

The Murky Future for US Health Care

Republicans vow to repeal Obamacare, but President-elect Trump has injected confusion by claiming that the replacement will provide health insurance for all. But many health experts fear what comes next, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

All eyes are on the Republicans and Obamacare, as the dominant GOP now proceeds toward dismantling President Barack Obama's signature healthcare policy plan, formally known as the Affordable Care Act. What they plan to replace it with is still anybody's guess.

I spoke recently to public health care expert and single-payer advocate Dr. Don McCain about the debate, the negatives and positives of Obamacare, and what kind of health care system we need in the U.S. to really attend to the medical needs of all people.

McCain, a senior health policy fellow with the group Physicians for a National Health Program, said recently about the current debate, "President Obama meeting with the Congressional Democrats, and Vice President-elect Pence meeting with the Republicans are being touted as a strategy efforts on the two opposite sides of the health care reform debate. But are they really opposites?"

Dennis Bernstein: What do you mean by that? Aren't they opposites? It does seem like the Democrats are on one side, and the Republicans are on the other.

Dr. Don McCain: That's certainly the way they framed it. Of course, they passed Obamacare. The Democrats passed that even though it was a Republican plan. And now the Republicans claim it's a Democrat plan that has to be repealed. Yet, what are they talking about, as far as reform is concerned? They are talking about tweaking our current system. Well, that's all that Obamacare did.

We have a highly dysfunctional system, fragmented, with extreme administrative excesses. And a system that doesn't function very well because it leaves people with insurance in debt. It leaves too many people uninsured and takes away choices for our health care providers, through these narrow networks that are increasing in prevalence.

The Democrats did improve that, but the improvements were very small compared to what needs to be done. The Republicans would turn around, and maybe repeal some of those things, and then introduce their own tweaks. But these are all only tweaks to our current, highly dysfunctional, wasteful, fragmented system.

So the opposite would be an integrated, universal system that provides healthcare to everyone, and eliminates this profound administrative waste. And gives people their choice again. Of course, that's a single payer, national health program commonly known as an improved Medicare For All—fixing Medicare, and providing it to everyone.

DB: Well... the Republicans would say that's a budget buster, that's a big government program, that's socialism, and ultimately it will be a disaster.

DM: Of course, it is paid through taxes but we already... two-thirds of our health care is already paid for through the tax system. In fact, we pay more in taxes for health care in the United States than other nations pay for their entire health care system.

So tax isn't the problem. Getting the tax right is the problem, and we've got to make it much more equitable through progressive taxes where everyone can afford to pay the taxes that we would need to run the system. But it doesn't bust budgets.

In fact, the efficiencies of a single payer system actually slow down the increases in health care costs. So we would not be having these high increases every year. Yeah, there's been slowing for a couple of years, but they haven't really fixed the fundamental defects, whereas through a Medicare-like system, they do control healthcare costs, much more effectively. So we would all be ahead and we would all have health care.

DB: ... Let's do a compare and contrast: Under Obamacare, how does the U.S. system compare to, say, Europe?

DM: It is much less efficient [with] extreme administrative waste. We pay about a trillion dollars a year in just administration of our system. It's because it's this fragmented system of multiple programs, and other reasons, for the excesses. We could recover about one-half of that trillion dollars, and redirect it into health care. They don't have that in the European systems. They have much more efficient financing systems. None of them pay near what we do, in administration.

DB: And, in terms of actual health care?

DM: The health care systems... the health care delivery systems are pretty comparable. There is a difference and that is that many people in the United States, either because they are uninsured or underinsured, they have excess deductibles that they cannot afford, are unable to access our system. Whereas in the European nations [and] Canada there's no problem with access.

Yes, there may be some delays in some countries, but that's mainly for elective care. Any urgent care is taken care of right away and so, overall, the performance of their systems is superior. Commonwealth has done a study a few times of eleven nations and we always fall in last place, the eleventh, as far as the functioning of our healthcare system.

DB: And, what is your concern if the Republicans simply dismantle Obamacare? Will it matter... [if they don't] have any program to put in its place? What do you think is going to happen here?

DM: It will matter because many of the people who gained insurance under Obamacare will lose it. And they will do virtually nothing to control our increasing health care costs. So overall, it would be worse. ...

If they eliminate the subsidies and yet, as they said, they'll continue the right of anyone to buy insurance regardless of pre-existing conditions.... [Then] the insurance model breaks down, because sick people buy insurance. Healthy people don't until they get sick. Then insurance will be affordable for no one.

DB: So, what happens in terms of your own experiences as a medical doctor? What have been your struggles and how might they be mitigated so that you can spend your time doing health care, instead of being a businessman? Talk about that. What does that look like?

DM: It really happened with the managed care revolution in the '80s, where the insurance companies basically gained the right to contract with doctors, and, of course, they contract with patients by selling them insurance plans. But this physician contracting, they have used to try to slow the race that way, while they continue to ratchet down on the way physicians can provide care to their patients.

So the reimbursement rates do not keep up with inflation. The prior authorization requests that you have to go through make it more and more difficult to get care for your patients.

And now [with] these narrow networks, they've made it extremely difficult to get the specialists that your patient needs, because they are not in these networks. So we're losing choice in care.

And then the hassles, the computers. The computers are designed to assist the insurance company, and assist the government bureaucrats. But they are sure a headache, because they come between the physician and the patient.

Computerized records are a good thing, but the way the computers are being used, it's increased the hassle factor. And, in fact, physicians now, over 50% of

physicians are experiencing burn out, from a Mayo study.

DB: Wow. Now, before we let you go, I want to talk to you about something that's personal to me. I know you're a medical doctor, but dental care is very much a part of medical care. I don't know the exact figures for how many people don't have medical care now, but more people don't have adequate dental care. I mean, I have a health plan here at KPFA, Pacifica. But it's a joke. It's gone with the second cleaning.

DM: That's correct. In our proposals for health care reform, we include dental care. Because that's a very basic, essential health service. And we think it needs to be part of the national health care program.

DB: But, again, it is interesting that in this country ... I mean, I remember traveling as a student, and traveling in England, and having a massive toothache. I walked into an office and they took care of me. And I was done. I didn't get a bill.

DM: Right. That's the way it should be.

DB: And how would you explain it in this context—Health care is a human right?

DM: Yes. In fact, [on January 3rd] JAMA, The Journal of the American Medical Association, the editor-in-chief wrote an editorial and they're allowing access for free, that says "healthcare is a right, and as we reform health care, we have to accept that fact." And it's a very interesting editorial, and your listeners should look it up.

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It's Not About Trump, But Us

The looming inauguration of Donald Trump has led many on the "liberal/left" to vow eternal resistance but this fury has obscured the need for self-reflection on how "progressives" have lost their way, as John Pilger explains.

By John Pilger

On the day President Trump is inaugurated, thousands of writers in the United States will express their indignation. "In order for us to heal and move forward

...,” say Writers Resist, “we wish to bypass direct political discourse, in favour of an inspired focus on the future, and how we, as writers, can be a unifying force for the protection of democracy.”

And: “We urge local organizers and speakers to avoid using the names of politicians or adopting ‘anti’ language as the focus for their Writers Resist event. It’s important to ensure that nonprofit organizations, which are prohibited from political campaigning, will feel confident participating in and sponsoring these events.”

Thus, real protest is to be avoided, for it is not tax exempt. Compare such drivel with the declarations of the Congress of American Writers, held at Carnegie Hall, New York, in 1935, and again two years later. They were electric events, with writers discussing how they could confront ominous events in Abyssinia, China and Spain. Telegrams from Thomas Mann, C Day Lewis, Upton Sinclair and Albert Einstein were read out, reflecting the fear that great power was now rampant and that it had become impossible to discuss art and literature without politics or, indeed, direct political action.

“A writer,” the journalist Martha Gellhorn told the second congress, “must be a man of action now . . . A man who has given a year of his life to steel strikes, or to the unemployed, or to the problems of racial prejudice, has not lost or wasted time. He is a man who has known where he belonged. If you should survive such action, what you have to say about it afterwards is the truth, is necessary and real, and it will last.”

Her words echo across the unctious and violence of the Obama era and the silence of those who colluded with his deceptions. That the menace of rapacious power – rampant long before the rise of Trump – has been accepted by writers, many of them privileged and celebrated, and by those who guard the gates of literary criticism, and culture, including popular culture, is uncontroversial. Not for them the impossibility of writing and promoting literature bereft of politics. Not for them the responsibility to speak out, regardless of who occupies the White House.

Clinton’s Contempt

Today, false symbolism is all. “Identity” is all. In 2016, Hillary Clinton stigmatized millions of voters as “a basket of deplorables, racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic – you name it.” Her abuse was handed out at an LGBT rally as part of her cynical campaign to win over minorities by abusing a white, mostly working-class, majority. Divide and rule, this is called; or identity politics in which race and gender conceal class, and allow the waging of class war. Trump understood this.

“When the truth is replaced by silence,” said the Soviet dissident poet Yevtushenko, “the silence is a lie.”

This is not an American phenomenon. A few years ago, Terry Eagleton, then professor of English literature at Manchester University, reckoned that “for the first time in two centuries, there is no eminent British poet, playwright or novelist prepared to question the foundations of the western way of life.”

No Shelley speaks for the poor, no Blake for utopian dreams, no Byron damns the corruption of the ruling class, no Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin reveal the moral disaster of capitalism. William Morris, Oscar Wilde, HG Wells, George Bernard Shaw have no equivalents today. Harold Pinter was the last to raise his voice. Among today’s insistent voices of consumer-feminism, none echoes Virginia Woolf, who described “the arts of dominating other people ... of ruling, of killing, of acquiring land and capital.”

There is something both venal and profoundly stupid about famous writers as they venture outside their cosseted world and embrace an “issue.” Across the Review section of the Guardian on Dec. 10 was a dreamy picture of Barack Obama looking up to the heavens and the words, “Amazing Grace” and “Farewell the Chief.”

The sycophancy ran like a polluted babbling brook through page after page. “He was a vulnerable figure in many ways ... But the grace. The all-encompassing grace: in manner and form, in argument and intellect, with humour and cool ... [He] is a blazing tribute to what has been, and what can be again ... He seems ready to keep fighting, and remains a formidable champion to have on our side ... The grace ... the almost surreal levels of grace ...”

I have conflated these quotes. There are others even more hagiographic and bereft of mitigation. The Guardian’s chief apologist for Obama, Gary Younge, has always been careful to mitigate, to say that his hero “could have done more”: oh, but there were the “calm, measured and consensual solutions ...”

Idolizing Obama

None of them, however, could surpass the American writer, Ta-Nehisi Coates, the recipient of a “genius” grant worth \$625,000 from a liberal foundation. In an interminable essay for The Atlantic entitled, “My President Was Black,” Coates brought new meaning to prostration. The final “chapter,” entitled “When You Left, You Took All of Me With You,” a line from a Marvin Gaye song, describes seeing the Obamas “rising out of the limo, rising up from fear, smiling, waving, defying despair, defying history, defying gravity.” The Ascension, no less.

One of the persistent strands in American political life is a cultish extremism that approaches fascism. This was given expression and reinforced during the two

terms of Barack Obama. "I believe in American exceptionalism with every fiber of my being," said Obama, who expanded America's favorite military pastime, bombing, and death squads ("special operations") as no other president has done since the Cold War.

According to a Council on Foreign Relations survey, in 2016 alone Obama dropped 26,171 bombs. That is 72 bombs every day. He bombed the poorest people on earth, in Afghanistan, Libya, Yemen, Somalia, Syria, Iraq, Pakistan.

Every Tuesday – reported The New York Times – he personally selected those who would be murdered by mostly hellfire missiles fired from drones. Weddings, funerals, shepherds were attacked, along with those attempting to collect the body parts festooning the "terrorist target."

A leading Republican senator, Lindsey Graham, estimated, approvingly, that Obama's drones killed 4,700 people. "Sometimes you hit innocent people and I hate that," he said, "but we've taken out some very senior members of Al Qaeda."

Like the fascism of the 1930s, big lies are delivered with the precision of a metronome: thanks to an omnipresent media whose description now fits that of the Nuremberg prosecutor: "Before each major aggression, with some few exceptions based on expediency, they initiated a press campaign calculated to weaken their victims and to prepare the German people psychologically ... In the propaganda system ... it was the daily press and the radio that were the most important weapons."

Destroying Libya

Take the catastrophe in Libya. In 2011, Obama said Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi was planning "genocide" against his own people. "We knew ... that if we waited one more day, Benghazi, a city the size of Charlotte, could suffer a massacre that would have reverberated across the region and stained the conscience of the world."

This was the known lie of Islamist militias facing defeat by Libyan government forces. It became the media story; and NATO – led by Obama and Hillary Clinton – launched 9,700 "strike sorties" against Libya, of which more than a third were aimed at civilian targets. Uranium warheads were used; the cities of Misurata and Sirte were carpet-bombed. The Red Cross identified mass graves, and Unicef reported that "most [of the children killed] were under the age of ten."

Under Obama, the U.S. has extended secret "special forces" operations to 138 countries, or 70 per cent of the world's population. The first African-American president launched what amounted to a full-scale invasion of Africa. Reminiscent of the Scramble for Africa in the late Nineteenth Century, the U.S. African

Command (Africom) has built a network of supplicants among collaborative African regimes eager for American bribes and armaments. Africom's "soldier to soldier" doctrine embeds U.S. officers at every level of command from general to warrant officer. Only pith helmets are missing.

It is as if Africa's proud history of liberation, from Patrice Lumumba to Nelson Mandela, is consigned to oblivion by a new master's black colonial elite whose "historic mission," warned Frantz Fanon half a century ago, is the promotion of "a capitalism rampant though camouflaged."

It was Obama who, in 2011, announced what became known as the "pivot to Asia", in which almost two-thirds of U.S. naval forces would be transferred to the Asia-Pacific to "confront China," in the words of his Defense Secretary. There was no threat from China; the entire enterprise was unnecessary. It was an extreme provocation to keep the Pentagon and its demented brass happy.

In 2014, the Obama's administration oversaw and paid for a fascist-led coup in Ukraine against the democratically elected government, threatening Russia in the western borderland through which Hitler invaded the Soviet Union, with a loss of 27 million lives. It was Obama who placed missiles in Eastern Europe aimed at Russia, and it was the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize who increased spending on nuclear warheads to a level higher than that of any administration since the Cold War – having promised, in an emotional speech in Prague, to "help rid the world of nuclear weapons".

Obama, the constitutional lawyer, prosecuted more whistleblowers than any other president in history, even though the U.S. Constitution protects them. He declared Chelsea Manning guilty before the end of a trial that was a travesty. He has refused to pardon Manning who has suffered years of inhumane treatment, which the United Nations says amounts to torture. He has pursued an entirely bogus case against Julian Assange. He promised to close the Guantanamo concentration camp and didn't.

A Smooth Operator

Following the public relations disaster of George W. Bush, Obama, the smooth operator from Chicago via Harvard, was enlisted to restore what he calls "leadership" throughout the world. The Nobel Prize committee's decision was part of this: the kind of cloying reverse racism that beatified the man for no reason other than he was attractive to liberal sensibilities and, of course, American power, if not to the children he kills in impoverished, mostly Muslim countries.

This is the Call of Obama. It is not unlike a dog whistle: inaudible to most, irresistible to the besotted and boneheaded, especially "liberal brains pickled

in the formaldehyde of identity politics,” as Luciana Bohne put it. “When Obama walks into a room,” gushed George Clooney, “you want to follow him somewhere, anywhere.”

William I. Robinson, professor at the University of California, and one of an uncontaminated group of American strategic thinkers who have retained their independence during the years of intellectual dog-whistling since 9/11, wrote this last week:

“President Barack Obama ... may have done more than anyone to assure [Donald] Trump’s victory. While Trump’s election has triggered a rapid expansion of fascist currents in U.S. civil society, a fascist outcome for the political system is far from inevitable ... But that fight back requires clarity as to how we got to such a dangerous precipice. The seeds of 21st century fascism were planted, fertilized and watered by the Obama administration and the politically bankrupt liberal elite.”

Robinson points out that “whether in its 20th or its emerging 21st century variants, fascism is, above all, a response to deep structural crises of capitalism, such as that of the 1930s and the one that began with the financial meltdown in 2008 ... There is a near-straight line here from Obama to Trump ... The liberal elite’s refusal to challenge the rapaciousness of transnational capital and its brand of identity politics served to eclipse the language of the working and popular classes ... pushing white workers into an ‘identity’ of white nationalism and helping the neo-fascists to organise them”..

The seedbed is Obama’s Weimar Republic, a landscape of endemic poverty, militarized police and barbaric prisons: the consequence of a “market” extremism which, under his presidency, prompted the transfer of \$14 trillion in public money to criminal enterprises in Wall Street.

Perhaps his greatest “legacy” is the co-option and disorientation of any real opposition. Bernie Sanders’ specious “revolution” does not apply. Propaganda is his triumph.

The lies about Russia – in whose elections the U.S. has openly intervened – have made the world’s most self-important journalists laughingstocks. In the country with constitutionally the freest press in the world, free journalism now exists only in its honorable exceptions.

The obsession with Trump is a cover for many of those calling themselves “left/liberal”, as if to claim political decency. They are not “left,” neither are they especially “liberal.” Much of America’s aggression towards the rest of humanity has come from so-called liberal Democratic administrations – such as

Obama's. America's political spectrum extends from the mythical center to the lunar right. The "left" are homeless renegades Martha Gellhorn described as "a rare and wholly admirable fraternity." She excluded those who confuse politics with a fixation on their navels.

While they "heal" and "move forward", will the Writers Resist campaigners and other anti-Trumpists reflect upon this? More to the point: when will a genuine movement of opposition arise? Angry, eloquent, all-for-one-and-one-for all. Until real politics return to people's lives, the enemy is not Trump, it is ourselves.

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Trump's Remaking of US Foreign Policy

President-elect Trump is outlining a foreign policy that rejects the interventionist tenets of Washington's neocon/liberal-hawk establishment and puts U.S.-Russia nuclear arms control at the top of his agenda, writes Gilbert Doctorow.

By Gilbert Doctorow

Over the weekend, President-elect Trump received two journalists from mainstream European print media – *The Times of London* and the German magazine *Bild* – for a joint interview in New York City's Trump Tower. The event was videotaped and we are seeing some remarkable sound bites, particularly those of interest to the British and German publics.

For the government of British Prime Minister Theresa May, nothing could have sounded sweeter than Donald Trump's statement that she would be invited for talks in the White House shortly after he is sworn in on Jan. 20 and that he seeks very quickly to reach agreement on a bilateral free trade pact. The effect of the pledge itself, even ahead of its successful implementation, assures the British that the sting of severing ties with the European Union will be greatly offset by new commercial possibilities in the world's biggest economy; in this way, it strengthens May's hand enormously as she enters into talks with the E.U. leadership over the detailed terms of what will apparently be a "Hard Brexit."

Further adding to her leverage with the E.U. were Trump's remarks suggesting that the E.U. will face stern trade pressure, beginning with Germany and its

automobile industry, to do more to manufacture in the U.S. That precisely raises the relative importance of the U.K. market, which the E.U. will otherwise lose if it imposes severe penalties on Britain in negotiations over Brexit.

For the general public's consumption, Donald Trump used the interview to explain his special affection for Britain, speaking about his Scottish mother's delight in the Queen and her watching every royal event on television for its unequaled pageantry. But we may expect that Prime Minister May will find there is a bill to pay for the "special relationship" with the U.S. under President Trump.

Rather than the British media's early speculation that Prime Minister May would be the one to set the misguided Trump straight about the nefarious Vladimir Putin, she may now have to become a leading European advocate for détente with Russia at Trump's behest. In this connection, British Foreign Minister Boris Johnson's advice to Congress during his visit to Washington last week that Official Washington "stop demonizing Putin" may well have been a straw in the wind.

For the Germans, Trump also offered a bit of flattery, saying how much he respected their Chancellor Angela Merkel. However, as he went on, he virtually flattened the Iron Lady's reputation by calling her open-door policy of admitting migrants into Germany and the E.U. a catastrophe. He noted that Merkel's controversial position had swayed the election results in Britain on Brexit and may lead to the departure of other countries from the E.U. Given his staff's consultation with Marine Le Pen, a visiting French candidate for the presidency from the right-wing Front National, Trump's list surely includes France.

Finally, among the sound bites that will be featured in media coverage of the interview, we hear Donald Trump describe NATO as an outdated organization that needs overhaul. However, apart from his reiterated insistence that Member States must pay their fair share, which he claims only Britain and four others from the 28 Member States are currently doing, the interview offers no specifics on what kind structural change, if any, he seeks for NATO. We only hear that NATO has not been prepared to deal with the threat of international terrorism.

Views on Russia

But it was in another area, Trump's remarks on Russia and the terms he named for possibly lifting sanctions, that we find convincing proof that the President-elect's approach to foreign affairs is not just the sum of isolated tactical considerations but a complete reinvention of the guiding principles of U.S. foreign policy. What we are witnessing is a shift to a new strategic, geopolitical paradigm.

In the past couple of decades, going back to the second term of President Bill Clinton, the ideology of neoconservatism with its stress on “democracy promotion” as being the whole of national interest, dictated policy decisions that amounted to the tail wagging the dog. The Baltic States were admitted into NATO in its 2004 enlargement *because they wanted it*. The decision to station U.S., German and other NATO brigades in Poland and other states along the Russian border taken last July in Warsaw and implemented, in the case of Poland, by U.S. forces in the past several days, was justified by *the anxiety of these countries* over the possibility of Russian aggression, even though NATO’s action has been highly provocative vis-à-vis Russia and brought the major nuclear powers ever closer to direct confrontation.

In the interview, Trump changed entirely the metrics by which sanctions on Russia would be lifted. Instead of fulfillment of the Minsk Accords over Ukraine’s ethnic Russian Donbas region – which nationalist hardliners in Kiev had the power to block – Trump conditioned the relaxation of sanctions on progress in curbing the nuclear arms race and moving toward significant nuclear disarmament, issues that are fully within the power of the Kremlin to implement.

To be sure, these issues today are more complex than they were in the heyday of disarmament talks. The recent obstacles include the U.S. anti-ballistic missile installations in Poland and Romania, the forward stationing of NATO human and materiel resources in the former Warsaw Pact countries, and the standing invitations to Ukraine and Georgia to enter NATO. So any negotiations between Washington and Moscow will be very complex.

But Trump’s statement shows that he is focused on the big picture, on the triangular relationship between Washington, Moscow and Beijing that he believes to be of vital importance in keeping the peace globally, rather than on some amorphous reliance on expanding democracy globally on the unproven assumption that democracies among themselves are peace-loving.

These elements in Donald Trump’s thinking, quite unexpected in a businessman, bring him very close to the Realism of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, while his setting nuclear disarmament as a key goal, aligns him with Ronald Reagan and – strange to say – with Barack Obama at the very start of his presidency.

If Donald Trump can stave off the jackals from the Western mainstream media and the U.S. foreign policy establishment – a combination that has formed a snarling circle around him even before he takes office – he may have a chance to make historic changes in international relations toward a more peaceful world.

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August 2015.

Playing Politics with Terrorism List

Congressional Republicans continue to push Islamo-phobic bills, now seeking to put the mostly political Muslim Brotherhood on the foreign terrorist list, notes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Legislation introduced by Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, and Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart, R-Florida, to designate the Muslim Brotherhood as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO) is regrettable on multiple counts. It represents a perversion of the FTO list and reflects an attitude that is likely to increase rather than decrease Islamist terrorism.

There was no official U.S. list of foreign terrorist organizations until 20 years ago, and no need for one despite international terrorism having been a major official concern well before then. Notwithstanding the common practice in public discourse and the press of referring to how this or that government brands or designates a particular group as “terrorist,” any listing or branding by itself accomplishes nothing in combating such groups or reducing terrorism.

The Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996 created the U.S. FTO list for a very specific practical reason. Other provisions in that law criminalized for the first time the provision of material support to foreign terrorist organizations. To make prosecution under this statute possible, there needed to be a precise way of defining what constitutes a foreign terrorist organization. Hence the creation of the list.

The 1996 legislation established a procedure in which the various departments and agencies involved participate in a lengthy review process to examine which groups should be listed as FTOs. The law spells out the criteria to govern the review, which basically are that the group must be an identifiable organization that is foreign and has engaged in terrorism that somehow affects U.S. interests. The review process has been thorough and laborious, including the preparation of detailed “administrative records” assembling the available information about each group under examination. The Secretary of State makes the final determinations regarding listing or delisting.

There has been some political manipulation of the list, though it has been to

keep or move a group off the list rather than putting it on. The most salient case of this involved the Iranian cult and terrorist group known as the Mojahedin-e Khalq, which Secretary of State Hillary Clinton delisted in 2012. The group, which has killed American citizens in terrorist attacks and clearly met the criteria for being on the FTO list, had not changed its stripes. Instead, the delisting was a response to the group's long-running and well-financed lobbying campaign to win favor in Washington and especially among members of Congress.

A Congressionally imposed listing of the Muslim Brotherhood would be the first time such politicization would involve putting an organization on the FTO list rather than taking it off. It also would be the first time a group was listed not because of terrorist activities but instead because of dislike for its ideology.

Such a Congressional imposition would be a political end-run around the well-established process for applying the best possible expertise and information to the question of whether a group meets the criteria under the law that governs the FTO list. Such a move would reduce further the credibility in foreign eyes of what the U.S. Government say about terrorism, and lend substance to charges that much of what the United States calls opposition to terrorism is really just opposition to politics and ideologies it does not favor.

Mostly Political, Not Violent

The Muslim Brotherhood is a predominantly Egyptian organization with origins that go back to the 1920s. Its establishment was partly a response to the fall of the Ottoman Empire and to the militant secularism of Ataturk and his abolition of the Istanbul-based caliphate. For most of its modern history in Egypt, the Brotherhood has been the principal peaceful manifestation of political Islam.

During the rule of Hosni Mubarak, the Brotherhood was officially proscribed but in practice tolerated, being allowed to run candidates for office as independents or under the label of some other party. The extent of the Brotherhood's popular support was demonstrated after Mubarak's fall, when in a free election a Brotherhood leader, Mohamed Morsi, was elected president. The Egyptian military coup of 2013 began a harsh crackdown that was aimed at political liberties in general but specifically at the Muslim Brotherhood.

The forms and practices of Brotherhood offshoots outside Egypt have depended on the extent of political liberty in each location. In Jordan, for example, the organization has had a status slightly freer than the Egyptian Brotherhood had under Mubarak. The group in Jordan runs candidates and wins parliamentary seats

under the Brotherhood's own party label, the Islamic Action Front. Where political liberty is lacking, something different evolves. In the Palestinian territories, for example, that evolution involved the creation of Hamas (which has its own place on the U.S. FT0 list).

The habit of seeing previous Muslim Brotherhood ties in the violent and extreme activities of other groups disregards how participation in these groups, and especially the use of terrorism, is a *rejection* of the Brotherhood's peaceful, gradualist path. Such groups are foes, not offshoots or extensions, of the Brotherhood. The groups that terrorized Egypt in the 1990s explicitly opposed the Brotherhood and thought that its peaceful ways were feckless. The leader of one of those groups, Ayman al-Zawahiri, is now the leader of Al Qaeda.

The Folly of Suppression

The fundamental mistake in suppressing groups such as the Brotherhood, or in effect condoning such suppression with a step such as the Cruz-Diaz legislation, is that closing peaceful channels for the expression of political Islam moves more people into the violent channels. We have seen this process playing out in Egypt since the coup, with the harsh practices of military strongman Abdul Fatah al-Sisi being followed directly by an upsurge in terrorist violence in Egypt.

The unfortunate lesson being absorbed by many young men with Islamist inclinations is that all those years of forbearance by the Brotherhood were for naught. The lesson is that only a violent path has any chance of success.

The newly introduced legislation is bad not only as a politicization of counterterrorism but also as a counterproductive approach to Islamist terrorism in particular. Also unfortunate are indications of this approach becoming part of the new administration's direction. A disturbing part of the testimony this week by the nominee for Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, was his seamless lumping of the Muslim Brotherhood with "other agents of radical Islam, like al-Qaeda."

Likely to be even more damaging is the entrenchment of indiscriminate Islamophobia at the center of national security decision-making in the White House.

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America's Self-Destructive Obsessions

The U.S. population is led from one hysteria to the next, now transitioning from the Global War on Terror to the New Cold War with Russia, a fearful madness that is infecting the collective psyche, says Michael Brenner.

By Michael Brenner

Captain Ahab's obsessive hunt for Moby Dick was driven by the thirst for revenge. The great white whale had maimed Ahab – in soul as well as body. Ahab was consumed by the passion to restore his sense of self, and make himself whole again, by killing his nemesis – a compulsion that his wooden leg never lets weaken.

America's "war-on-terror" has become our national mission for restoration. The psychic wound of 9/11 is what grieves us; it inflames our collective passion for vengeance. The physical wound is already healed. By now, it must be memorialized in order for the scar to be seen. It never did impair our functioning. In that sense, little more than a broken toe.

In the aftermath of 9/11, there was genuine fear of a repeat attack – something that we now know never was in the cards. Our enemy has been emasculated; the great Satan was shot dead in Abbottabad. Only pinpricks at long intervals from within our midst draw blood.

Catharsis has eluded us, though. We still seethe with emotions. We suffer from the embedded anxiety that is dread, from uneasy feelings of vulnerability, from a seeming lost prowess and control. A society that talks casually about "closure" on almost all occasions cannot find closure on 9/11. Instead, the society has a powerful need to ritualize the fear, to pursue the implacable quest for ultimate security, to perform violent acts of vengeance that neither cure nor satiate.

So, we search the seven seas hunting for monsters to slay; not Moby Dick himself, but his accessories, accomplices, enablers, facilitators, emulators, sympathizers. Whales of every species, great and small, fall to our harpoons. The dead and innocent dolphins far outnumber even the smallest of whales. Fortunes of war.

Since there is no actual Moby Dick out there to pursue, we have fashioned a virtual game of acting out the hunt, the encounter, the retribution. We thereby have embraced the post-9/11 trauma rather than exorcised it. That is the "war-on-terror." That war is about *us* – it no longer is about *them*.

Ahab destroyed himself, destroyed his crew, destroyed his ship. He sacrificed all in the quest – a quest for the unattainable. The United States is sacrificing its principles of liberty, its political integrity, the trust that is the bedrock of its democracy, its standing in the world as the “best hope of mankind,” and its capacity to feel for others – including its fellow citizens. America’s Moby Dick has migrated and transmuted itself. It now is lodged in our innermost being.

There, it spawns fictive offspring, such as Vladimir Putin. But the **phantasmagoric** Putin is but the projection of our own existential dread. The spectral persona who haunts our minds, “Putin” has no objective existence. “Putin” is the creation of our troubled national psyche. We have transposed onto him the whole maelstrom of turbid emotions we had imparted to Osama bin-Laden, and then the Islamic State.

To be rid of America’s transmuted Moby Dick we must kill part of our tainted being – a form of psycho-political chemotherapy. Otherwise, our national soul will wither away just as Ahab was sucked into the ocean depths entangled in the very ropes he had fashioned to ensnare Moby Dick.

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Mainstream Media’s Russian Bogeymen

Exclusive: The mainstream hysteria over Russia has led to dubious or downright false stories that have deepened the New Cold War, as Gareth Porter notes regarding last month’s bogus tale of a hack into the U.S. electric grid.

By Gareth Porter

In the middle of a major domestic crisis over the U.S. charge that Russia had interfered with the U.S. election, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) triggered a brief national media hysteria by creating and spreading a bogus story of Russian hacking into U.S. power infrastructure.

DHS had initiated the now-discredited tale of a hacked computer at the Burlington, Vermont Electricity Department by sending the utility’s managers misleading and alarming information, then leaked a story they certainly knew to be false and continued to put out a misleading line to the media.

Even more shocking, however, DHS had previously circulated a similar bogus story of Russian hacking of a Springfield, Illinois water pump in November 2011.

The story of how DHS twice circulated false stories of Russian efforts to sabotage U.S. “critical infrastructure” is a cautionary tale of how senior leaders in a bureaucracy-on-the-make take advantage of every major political development to advance its own interests, with scant regard for the truth.

The DHS had carried out a major public campaign to focus on an alleged Russian threat to U.S. power infrastructure in early 2016. The campaign took advantage of a U.S. accusation of a Russian cyber-attack against the Ukrainian power infrastructure in December 2015 to promote one of the agency’s major functions – guarding against cyber-attacks on America’s infrastructure.

Beginning in late March 2016, DHS and FBI conducted a series of 12 unclassified briefings for electric power infrastructure companies in eight cities titled, “Ukraine Cyber Attack: implications for U.S. stakeholders.” The DHS declared publicly, “These events represent one of the first known physical impacts to critical infrastructure which resulted from cyber-attack.”

That statement conveniently avoided mentioning that the first cases of such destruction of national infrastructure from cyber-attacks were not against the United States, but were inflicted on Iran by the Obama administration and Israel in 2009 and 2012.

Beginning in October 2016, the DHS emerged as one of the two most important players – along with the CIA–in the political drama over the alleged Russian effort to tilt the 2016 election toward Donald Trump. Then on Dec. 29, DHS and FBI distributed a “Joint Analysis Report” to U.S. power utilities across the country with what it claimed were “indicators” of a Russian intelligence effort to penetrate and compromise U.S. computer networks, including networks related to the presidential election, that it called “GRIZZLY STEPPE.”

The report clearly conveyed to the utilities that the “tools and infrastructure” it said had been used by Russian intelligence agencies to affect the election were a direct threat to them as well. However, according to Robert M. Lee, the founder and CEO of the cyber-security company Dragos, who had developed one of the earliest U.S. government programs for defense against cyber-attacks on U.S. infrastructure systems, the report was certain to mislead the recipients.

“Anyone who uses it would think they were being impacted by Russian operations,” said Lee. “We ran through the indicators in the report and found that a high percentage were false positives.”

Lee and his staff found only two of a long list of malware files that could be

linked to Russian hackers without more specific data about timing. Similarly a large proportion of IP addresses listed could be linked to "GRIZZLY STEPPE" only for certain specific dates, which were not provided.

The Intercept discovered, in fact, that 42 percent of the 876 IP addresses listed in the report as having been used by Russian hackers were exit nodes for the Tor Project, a system that allows bloggers, journalists and others – including some military entities – to keep their Internet communications private.

Lee said the DHS staff that worked on the technical information in the report is highly competent, but the document was rendered useless when officials classified and deleted some key parts of the report and added other material that shouldn't have been in it. He believes the DHS issued the report "for a political purpose," which was to "show that the DHS is protecting you."

Planting the Story, Keeping it Alive

Upon receiving the DHS-FBI report the Burlington Electric Company network security team immediately ran searches of its computer logs using the lists of IP addresses it had been provided. When one of IP addresses cited in the report as an indicator of Russian hacking was found on the logs, the utility immediately called DHS to inform it as it had been instructed to do by DHS.

In fact, the IP address on the Burlington Electric Company's computer was simply the Yahoo e-mail server, according to Lee, so it could not have been a legitimate indicator of an attempted cyber-intrusion. That should have been the end of the story. But the utility did not track down the IP address before reporting it to DHS. It did, however, expect DHS to treat the matter confidentially until it had thoroughly investigated and resolved the issue.

"DHS wasn't supposed to release the details," said Lee. "Everybody was supposed to keep their mouth shut."

Instead, a DHS official called The Washington Post and passed on word that one of the indicators of Russian hacking of the DNC had been found on the Burlington utility's computer network. The Post failed to follow the most basic rule of journalism, relying on its DHS source instead of checking with the Burlington Electric Department first. The result was the Post's sensational Dec. 30 story under the headline "Russian hackers penetrated U.S. electricity grid through a utility in Vermont, U.S. officials say."

DHS official evidently had allowed the Post to infer that the Russians had penetrated the grid without actually saying so. The Post story said the Russians "had not actively used the code to disrupt operations of the utility, according

to officials who spoke on condition of anonymity in order to discuss a security matter,” but then added, and that “the penetration of the nation’s electrical grid is significant because it represents a potentially serious vulnerability.”

The electric company quickly issued a firm denial that the computer in question was connected to the power grid. The Post was forced to retract, in effect, its claim that the electricity grid had been hacked by the Russians. But it stuck by its story that the utility had been the victim of a Russian hack for another three days before admitting that no such evidence of a hack existed.

The day after the story was published, the DHS leadership continued to imply, without saying so explicitly, that the Burlington utility had been hacked by Russians. Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs J. Todd Breasseale gave CNN a statement that the “indicators” from the malicious software found on the computer at Burlington Electric were a “match” for those on the DNC computers.

As soon as DHS checked the IP address, however, it knew that it was a Yahoo cloud server and therefore not an indicator that the same team that allegedly hacked the DNC had gotten into the Burlington utility’s laptop. DHS also learned from the utility that the laptop in question had been infected by malware called “neutrino,” which had never been used in “GRIZZLY STEPPE.”

Only days later did the DHS reveal those crucial facts to the Post. And the DHS was still defending its joint report to the Post, according to Lee, who got part of the story from Post sources. The DHS official was arguing that it had “led to a discovery,” he said. “The second is, ‘See, this is encouraging people to run indicators.’”

Original DHS False Hacking Story

The false Burlington Electric hack scare is reminiscent of an earlier story of Russian hacking of a utility for which the DHS was responsible as well. In November 2011, it reported an “intrusion” into a Springfield, Illinois water district computer that similarly turned out to be a fabrication.

Like the Burlington fiasco, the false report was preceded by a DHS claim that U.S. infrastructure systems were already under attack. In October 2011, acting DHS deputy undersecretary Greg Schaffer was quoted by The Washington Post as warning that “our adversaries” are “knocking on the doors of these systems.” And Schaffer added, “In some cases, there have been intrusions.” He did not specify when, where or by whom, and no such prior intrusions have ever been documented.

On Nov. 8, 2011, a water pump belonging to the Curran-Gardner township water district near Springfield, Illinois, burned out after sputtering several times in previous months. The repair team brought in to fix it found a Russian IP

address on its log from five months earlier. That IP address was actually from a cell phone call from the contractor who had set up the control system for the pump and who was vacationing in Russia with his family, so his name was in the log by the address.

Without investigating the IP address itself, the utility reported the IP address and the breakdown of the water pump to the Environmental Protection Agency, which in turn passed it on to the Illinois Statewide Terrorism and Intelligence Center, also called a fusion center composed of Illinois State Police and representatives from the FBI, DHS and other government agencies.

On Nov. 10 – just two days after the initial report to EPA – the fusion center produced a report titled “Public Water District Cyber Intrusion” suggesting a Russian hacker had stolen the identity of someone authorized to use the computer and had hacked into the control system causing the water pump to fail.

The contractor whose name was on the log next to the IP address later told Wired magazine that one phone call to him would have laid the matter to rest. But the DHS, which was the lead in putting the report out, had not bothered to make even that one obvious phone call before opining that it must have been a Russian hack.

The fusion center “intelligence report,” circulated by DHS Office of Intelligence and Research, was picked up by a cyber-security blogger, who called The Washington Post and read the item to a reporter. Thus the Post published the first sensational story of a Russian hack into a U.S. infrastructure on Nov. 18, 2011.

After the real story came out, DHS disclaimed responsibility for the report, saying that it was the fusion center’s responsibility. But a Senate subcommittee investigation revealed in a report a year later that even after the initial report had been discredited, DHS had not issued any retraction or correction to the report, nor had it notified the recipients about the truth.

DHS officials responsible for the false report told Senate investigators such reports weren’t intended to be “finished intelligence,” implying that the bar for accuracy of the information didn’t have to be very high. They even claimed that report was a “success” because it had done what “what it’s supposed to do – generate interest.”

Both the Burlington and Curran-Gardner episodes underline a central reality of the political game of national security in the New Cold War era: major bureaucratic players like DHS have a huge political stake in public perceptions of a Russian threat, and whenever the opportunity arises to do so, they will

exploit it.

Gareth Porter is an independent investigative journalist and winner of the 2012 Gellhorn Prize for journalism. He is the author of the newly published *Manufactured Crisis: The Untold Story of the Iran Nuclear Scare*.

Who's the Real Manipulator of Elections?

Exclusive: In berating Russia for alleged interference in the recent U.S. election, the U.S. intelligence community ignores the extensive U.S. role in manipulating political movements around the globe, observes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

The Director of National Intelligence's public report on alleged Russian hacking opens with a "key judgment" that "Russian efforts to influence the 2016 US presidential election represent the most recent expression of Moscow's longstanding desire to undermine the US-led liberal democratic order."

That's a strong claim. The assertion suggests a fundamental and sustained Kremlin challenge to Western freedom, reminiscent of the early years of the Cold War. That such an unqualified and ideologically charged claim should lead the report speaks volumes about the politicization of the U.S. intelligence community's leadership. That such a claim has gone mostly unchallenged, aside from Donald Trump, speaks volumes about the powerful ideological consensus in Washington for escalating political and military conflict with Russia.

Yet a recent review of relations with Russia during the Obama years by former U.S. ambassador Michael McFaul – a harsh critic of President Putin – puts the lie to the notion that Moscow has consistently sought to undermine U.S. political interests. At the same time, however, McFaul's article illustrates the blinders shared by many American policy makers regarding the counterproductive impact on Russian behavior of repeated U.S. electoral and military interventions.

From Cooperation to Conflict

Writing for *Foreign Policy*, McFaul states that Russian cooperation allowed the Obama administration to negotiate the New START treaty, which slashed the number of missile launchers on each side; implement joint economic sanctions to pressure Iran into dismantling any capability of producing nuclear weapons; open

up critical transportation routes for the resupply of NATO forces in Afghanistan; and arrange huge business deals for major U.S. corporations. Russia also cooperated extensively in counterterrorism and persuaded the Assad regime to give up its stockpiles of chemical weapons.

These are hardly the actions of a government with a long-term plan to undermine the United States or the “liberal democratic order.” That order is far more at risk from the Saudi monarchy, whose “export of the rigid, bigoted, patriarchal, fundamentalist strain of Islam known as Wahhabism has fueled global extremism and contributed to terrorism,” to quote *The New York Times*.

So what went wrong with Russia? As I recently argued, and McFaul acknowledges, one major sticking point in recent years was the Obama administration’s insistence on deploying missile defenses in Eastern Europe, which Moscow interpreted as a long-term threat to its nuclear deterrent. Congressional meddling in Russian affairs by imposing sanctions on alleged human rights abusers also angered the Kremlin. But those issues were not fatal, McFaul insists.

Instead, McFaul claims, the fault lay with Putin’s paranoid reaction to “common people demonstrating in the streets to demand greater freedoms and democratic rule” during the Arab Spring, the 2011 Russian elections, and then in Ukraine. “Putin’s response to those events, first the annexation of Crimea and then intervention in support of insurgents in eastern Ukraine, ended for good our ability to cooperate,” he maintains.

McFaul writes that Putin had “wild theories” about “American financial support for Russian opposition leaders and their organizations,” and about U.S. responsibility for regime change more generally in the Middle East and Ukraine.

“We tried to convince Putin and his government otherwise. We explained that the CIA was not financing demonstrators in Cairo, Moscow, or Ukraine . . . But Putin’s theory of American power – engrained long ago as a KGB officer (and confirmed, it must be admitted, by previous American actions in Iran, Latin America, Serbia, and Iraq) – was only reconfirmed by events during the Arab Spring and especially on the streets of Moscow in the winter of 2011 and spring of 2012.

“In his view, people don’t rise up independently and spontaneously to demand greater freedom. They must be guided, and the Obama administration was the hidden hand. On that, we profoundly disagreed; our bilateral relations never recovered.”

Even Paranoids Have Enemies

McFaul's parenthetical acknowledgment of past U.S. complicity in regime change all over the world is refreshing. But he dismisses as "phantom" the documented evidence that the Obama administration also sought to overthrow regimes in areas of Russian interest with catastrophic results.

In Libya, for example, Putin was appalled when Obama flagrantly violated his narrow mandate from the United Nations Security Council to protect civilians in the 2011 civil war. That March, President Obama accepted that "broadening our military mission to include regime change would be a mistake." One month later, he declared, with the leaders of France and Great Britain, "Colonel Gaddafi must go, and go for good."

A recent British parliamentary report condemning that fundamental change of mission blamed the Western military campaign for triggering Libya's "political and economic collapse, inter-militia and inter-tribal warfare, humanitarian and migrant crises, widespread human rights violations, the spread of Gaddafi regime weapons across the region and the growth of ISIL in North Africa."

McFaul is similarly silent about Obama's promotion of regime change in Russia's longstanding ally, Syria. Fresh from their disaster in Libya, Obama and his two European partners declared in August 2011 that "the time has come for President Assad to step aside."

Their proclamation came four months after the *Washington Post* reported that Obama had continued a covert Bush administration program to fund Syrian Islamists who were engaged in "a long-standing campaign to overthrow the country's autocratic leader, Bashar al-Assad." Five years and half a million dead later, can McFaul really paint Putin as paranoid about regime change?

Russia's 2011 Elections

McFaul also discounts as irrational Putin's anger over Washington's alleged intervention in Russia's 2011 parliamentary elections, which a hostile Secretary of State Hillary Clinton condemned as fraudulent. Putin complained that Clinton judged the elections unfair even before international election monitors announced their findings. He called her comments a "signal for our activists who began active work with the U.S. Department of State" to stage mass protests.

Concerns about the fairness of the election were legitimate. Putin no doubt scapegoated Washington in part to explain the drop in popularity of his United Russia party. However, he wasn't making up the fact that the U.S.-funded National Endowment for Democracy (NED), created during the Reagan administration to take the place of covert CIA programs to influence civil groups, was "all over the place inside Russia."

Moreover, according to University of Westminster dean Roland Dannreuther, “For Putin and his entourage, there were clear parallels with Western democracy promotion in the Middle East and rising opposition and societal conflict within Russia,” which had only recently achieved political and economic stability after its near collapse in the 1990s.

“The lesson they took from events in Libya and Syria was that the West’s commitment to ‘democracy’ meant a willingness to break up societies, to use force, and to impose the wishes of an elite pro-Western minority on the majority. The interpretation was that ‘we must not allow the ‘Libyan scenario’ to be reproduced in Syria’. Even more important, of course, was that the ‘Libyan scenario’ should not be reproduced in Russia or in key neighbours, such as Ukraine.”

Regime Change in Ukraine

Ukraine was, in fact, the final straw. After Washington recognized the February 2014 coup against the elected government of Viktor Yanukovich, who was friendly with Moscow, Russia’s rushed to annex (or reunify with) Crimea and back the separatist movement in Russian-speaking Eastern Ukraine. Western powers responded with economic sanctions. Relations have gone downhill ever since.

Although the political opposition to Yanukovich had genuine mass appeal (at least in Western Ukraine), Washington’s hands were all over the movement to oust him and move Ukraine closer to the West. The demonstrators were publicly encouraged by Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland (former foreign policy adviser to Vice President Dick Cheney) and by the ardently anti-Putin Sen. John McCain. Just weeks before the Ukraine coup, the Russians intercepted a phone call between Nuland and the U.S. ambassador, discussing their picks for new leadership in the country.

U.S. government funds also poured into Ukraine before the coup, through the National Endowment for Democracy, to train grass-roots activists, support key journalists, and foster business groups. In 2013, the president of NED, Carl Gershman, published a blatantly provocative op-ed column in the *Washington Post* calling Ukraine “the biggest prize” among countries of interest to Russia. He boasted that U.S. programs to pull Ukraine into the Western orbit would “accelerate the demise of the ideology of Russian imperialism that Putin represents” and defeat him “not just in the near abroad but within Russia itself.”

NED: History of Interventions

Putin has had reason to doubt Western claims about “democracy promotion” since

Washington and its European allies overlooked Boris Yeltsin's unconstitutional power grab in 1993 and his blatant manipulation of the 1996 election. That election prompted a famous Time magazine cover story: "Yanks to the Rescue: The Secret Story of How American Advisers Helped Yeltsin Win."

U.S. interference in Russia's domestic affairs was soon followed by the so-called "color revolutions" in such former Soviet republics as Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan. Columbia University's Alexander Cooley remarked, "Eurasian elites viewed the color revolutions not as legitimate democratic responses to corrupt authoritarian rule, but as Western-sponsored threats targeting their very survival. These perceptions were supported when various Western NGOs and donors began to publicly take credit for their role in ushering in regime changes . . ."

Cooley added, "the United States has also contributed to the erosion of its own credibility as a promoter of democratic values through the manner in which it dealt with the government of Georgia and its democratic failings in the post-[2003] Rose Revolution period. Indeed . . . the United States' vigorous support of Georgia contributed to the notion that Washington's efforts to promote democracy in the post-Soviet space were simply justification for supporting anti-Russian regimes."

Ukraine's Orange Revolution in 2004 followed more than \$65 million in spending by the Bush administration "to aid political organizations in Ukraine" and "to bring opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko to meet U.S. leaders," reported Associated Press.

Its report continued, "U.S. officials say the activities don't amount to interference in Ukraine's election, as Russian President Vladimir Putin alleges, but . . . officials acknowledge some of the money helped train groups and individuals opposed to the Russian-backed government candidate – people who now call themselves part of the Orange revolution."

American Manipulation

Ian Traynor, the *Guardian's* European editor, called the 2004 Ukraine campaign "an American creation, a sophisticated and brilliantly conceived exercise in western branding and mass marketing that, in four countries in four years, has been used to try to . . . topple unsavoury regimes."

"Funded and organised by the US government, deploying US consultancies, pollsters, diplomats, the two big American parties and US non-government organisations, the campaign was first used in Europe in Belgrade in 2000 to beat Slobodan Milosevic at the ballot box," he continued.

“If the events in Kiev vindicate the US in its strategies for helping other people win elections and take power from anti-democratic regimes, it is certain to try to repeat the exercise elsewhere in the post-Soviet world.”

As it happened, the campaign in Kiev *did* turn out to Washington’s liking. Yushchenko – who was married to a former official in the Reagan administration – emerged as Ukraine’s new president and began seeking membership in NATO and the European Union.

Scholars agree that Putin and other Russian elites were deeply shaken by these successive U.S. interventions along their borders. That should have come as no surprise: Washington would have reacted much the same to Russia spending tens of millions of dollars on political revolutions in our backyard, as indeed we did during the Cold War in Guatemala, Cuba, Chile, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Grenada.

The DNI report thus would have been much more correct to state that Russia has long opposed U.S.-led regime changes on its borders and in the Middle East. Moscow is not implacably hostile to American values or interests, as shown by the cooperative behavior it repeatedly showed during the early Obama years.

In order to genuinely advance U.S. interests and better protect our freedoms, therefore, the Trump administration should follow through on the President-elect’s implicit promises to rethink policies that provoke conflict with Russia in the name of promoting democracy.

Jonathan Marshall is author of many recent articles on arms issues, including “How World War III Could Start,” “NATO’s Provocative Anti-Russian Moves,” “Escalations in a New Cold War,” “Ticking Closer to Midnight,” and “Turkey’s Nukes: A Sum of All Fears.”

America in Need of ‘Democracy Promotion’

The U.S. government lectures other countries about “democracy” – and finances internal opposition in the name of “democracy promotion” – but its own behavior falls far short of democratic norms, says ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

The health, or sickness, of democracy in foreign countries has long been a

matter of concern in the United States, notwithstanding disagreements regarding exactly what the United States can, or should, do to promote democracy abroad. Consider the case of the following country – for now, let us call it Slobbovia – as outsiders would view it and as it might be the subject of something equivalent to a State Department dispatch or a report from a nongovernmental organization concerned with democracy.

Slobbovia has a legal and constitutional structure that provides for political and civil rights and is in the form of a representative democracy with built-in checks and balances. In practice, much political activity derives not from that legal and constitutional framework but instead consists of crude use of levers of power by those with access to those levers.

Elements with the most power routinely show less regard for democratic procedures than for solidification of their own party's power. Ultimate motivations for such behavior may include retention of power for its own sake and the advancement of minority economic interests that would be unable to prevail under majority rule.

The ruling party – the party that as of later this month will be in full control of both the executive and legislative branches of the national government – aggressively uses non-democratic means to preserve and expand its position. Among these has been enactment at the state level – where the ruling party also controls most of the legislatures – of laws designed to impede voting by citizens deemed more likely to vote for the opposition, by imposing requirements difficult for many of those citizens to meet. The rationale for such laws has been to counter voting fraud, even though such fraud has been so rare as to be almost nonexistent.

The voter suppression laws have effectively disenfranchised what is probably a substantial, although admittedly impossible to quantify, portion of the electorate. The rationale – echoed by the incoming president, who has made accusations, without support, of widespread voting fraud – also has undermined confidence in Slobbovian democracy.

Gerrymandering Voting Districts

Both the ruling party and the principal opposition party extensively manipulate the boundaries of legislative districts to benefit their own party and to entrench incumbents, but this practice has disproportionately benefited the ruling party because of its control over most state legislatures, where the

manipulative line-drawing occurs.



Because members of state legislatures can draw their own district boundaries, this districting technique is another way for a minority to continue in power even after it has lost whatever majority support it once had. At the national level, the manipulation of district lines has enabled the ruling party to retain a majority of seats in the lower house of the legislature even when it has won fewer votes than the opposition party did.

The ruling party also benefits from an archaic feature of Slobbovian presidential elections – a holdover from a system devised partly to propitiate slave-holding interests – in which the candidate winning the most votes does not necessarily get the presidency. This has happened twice in the last five presidential elections. The oddity was especially marked in the most recent election, in which the presidency is being given to a candidate who finished a full two percentage points behind the opposition party's candidate.

When the opposition party has managed despite these handicaps to make inroads – as it did in winning the two previous presidential elections – the dominant party has used its position in the national legislature to flout the majority will and to impede the ability of the other party to govern. Its techniques have included a form of extortion in which, lacking the votes to enact its policies through normal democratic means, it threatens to shut down the government altogether or to destroy Slobbovia's credit rating through a debt default if it does not get its way.

The party's leader in the upper house of the national legislature openly declared his intention, as his highest priority, to make the president a failure. He and his party acted consistently with that declaration. This approach included automatic and total opposition to what was the principal domestic policy initiative of the day, even though this meant the party did not have any alternative to offer once it regained full control of the policymaking branches of government.

Controlling the Courts

The ruling party has placed heavy emphasis on controlling as well the judiciary, which is significant in that Slobbovia's highest court has become in effect another policymaking branch of government, with justices in ideological camps that clearly correspond to the preferences of the two major political parties.

The death a year ago of one justice threatened a loss of the dominant party's hold on the court. The party's members in the upper house of the legislature – which the constitution says must provide advice and consent regarding presidential appointments to the court – disregarded that constitutional provision and refused to consider the incumbent president's nominee, even though it meant the vacancy would last at least a year and the nominee in question was a moderate.

The sympathy of a majority of the court toward the dominant party's ideology has played a major role in increasing the part of money in Slobbovian politics, especially by striking down legislation intended to regulate money's role in election campaigns. Slobbovia is no kleptocracy, and for the most part the role of money in politics does not take the form of what is undeniably corruption, as it does in many other countries.

It is worthy of note, however, that the first attempted action by the ruling party's members in the lower house of the newly convened national legislature was to disable an office with the mission of investigating corruption among members. The action was scuttled after it provoked outrage. (The incoming president criticized the timing, but not the substance, of the attempted disabling of the office.)

The increasing role of money is instead more a matter of deference to minority moneyed interests, based on disproportionate access of those interests to the corridors of power, at the expense of majority interests as would be expressed through democratic means. This trend involves the flouting of previous custom and in some respects the flouting of law.

The incoming president, contrary to the practice of his predecessors, refuses to disclose fully his financial interests and specifically his tax returns. He is a businessman with worldwide interests that he is not divesting, making it almost inevitable that during his administration there will be violations of a provision in the Slobbovian constitution that prohibits U.S. officials from receiving private gain from foreign governments. The intermingling of public business with private business interests also involves members of the President's family who evidently are going to have hands in both, notwithstanding Slobbovian law that is supposed to restrict nepotism. Some

observers have even seen similarities to family rule in North Korea.

Some senior appointees of the incoming president who also have extensive private interests that could conflict with the public interest appear likely to be confirmed in their appointments even though they have failed to complete ethics-related submissions that are supposed to be required for confirmation. The financial donations that some wealthy nominees have made to the same members of the upper house who will be voting on their nominations may have something to do with this outcome.

Also of concern regarding the intermingling of private and public interests are informal advisers who have extensive financial interests that would be affected by policy decisions and whose grey-area status keeps them outside even the ostensible legal restrictions that apply to formally appointed officials.

An Unfavorable Trend

An overall assessment of the state of democracy in Slobbovia must begin with the observation that this is a nation with a long history and strong tradition of representative democracy. But this tradition is visibly and seriously eroding. The trend is unfavorable.

The defects in Slobbovian democracy are growing and becoming more obvious. This country is increasingly a place where minority interests can, and do, use nondemocratic means to prevail over the will and interests of a majority. As both a cause and effect of this pattern, the aspects of political culture that, at least as much as constitutional and legal provisions, are critical to the sustaining of a liberal representative democracy have been weakening. The most important aspect of such culture is widespread acceptance that observing and nourishing democratic norms themselves are more important than any one policy outcome or the fortunes of any one political party. Too often this is not the set of priorities one observes.

Realizing that this particular Slobbovia is actually the United States, one can get a sense of how non-Americans are viewing American democracy. This in turn can have implications for democracy in the observers' own lands. Right now there is uncertainty about what effect the direct actions of the incoming Trump administration will have on democracy abroad.

Anne Applebaum expresses a pessimistic view that Trump, far from promoting any expansion of democracy, may undermine hitherto well-established democracies in Europe by making common cause with racist and anti-immigration elements in hard-right nationalist movements.

Democracy scholar Thomas Carothers believes, somewhat more optimistically, that

“as Trump and his team move to actual policymaking,” their support for democracy and human rights abroad “will prove less consistently negative than their initial signals might indicate.”

Carothers correctly identifies, however, the biggest negative of all: “Various problematic features of U.S. political life in recent years – the institutional gridlock, the ever-rising role of money in politics, and the frequent skirmishing over basic electoral rules and procedures – have already tarnished the United States’ image abroad.

But the recent U.S. presidential election process damaged this image much more widely and deeply. Although this damage had many sources, numerous actions that Trump took during the campaign and since the election – from his vows to prosecute his main opponent to his baseless postelection assertions of massive electoral fraud – figure significantly in the dispiriting diminishment of America’s global political brand.”

For anyone interested in expanding democracy abroad, this is a reason for deep pessimism. America is more likely to be successful in encouraging such expansion by setting an example than by direct manipulation or intervention. Because stable democracy requires those critical elements of political culture – including genuine and willing commitment to democratic procedures themselves – it must arise in large part inwardly, even if inspired by a salient example such as the United States, rather than being imposed from the outside.

For all Americans, the biggest reason to be bothered by the trends in American democracy is that it is their own country. That is a reason to be pessimistic even if not giving a hoot about the expansion of democracy abroad.

That is also one of the biggest problems to think about in connection with the alleged Russian interference in the U.S. election. Primary among the likely Russian motives, as suggested in the official government report on the Russian initiative, was “to undermine public faith in the U.S. democratic process.” Sure, what the Russians allegedly did is worthy of condemnation, but Americans ought to be most disturbed by the fact that there already were enough reasons to shake such faith that the Russians would have known they had a vulnerable target. The recent election, with or without Russian interference, provided still more reasons.

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Pulling a J. Edgar Hoover on Trump

Exclusive: President-elect Trump is fending off a U.S. intelligence leak of unproven allegations that he cavorted with Russian prostitutes, but the darker story might be the CIA's intervention in U.S. politics, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The decision by the U.S. intelligence community to include in an official report some unverified and salacious accusations against President-elect Donald Trump resembles a tactic out of FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover's playbook on government-style blackmail: I have some very derogatory information about you that I'd sure hate to see end up in the press.

In this case, as leaders of the U.S. intelligence community were pressing Trump to accept their assessment that the Russian government had tried to bolster Trump's campaign by stealing and leaking actual emails harmful to Hillary Clinton's campaign, Trump was confronted with this classified "appendix" describing claims about him cavorting with prostitutes in a Moscow hotel room.

Supposedly, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper and CIA Director John Brennan included the unproven allegations in the report under the rationale that the Russian government might have videotaped Trump's misbehavior and thus could use it to blackmail him. But the U.S. intelligence community also had reasons to want to threaten Trump who has been critical of its performance and who has expressed doubts about its analysis of the Russian "hacking."

After the briefing last Friday, Trump and his incoming administration did shift their position, accepting the intelligence community's assessment that the Russian government hacked the emails of the Democratic National Committee and Clinton's campaign chief John Podesta. But I'm told Trump saw no evidence that Russia then leaked the material to WikiLeaks and has avoided making that concession.

Still, Trump's change in tone was noted by the mainstream media and was treated as an admission that he was abandoning his earlier skepticism. In other words, he was finally getting onboard the intelligence community's Russia-did-it bandwagon. Now, however, we know that Trump simultaneously had been confronted with the possibility that the unproven stories about him engaging in unorthodox sex acts with prostitutes could be released, embarrassing him barely a week before his inauguration.

The classified report, with the explosive appendix, was also given to President

Obama and the so-called “Gang of Eight,” bipartisan senior members of Congress responsible for oversight of the intelligence community, which increased chances that the Trump accusations would be leaked to the press, which indeed did happen.

Circulating Rumors

The stories about Russian intelligence supposedly filming Trump in a high-end Moscow hotel with prostitutes have been circulating around Washington for months. I was briefed about them by a Hillary Clinton associate who was clearly hopeful that the accusations would be released before the election and thus further damage Trump’s chances. But the alleged video never seemed to surface and the claims had all the earmarks of a campaign dirty trick.

However, now the tales of illicit frolic have been elevated to another level. They have been inserted into an official U.S. intelligence report, the details of which were leaked first to CNN and then to other mainstream U.S. news media outlets.

Trump has denounced the story as “fake news” and it is certainly true that the juicy details – reportedly assembled by a former British MI-6 spy named Christopher Steele – have yet to check out. But the placement of the rumors in a U.S. government document gave the mainstream media an excuse to publicize the material.

It’s also allowed the media to again trot out the Russian word “kompromat” as if the Russians invented the game of assembling derogatory information about someone and then using it to discredit or blackmail the person.

In American history, legendary FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover was infamous for using his agency to develop negative information on a political figure and then letting the person know that the FBI had the dirt and certainly would not want it to become public – if only the person would do what the FBI wanted, whether that was to reappoint Hoover to another term or to boost the FBI’s budget or – in the infamous case of civil rights leader Martin Luther King – perhaps to commit suicide.

However, in this case, it is not even known whether the Russians have any dirt on Trump. It could just be rumors concocted in the middle of a hard-fought campaign, first among Republicans battling Trump for the nomination (this opposition research was reportedly initiated by backers of Sen. Marco Rubio in the GOP race) before being picked up by Clinton supporters for use in the general election.

Still, perhaps the more troubling issue is whether the U.S. intelligence

community has entered a new phase of politicization in which its leadership feels that it has the responsibility to weed out “unfit” contenders for the presidency. During the general election campaign, a well-placed intelligence source told me that the intelligence community disdained both Clinton and Trump and hoped to discredit both of them with the hope that a more “acceptable” person could move into the White House for the next four years.

Hurting Both Candidates

Though I was skeptical of that information, it did turn out that FBI Director James Comey, one of the top officials in the intelligence community, badly damaged Clinton’s campaign by deeming her handling of her emails as Secretary of State “extremely careless” but deciding not to prosecute her – and then in the last week of the campaign briefly reopening and then re-closing the investigation.

Then, after the election, President Obama’s CIA began leaking allegations that Russian President Vladimir Putin had orchestrated the hacking of Democratic emails and provided them to WikiLeaks to reveal how the DNC undermined Sen. Bernie Sanders’s campaign and what Clinton had told Wall Street bigwigs in paid speeches that she had sought to keep secret from the American people.

The intelligence community’s assessment set the stage for what could have been a revolt by the Electoral College in which enough Trump delegates could have refused to vote for him to send the election into the House of Representatives, where the states would choose the President from one of the top three vote-getters in the Electoral College. The third-place finisher turned out to be former Secretary of State Colin Powell who got three votes from Clinton delegates in Washington State. But the Electoral College ploy failed when Trump’s delegates proved overwhelmingly faithful to the GOP candidate.

Now, we are seeing what looks like a new phase in this “stop (or damage) Trump” strategy, the inclusion of anti-Trump dirt in an official intelligence report that was then leaked to the major media.

Whether this move was meant to soften up Trump or whether the intelligence community genuinely thought that the accusations might be true and deserved inclusion in a report on alleged Russian interference in U.S. politics or whether it was some combination of the two, we are witnessing a historic moment when the U.S. intelligence community has deployed its extraordinary powers within the domain of U.S. politics. J. Edgar Hoover would be proud.

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](#)).

How Obama Spread the Mideast Fires

Exclusive: Barack Obama is one of the “coolest” American presidents, but his “team of rivals” approach to governing – trying to accommodate and co-opt his adversaries – proved disastrous, especially in the Mideast, says Daniel Lazare.

By Daniel Lazare

With President Obama down to less than two weeks in office, everyone is busy assessing his legacy. So let's begin with the Arab world. Not since the Vietnam War, we can safely say, has an administration left a region in ruins the way Obama has left the Middle East (although it's true that George W. Bush contributed mightily to the mess).

But Obama has expanded the chaos outward from Bush's legacy wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, now including Libya, Syria and Yemen with ripple effects from the refugee flows extending into Turkey and even into Europe. Terrorism is exploding, entire nations have been reduced to war zones, while religious sectarianism is raging out of control.

Of course, not all of it is Obama's fault. After all, he didn't start the Sunni-Shia conflict, which dates back to the mid-Seventh Century, nor is he responsible for Arab-Persian ethnic tensions in general, which go back even farther. But he breathed new life into such forces and enabled them to achieve a new kind of prominence, with consequences that are little short of breathtaking.

How did someone so charming and seemingly so progressive wreak such havoc? The answer is through a combination of weakness, complacency, and taking the easy way out. Obama is the sort of cool and laid-back individual who adapts effortlessly to whatever institution he finds himself in, whether it's the Harvard Law Review, the Illinois state legislature, the U.S. Senate or the White House.

The writer Edward L. Fox [argues](#) that, during his childhood in Indonesia, he soaked up the Javanese doctrine of *halus* in which a king “does not conquer opposing political forces, but absorbs them all under himself.” Instead of meeting conflict head on, the king floats serenely above it. The idea is to “let your opponent yell and scream, listen politely, and then, when your adversary

has exhausted himself, somehow end up winning.”

Whereas someone a little less afraid of getting his hair mussed might have confronted “the Blob,” as Washington’s pro-war foreign-policy establishment is known, Obama decided to name Hillary Clinton, one of its chief standard-bearers, as Secretary of State, and keep Robert Gates, another pillar of the national security establishment, as Secretary of Defense.

Rather than fighting what President Dwight Eisenhower dubbed the “military-industrial complex,” Obama’s idea was to disarm it by bringing some of its chief advocates into his inner circle and perhaps give his own standing a boost as well. But what it chiefly did was to provide the War Party with a new lease on life.

More Conflict, Not Less

The upshot was more conflict rather than less. John Kerry, Clinton’s no-less-bellicose successor, made this clear in his much-ballyhooed Dec. 28 speech about the breakdown in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

Although the address has been hailed in certain quarters as an attempt to put peace back on track, a careful reading reveals something very different: the epic two-state talks between Israel and Palestine were not about peace, but about tamping down conflict in one corner of the Middle East so that the U.S. could pursue various imperial misadventures in others. Kerry revealed as much by declaring that all of America’s allies have “common interests in countering Iran’s destabilizing activities.”

The 2002 Saudi Initiative, which served as the basis for the latest failed Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, not only called for an Israeli-Palestinian accord, but for a regional defense agreement aimed at keeping the Persians out.

The framework, Kerry went on, “envisages Israel being a partner in those efforts when peace [with the Palestinians] is made. This is the area where Israel and the Arab world are looking at perhaps the greatest moment of potential transformation in the Middle East since Israel’s creation in 1948. The Arab world faces its own set of security challenges. With Israeli-Palestinian peace, Israel, the United States, Jordan, Egypt – together with the GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] countries – would be ready and willing to define a new security partnership for the region that would be absolutely groundbreaking.”

This was the old goal of a “GCC + 2” security umbrella in which Israel and the Palestinians would forget their differences and join with Egypt, Jordan, and the six members of the GCC – Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman – to form a united front against a non-Arab intruder, Iran.

The alliance thus had an ethnic dimension right from the start. But it also had a religious dimension since all eight Arab nations are Sunni or Sunni-controlled with the minor exception of Oman. So, GCC + 2 would only pave the way for a growing sectarian conflict between Wahhabism, the stringent form of Sunni orthodoxy that is the official state ideology in Saudi Arabia, the dominant member of the GCC, and Iranian Shi'ism.

But since Shi'ism is not confined to a single nation but is actually the majority religion throughout the Persian Gulf area, it was a formula for something even worse, an all-out regional struggle between the Sunni states led by Riyadh on one hand and, on the other, an Iranian-dominated "Shi'ite crescent" stretching from Lebanon and Syria to Bahrain, Yemen, and the Saudis' own Eastern Province, the center of both its oil industry and its 15 percent Shi'ite minority.

The Worst Passions

It was a strategy guaranteed to excite the worst passions on both sides of the divide. It was a recipe not only for war but for religious war, which is the worst kind. Not surprisingly, violence exploded, and more than a million refugees were sent fleeing toward Europe, a human inundation that is now roiling the political waters from Paris to Warsaw.

Yet, Obama – with his Javanese penchant for reconciling opposites – has shown a strange combination of vision and blindness throughout the debacle. He spoke up in favor of human rights. But at his first meeting with Saudi King Abdullah, he bowed deeply and apparently kissed his hand, a curious gesture for a young progressive encountering one of the world's greatest despots but it was a sign of hypocrisies to come. Obama protested loudly when Bashar al-Assad's cracked down on Sunni-led Arab Spring protests in Syria, but Obama remained silent when Saudi Arabia dispatched troops to crack down on Shi'ite-led Arab Spring protests in neighboring Bahrain.

Welcoming Abdullah's equally tyrannical neighbor, Qatar's Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, in April 2011, Obama uttered the usual diplomatic boilerplate, expressing appreciation for "the leadership that the emir has shown when it comes to democracy in the Middle East." But he was franker in private.

Not realizing that he was speaking into an open mike, he told donors at a Democratic fundraiser in Chicago later that evening that Al-Thani was a "pretty influential guy. He is a big booster, big promoter of democracy all throughout the Middle East. Reform, reform, reform – you're seeing it on Al Jazeera. Now, he himself is not reforming significantly. There's no big move towards democracy in Qatar. But you know part of the reason is that the per capita income of Qatar

is \$145,000 a year. That will dampen a lot of conflict.”

In fact, Al-Thani is a lawless autocrat who, according to Obama’s own State Department, prohibits organized political parties, restricts civil liberties “including freedoms of speech, press, and assembly and access to a fair trial,” and countenances human trafficking “primarily in the domestic worker and labor sectors.” But since he has oodles of oil and natural gas and is friendly to the U.S. besides, he gets a free pass.

Double your standards, double your fun. A month later, Obama gave a major address in which he called for “freedom of religion, equality for men and women under the rule of law, and the right to choose your own leaders – whether you live in Baghdad or Damascus, Sanaa, or Tehran.” But he remained studiously silent about Saudi Arabia, America’s chief ally in the region, where the rule of law is nonexistent and the status of women is probably the worst in the world.

While urging freedom for Egypt’s Christian minority, he said nothing about how the Saudis routinely arrest Christians for the “crime” of attending underground services, close down Shia mosques, or tolerate dangerous sectarian rhetoric in which Sunni routinely accuse “evil Shias” of “set[ting] traps for monotheism and for the Sunnis” and seeking to “skin Sunnis and boil them in water.”

Enlisting the Autocracies

But not only did Obama shield the other oil autocracies from criticism, but, on the theory that only Arabs can solve Arab problems, he encouraged them to become more active abroad. The results were uniformly disastrous. Despite Al-Thani’s well-established record as a supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood and similar forces, Hillary Clinton spent much of late March 2011 persuading him to take part in the U.S.-led military effort to overthrow Libyan strongman Muammar Gaddafi, according to an internal State Department memo. When he said yes, the Obama administration was overjoyed.

But Al-Thani took advantage of the deal to distribute some \$400 million to Salafist rebels in the form of machine guns, automatic rifles, and ammunition so that they could do to Libya what an earlier generation of U.S.-backed jihadis had done to Afghanistan, i.e. reduce it to chaos.

Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other Sunni-run states responded the same way when the U.S. invited them to fund the uprising against Syria’s leader Bashar al-Assad, an Alawite, a branch of Shi’a Islam. These “friends of Syria” channeled billions of dollars in aid to Salafist rebels determined to impose Saudi-style fundamentalism.

In August 2012, the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency warned that Salafists, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Al Qaeda were “the major forces driving the insurgency,” that rebels were seeking to establish a “Salafist principality in eastern Syria,” and that “western countries, the gulf states, and Turkey are supporting these efforts” in order to counter the Shi’ite threat.

In September 2014, Clinton wrote in an email that Saudi Arabia and Qatar were “providing clandestine financial and logistic support to ISIL and other radical Sunni groups” while Vice President Joe Biden admitted the same thing a month later at a talk at Harvard’s Kennedy School:

“Our allies in the region were our largest problem in Syria ... the Saudis, the emirates, etc. what were they doing? They were so determined to take down Assad and essentially have a proxy Sunni-Shia war, what did they do? They poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of thousands of tons of military weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad except the people who were being supplied were Al Nusra and Al Qaeda and the extremist elements of jihadis coming from other parts of the world.” [Quote starts at 53:25.]

A Spreading Fire

Yet President Obama did nothing to stop this pouring of gasoline on this regional sectarian war. Rather than tamping down the sectarianism, the U.S. facilitated its spread. Chatting with Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, Obama remarked how the easy-going Indonesia he remembered as a child was coming under the sway of the harsh and unforgiving Wahhabism taught in Saudi-funded madrassas.

“Aren’t the Saudis your friends?” Turnbull asked. To which Obama could only smile and say: “It’s complicated.” This is Obama-speak for: “I reconcile opposites, but please don’t ask me to explain how.”

Once sectarianism is out of the bag, it’s very hard to put it back in. In Turkey, which President Recep Tayyip Erdogan turned into a transit hub for Syria-bound Salafist fighters at U.S. behest, the country’s 20 percent Alevi minority, which practices a form of Shi’ism, is hunkering down in anticipation of attacks by Erdogan’s Sunni supporters, ISIS, or both. \ Since March 2015, Shi’ite Houthis in Yemen have been fending off an air assault by Saudis convinced that the Houthi fighters are part of some occult Iranian conspiracy aimed at taking over that country as well.

Members of the Saudi ruling elite “see the hand of Iran everywhere and take seriously the declarations in the Iranian press bragging about how Iran now controls four Arab capitals – Baghdad, Sanaa, Beirut, and Damascus,” a Riyadh-

based diplomat told the French journalist Alain Gresh. "They are obsessed with Iran," said another.

The result is a self-fulfilling prophecy in which the Saudis, backed by the U.S., attack Shi'ite forces before they can attack them, thereby generating yet another round of conflict and recrimination.

Obama adapted to such paranoia all too gracefully and easily. Instead of fighting it, he accepted it as a given and tried to work with it, which only made it worse. The consequence was to tip the entire region into the abyss. Rarely has coolness led to more uncool results.

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