroes of the Left and Right, is this: America, a "shining city on a hill" (John Winthrop, later vulgarized by Ronald Reagan) "remains the one indispensable nation" (Barack Obama) and deprived of America's "benevolent global hegemony" (Robert Kagan) the world will surely collapse into anarchy.

This strain of messianic thinking has deep roots in the psyche of the American establishment and so, in a sense, neoconservatism, which is really little more than a latter-day Trotskyist sect, is as American as apple pie.

Common though it is to trace, or conflate, the rise of American messianism to 1898 when the country first emerged as a global power, the cult of "American exceptionalism" has its roots in Puritan theology.

In his indispensable work, *The Irony of American History*, the Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr cites a tract from 1650 in which the colonial leader Edward Johnson wrote that New England was "where the Lord would create a new heaven and a new earth, new churches and a new commonwealth together." Niebuhr wrote that the Puritans had a "sense of being a 'separated' nation which God was using to make a new beginning for mankind."

This strain of American solipsism was also noted with distaste by that most perceptive chronicler of American democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville who, in 1840, wrote that it was "impossible to conceive of a more troublesome and garrulous patriotism."

The historian John Lamberton Harper has observed that the strain of messianic thinking was evident throughout the Nineteenth Century, reminding us that Indiana Sen. Albert Beveridge once claimed that the good Lord had "marked the

American people as His chosen nation to finally lead in the regeneration of the world.”

And so on and so on.

Throughout the Twentieth Century, the messianic way of thinking became ever more firmly entrenched – particular among the governing class – as America continued what many felt was its inexorable rise to global supremacy. At the turn of the century prominent men of politics and letters such as Brooks Adams, Theodore Roosevelt and the geopolitical theorist Alfred MacKinder enthusiastically subscribed to the notion that “all signs point to the approaching supremacy of the United States.” Indeed, that this was so was an “inexorable decree of destiny.”

America’s entry into the First World War only deepened that sense of singularity. Here’s Walter Lippmann, who later in life became something like the dean of American realists, writing about President Woodrow Wilson in the *New Republic* in 1917: “other men have led nations to war to increase their glory, their wealth, their prestige no other statesman has ever so clearly identified the glory of his country with the peace and liberty of the world.”

Decades later, during the Cold War, Lippmann regained his sanity, while *TNR* all but lost its. And indeed, it was during that 40-year-long “twilight struggle” between the U.S. and the USSR that the messianic consensus grabbed hold of the American mind and, to this day, has not let go. But the roots of that way of thinking, as we have seen, are deep and long predate the Cold War.

And so I would submit that the reason the three major American newspapers are “allergic to realism” is because they are part and parcel of an establishment that has, for well over a century now, been in thrall to a messianic vision of global supremacy.

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WPost’s Deadly Lack of Realism

The Washington Post’s neocon editors advocate one regime change after another, oblivious to the death and destruction that their strategies have unleashed across the Mideast and now into Europe and reflecting a lack of realism about

what U.S. foreign policy can achieve, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar notes.

By Paul R. Pillar

Fred Hiatt, whose *Washington Post* editorial page has been beating its drum incessantly for more U.S. intervention in Syria, comes at that same theme from another angle with a signed column that criticizes President Obama's State of the Union address. Hiatt's critique illustrates some recurring and fallacious patterns of thought that arise in debate about U.S. intervention and especially military intervention.

Hiatt didn't like that the President, in Hiatt's words, reserved any optimism in the speech for America and that "for the rest of the world, Obama was pessimistic, even fatalistic."

Specific passages in the speech Hiatt cites are one that referred to the Middle East "going through a transformation that will play out for a generation, rooted in conflicts that date back millennia" and another that noted how "instability will continue for decades in many parts of the world, in the Middle East, in Afghanistan, parts of Pakistan, in parts of Central America, in Africa, and Asia."

Then Hiatt asks, "Why would a president ask Americans to assume that the problems of Central America, say, are intractable and inevitable?" But the President didn't say anything about intractability or inevitability. He was merely making an observation about a reality, the sort of reality that, if ignored, can work to the detriment of sound U.S. foreign policy.

Even with insertion of the time frame "for decades", the President's observation about what we can expect regarding instability "in" some regions and in "parts of" other places is so safe as to be undebatable. To expect otherwise would be to predict a sweeping, benign transformation of a conflict-prone world the likes of which have never been seen.

Hiatt comments that Costa Rica has been stable for a good while and that the internal situation in Mexico has improved noticeably in the last 20 years, both true, and then writes, "Why would we assume that El Salvador or Honduras can't accomplish as much?"

We shouldn't assume that, and the President did not say we should assume that. But neither should we assume that those states *will* accomplish as much, or, even more relevant to policy questions, that they could do so with some sort of help from the United States.

Hiatt is right that we ought to be open to favorable possibilities, but a common

problem with the mindset he represents is to focus *only* on those possibilities, or to focus on them disproportionately more than on the pitfalls and problems. A related tendency is to believe that current conflicts and instability, some of which, within time frames that are politically meaningful, really are intractable, are some sort of aberration that can be smoothed out with enough good will and enough policy smarts and that the countries involved can be returned to a sort of benign state of nature.

Other examples of favorable change that Hiatt cites are South Korea progressing from “an impoverished military dictatorship” and Estonia no longer being “a captive of the Soviet Union.” But even though his column is trying to make a point about U.S. policy, Hiatt says nothing about exactly what sorts of U.S. policy had anything to do with those changes.

In the case of South Korea, the big thing the United States did, in addition to years of substantial economic and military assistance, was the beating back of North Korean aggression, aided by China, in the Korean War and the subsequent ensuring, through a mutual security commitment and the stationing of U.S. forces in South Korea, that such aggression would not be repeated.

There was never anything like a civil war or violent ethnic or sectarian conflicts within South Korea, and certainly nothing remotely close to U.S. intervention in such internal conflicts. Neither was there anything like such U.S. intervention in Estonia, whose gaining of freedom was one data point in a much larger process of the Soviets’ European empire collapsing of its own weight.

There was sound policy and deft diplomacy on the part of the George H.W. Bush administration at the time, but that policy was distinguished as much by what it wisely did *not* try to do as by what it did. Robert Gates, who was deputy national security adviser at the time, later wrote that the smartest thing President Bush did as the Soviet empire crumbled was to “play it cool.”

Outlooks such as Hiatt’s obliterate any distinction between the idea that conscious action can be efficacious in resolving conflicts favorably, i.e., that we should not be “fatalistic” about such problems, and the idea that it is the United States that should be taking action.

Hiatt says that whether longstanding hatreds are managed or explode “is the result of political choices. It is not a matter of destiny.” Correct, and the political choices that matter above all are those of Mexicans, Koreans, or whoever’s conflict it is in the first place.

Referring to the cases of South Korea and Estonia, Hiatt writes that “it was the

U.S. commitment to a peaceful democratic future ... that paved the way for their success." This vague formulation could mean either of two things, both of which also are characteristic of the interventionist position that the columnist represents.

One is to disguise a push for some specific measure (e.g., conduct U.S. combat air operations against the Assad regime) whose costs and risks may be all too apparent by making an exhortation for something more apple pie-ish (e.g., a "peaceful democratic future") with the costs and risks being less obvious.

The other possibility is that Hiatt is referring just to "commitment" in the sense of expressing such a commitment, as leaders do in speeches (and it is a speech that in the first instance is what he is criticizing). That sort of approach also has become typical of much of the criticism of related policies of the Obama administration, such as the silly demand that the President say the phrase "Islamic terrorism," as if that is somehow going to save lives from terrorism.

No matter how loudly or eloquently a leader utters a commitment or a popular phrase, speeches do not remove real obstacles and pitfalls on the ground.

A final fallacy is the apparent belief that polities and societies across the world are so homogeneous that whatever works in one place ought to work in another. Referring again to the Korean and Estonian cases, Hiatt writes, "Why would Obama set his sights lower for Afghanistan or Africa?"

If the President were indeed "setting sights" lower, it would be because of the enormous differences in political culture, ethnic geography, economic development, and much else that makes what is achievable in the way of resolving or managing conflicts in one place much different from what is possible in another place, and especially what is achievable in building stable democracies.

Hiatt repeats the same themes about Syria that he and his editorial staff have been repeating *ad infinitum*. There is the familiar and casual counterfactual assertion that if only a "modest intervention" had been undertaken earlier then we would be seeing nothing like the complicated and debilitating conflict that besets Syria today, but without any explanation as to why the roots of the conflict, involving such matters as sectarian divisions and legitimacy issues, would have been any more possible to overcome with a "modest intervention" on one date rather than another.

There is just the statement that the "modest intervention" would have been "to forestall a civil war that might spin out of control", as if what Syria had before was a "controlled" civil war, or as if it were ever within in the power

of the United States to “control” such things.

It surely would be nice if Honduras were just like Costa Rica, if Syria were just like Estonia, and if expressions of optimism by U.S. presidents about the possibility of felicitous change overseas could make such change happen. If that were so, making U.S. foreign policy would be a whole lot easier. But that’s not the way the world works.

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MH-17’s Unnecessary Mystery

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

By Robert Parry

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

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

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

Two days later, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence released a

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Demonizing Putin

Yet, despite the flimsiness of the “blame-Russia-for-MH-17” case in July 2014,

the Obama administration's rush to judgment proved critical in whipping up the European press to demonize President Vladimir Putin, who became the Continent's *bete noire* accused of killing 298 innocent people. That set the stage for the European Union to accede to U.S. demands for economic sanctions on Russia.

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

But the intelligence source who spoke to me several times after he received additional briefings about advances in the investigation said that as the U.S. analysts gained more insights into the MH-17 shoot-down from technical and other sources, they came to believe the attack was carried out by a rogue element of the Ukrainian military with ties to a hard-line Ukrainian oligarch. [See, for instance, Consortiumnews.com's "[Flight 17 Shoot-Down Scenario Shifts](#)" and "[The Danger of an MH-17 Cold Case.](#)"]

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

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

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

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

The Ukrainian Buks

Yet, what has become clear after the initial splurge of U.S. blame-casting is

that U.S. intelligence lacked key evidence to support Kerry's hasty judgments. Despite intensive overhead surveillance of eastern Ukraine in summer 2014, U.S. and other Western intelligence services could find no evidence that Russia had ever given a Buk system to the rebels or introduced one into the area.

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

But one doesn't need to infer this lack of evidence. It was spelled out in a little-noticed report by the Netherlands' Military Intelligence and Security Service (MIVD) that was made public last October when the Dutch Safety Board issued its findings on the causes of the doomed MH-17 flight. (Since the flight had originated in Amsterdam and carried many Dutch passengers, Netherlands took a lead role in the investigation.)

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

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

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

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

"During the course of July, several reliable sources indicated that the systems

that were at the military base were not operational,” MIVD said. “Therefore, they could not be used by the Separatists.”

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

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

According to the Dutch Safety Board [report](#), issued last October, a Ukrainian warplane had been shot down by a suspected air-to-air missile (presumably from a Russian fighter) on July 16, 2014, meaning that Ukrainian defenses were probably on high alert. The Russian military also claimed that Ukraine had activated a radar system that is used to guide Buk missiles.

Gunning for Putin?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lying First

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

So, Reagan's propagandists edited the ground-control intercepts to make it

appear that the Soviets had committed willful murder, a theme that was presented to the United Nations and was gullibly lapped up by the mainstream U.S. news media.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Citizen Journalists'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Latest Speculation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Clintons' Cheap Shot at Sanders

Seeing the polls tighten, Hillary Clinton's campaign has gone on the attack

against Sen. Bernie Sanders over his support for Medicare for all, accusing him of seeking to destroy Obamacare (though he voted for it). It's a deceptive assault, say Bill Moyers and Michael Winship.

By Bill Moyers and Michael Winship

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

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

But when it's the first time (as this was for Clinton the younger), the surrogate should be sure whereof she speaks, and had better stick to talking about her candidate, not the opponent. Unfortunately, Chelsea Clinton misrepresented Sen. Sanders's position, and her premiere performance on the stump backfired, producing a flood of political donations to Sanders.

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

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

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

And here's an ironic note: During that 1993 quest for a health care plan,

Secretary Clinton sent Sanders an autographed picture of the two of them, wishing him the best and thanking the senator “for your commitment to real health care access for all Americans.”

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

And look at former presidential candidate and single-payer advocate Howard Dean, Bernie’s fellow Vermonter, who went on MSNBC this week and said that the Sanders plan “would in fact undo people’s health care That is something people should be concerned about.”

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

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

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

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

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Will Reckless Saudis Seek War with Iran?

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

By Daniel Lazare

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

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

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

Reason #1: Economic collapse.

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

The reason is simple: a classic crisis of over-production straight out of *Das Kapital* as shale drillers grow more adept, sidelined producers such as Iran go

on-stream, and demand continues to slide due to the collapse of the Chinese economy and ongoing listlessness in Japan and the West. Too many goods are chasing too few customers, a problem affecting not just energy but raw materials in general.

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

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

Saudi Arabia would be in better straits if it had used its income to diversify. But faced with a gusher of oil wealth seemingly without end, the Saudis preferred to spend rather than invest. By 2013, they were more dependent on oil revenue than 40 years earlier.

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

Reason #2: The United States.

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

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

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

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

the arms of Assad's secular Baathist government.

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

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

The more the White House resisted being drawn into the Saudis' paranoid worldview, the more mistrustful the Saudis became and the more aggressive their behavior grew, a pattern that would repeat itself in the months ahead.

Reason #3: The logic of sectarianism.

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

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

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

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

If Bahrain's 70-percent Shi'ite majority had succeeded, it would have brought

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

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

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

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

Reason #4: Implementation Day.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Reason #5: Islamic State.

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

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

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

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

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

The only way the ruling family can redeem itself in the eyes of the Wahhabist *ulema* (as the mullahs are collectively known) is by escalating its own war against Shia Islam. This is why the Saudis have wound down participation in

the U.S.-led effort against ISIS in Syria and Iraq in order to concentrate on the war in Yemen. The Saudi monarchy wishes to see ISIS beaten because it represents an eventual threat to the kingdom. But the mullahs are more comfortable fighting against Shi'ism, and the royal family has no choice but to go along.

Reason #6: Internal Saudi dynamics.

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

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

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

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

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

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

the fault of the women themselves.

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

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

Instead of less war, in other words, the outlook is for more. For the moment, Muhammad is a popular figure. Poets and singers write songs about him, and friends depict him in various social media as a macho warrior surrounded by lions and fighter jets.

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

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

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

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Chavismo’s Sturdy Legacy

Exclusive: Right-wing parties are staging a comeback in Latin America, with the

most dramatic victory in Venezuela's parliamentary elections. Yet, despite troubled leftist regimes facing weak economies and corruption charges, their social reforms have slashed poverty and appear safe for now, writes Andrés Cala.

By Andrés Cala

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

On Nov. 23, 2015, Argentines elected center-right Mauricio Macri as president, replacing the 12-year Peronista regime led by Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. But the sharpest blow to the Left came in Venezuela on Dec. 6, when Chavismo, the most radical of the so-called Pink Tide regional movements, suffered its first electoral defeat in 16 years and a massive one at that when the opposition won an absolute majority in parliamentary elections.

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

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

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

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

Chavismo Legacy

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

external opponents of its socialist policies, the fact remains that Chavismo was all but paralyzed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Venezuela. Argentina will grow marginally.

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

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

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What Hillary Knew about Libya

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

By Robert Parry

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

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

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

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

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

A month later, this bizarre Viagra-rape angle became part of a United Nations presentation by then U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Susan Rice who brought up the Viagra charge in a debate about the evils of Muammar Gaddafi’s regime.

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

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

Media Self-Interest

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

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

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

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

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

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

France's Designs

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

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

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

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

Blumenthal then added that "According to knowledgeable individuals, this quantity of gold and silver is valued at more than \$7 billion. French

intelligence officers discovered this plan shortly after the current rebellion began, and this was one of the factors that influenced President Nicolas Sarkozy's decision to commit France to the attack on Libya."

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

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

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

Seeing No Jihadists

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

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

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

"Accordingly, he [Sarkozy] asked [a] sociologist who has long established ties to Israel, Syria, and other nations in the Middle East, to use his contacts to

determine the level of influence AQIM and other terrorist groups have inside of the NLC. Sarkozy also asked for reports setting out a clear picture of the role of the Muslim Brotherhood in the rebel leadership.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Reality’s Hard Sell

But it probably would have been a hard sell to the American people if the U.S.

government explained the dark side of the “R2P” mission that it involved systematic executions of blacks and rapacious Western officials grasping for oil and gold as well as creating a vacuum for jihadists. Instead, it worked much better to promote wild rumors about Gaddafi’s perfidy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In Syria, President Bashar al-Assad has hung on despite continued efforts by the Obama administration and its regional Sunni allies to remove him. The four years

of war waged mostly by jihadists armed and financed by Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Western powers have killed a quarter million people and made millions homeless, now spreading the Mideast's disorders into Europe where the refugee crisis is dividing the European Union.

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

In the Syrian case, the major decaying propaganda theme that continues to contaminate public understanding of the crisis has been the accusation that Assad "gassed his own people" with sarin on Aug. 21, 2013. Although independent evidence has long been pointing in the direction of a rebel provocation, perhaps aided by Turkey, the old rotting propaganda is routinely dug up by neocons and their liberal interventionist sidekicks to justify why "Assad must go!" [See Consortiumnews.com's "[The Collapsing Syria-Sarin Case.](#)"]

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

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