

The Lost Journalistic Standards of Russia-gate

Exclusive: The Russia-gate hysteria has witnessed a widespread collapse of journalistic standards as major U.S. news outlets ignore rules about how to treat evidence in dispute, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

A danger in both journalism and intelligence is to allow an unproven or seriously disputed fact to become part of the accepted narrative where it gets widely repeated and thus misleads policymakers and citizens alike, such as happened during the run-up to war with Iraq and is now recurring amid the frenzy over Russia-gate.

For instance, in a Russia-gate story on Saturday, The New York Times reported as flat fact that a Kremlin intermediary “told a Trump campaign aide, George Papadopoulos, that the Russians had ‘dirt’ on Mr. Trump’s rival, Hillary Clinton, in the form of ‘thousands of emails.’” The Times apparently feels that this claim no longer needs attribution even though it apparently comes solely from the 32-year-old Papadopoulos as part of his plea bargain over lying to the FBI.

Beyond the question of trusting an admitted liar like Papadopoulos, his supposed Kremlin contact, professor Joseph Mifsud, a little-known academic associated with the University of Stirling in Scotland, denied knowing anything about Democratic emails.

In an interview with the U.K. Daily Telegraph, Mifsud acknowledged meeting with Papadopoulos but disputed having close ties to the Kremlin and rejected how Papadopoulos recounted their conversations. Specifically, he denied the claim that he mentioned emails containing “dirt” on Clinton.

Even New York Times correspondent Scott Shane noted late last month – after the criminal complaint against Papadopoulos was unsealed – that “A crucial detail is still missing: Whether and when Mr. Papadopoulos told senior Trump campaign officials about Russia’s possession of hacked emails. And it appears that the young aide’s quest for a deeper connection with Russian officials, while he aggressively pursued it, led nowhere.”

Shane added, “the court documents describe in detail how Mr. Papadopoulos continued to report to senior campaign officials on his efforts to arrange meetings with Russian officials, ... the documents do not say explicitly whether,

and to whom, he passed on his most explosive discovery – that the Russians had what they considered compromising emails on Mr. Trump’s opponent.

“J.D. Gordon, a former Pentagon official who worked for the Trump campaign as a national security adviser [and who dealt directly with Papadopoulos] said he had known nothing about Mr. Papadopoulos’ discovery that Russia had obtained Democratic emails or of his prolonged pursuit of meetings with Russians.”

Missing Corroboration

But the journalistic question is somewhat different: why does the Times trust the uncorroborated assertion that Mifsud told Papadopoulos about the emails – and trust the claim to such a degree that the newspaper would treat it as flat fact? Absent corroborating evidence, isn’t it just as likely (if not more likely) that Papadopoulos is telling the prosecutors what he thinks they want to hear?

If the prosecutors working for Russia-gate independent counsel Robert Mueller had direct evidence that Mifsud did tell Papadopoulos about the emails, you would assume that they would have included the proof in the criminal filing against Papadopoulos, which was made public on Oct. 30.

Further, since Papadopoulos was peppering the Trump campaign with news about his Russian outreach in 2016, you might have expected that he would include something about how helpful the Russians had been in obtaining and publicizing the Democratic emails.

But none of Papadopoulos’s many emails to Trump campaign officials about his Russian contacts (as cited by the prosecutors) mentioned the hot news about “dirt” on Clinton or the Russians possessing “thousands of emails.” This lack of back-up would normally raise serious doubts about Papadopoulos’s claim, but – since Papadopoulos was claiming something that the prosecutors and the Times wanted to believe – reasonable skepticism was swept aside.

What the Times seems to have done is to accept a bald assertion by Mueller’s prosecutors as sufficient basis for jumping to the conclusion that this disputed claim is undeniably true. But just because Papadopoulos, a confessed liar, and these self-interested prosecutors claim something is true doesn’t make it true.

Careful journalists would wonder, as Shane did, why Papadopoulos who in 2016 was boasting of his Russian contacts to make himself appear more valuable to the Trump campaign wouldn’t have informed someone about this juicy tidbit of information, that the Russians possessed “thousands of emails” on Clinton.

Yet, the prosecutors’ statement regarding Papadopoulos’s guilty plea is

strikingly silent on corroborating evidence that could prove that, first, Russia did possess the Democratic emails (which Russian officials deny) and, second, the Trump campaign was at least knowledgeable about this core fact in the support of the theory about the campaign's collusion with the Russians (which President Trump and other campaign officials deny).

Of course, it could be that the prosecutors' "fact" will turn out to be a fact as more evidence emerges, but anyone who has covered court cases or served on a jury knows that prosecutors' criminal complaints and pre-trial statements should be taken with a large grain of salt. Prosecutors often make assertions based on the claim of a single witness whose credibility gets destroyed when subjected to cross-examination.

That is why reporters are usually careful to use words like "alleged" in dealing with prosecutors' claims that someone is guilty. However, in Russia-gate, all the usual standards of proof and logic have been jettisoned. If something serves the narrative, no matter how dubious, it is embraced by the U.S. mainstream media, which – for the past year – has taken a lead role in the anti-Trump "Resistance."

A History of Bias

This tendency to succumb to "confirmation bias," i.e., to believe the worst about some demonized figure, has inflicted grave damage in other recent situations as well.

One example is described in the Senate Intelligence Committee's 2006 study of the false intelligence that undergirded the case for invading Iraq in 2003. That inquiry discovered that previously discredited WMD claims kept reemerging in finished U.S. intelligence analyses as part of the case for believing that Iraq was hiding WMD.

In the years before the Iraq invasion, the U.S. government had provided tens of millions of dollars to Iraqi exiles in the Iraqi National Congress, and the INC, in turn, produced a steady stream of "walk-ins" who claimed to be Iraqi government "defectors" with knowledge about Saddam Hussein's secret WMD programs.

Some U.S. intelligence analysts – though faced with White House pressure to accept this "evidence" – did their jobs honestly and exposed a number of the "defectors" as paid liars, including one, who was identified in the Senate report as "Source Two," who talked about Iraq supposedly building mobile biological weapons labs.

CIA analysts caught Source Two in contradictions and issued a "fabrication

notice" in May 2002, deeming him "a fabricator/provocateur" and asserting that he had "been coached by the Iraqi National Congress prior to his meeting with western intelligence services."

But the Defense Intelligence Agency never repudiated the specific reports that were based on Source Two's debriefings. Source Two also continued to be cited in five CIA intelligence assessments and the pivotal National Intelligence Estimate in October 2002, "as corroborating other source reporting about a mobile biological weapons program," the Senate Intelligence Committee report said.

Thus, Source Two became one of four human sources referred to by Secretary of State Colin Powell in his United Nations speech on Feb. 5, 2003, making the case that Iraq was lying when it insisted that it had ended its WMD programs. (The infamous "Curve Ball" was another of these dishonest sources.)

Losing the Thread

After the U.S. invasion and the failure to find the WMD caches, a CIA analyst who worked on Powell's speech was asked how a known "fabricator" (Source Two) could have been used for such an important address by a senior U.S. government official. The analyst responded, "we lost the thread of concern as time progressed I don't think we remembered."

A CIA supervisor added, "Clearly we had it at one point, we understood, we had concerns about the source, but over time it started getting used again and there really was a loss of corporate awareness that we had a problem with the source."

In other words, like today's Russia-gate hysteria, the Iraq-WMD groupthink had spread so widely across U.S. government agencies and the U.S. mainstream media that standard safeguards against fake evidence were discarded. People in Official Washington, for reasons of careerism and self-interest, saw advantages in running with the Iraq-WMD pack and recognized the dangers of jumping in front of the stampeding herd to raise doubts about Iraq's WMD.

Back then, the personal risk to salary and status came from questioning the Iraq-WMD groupthink because there was always the possibility that Saddam Hussein indeed was hiding WMD and, if so, you'd be forever branded as a "Saddam apologist"; while there were few if any personal risks to agreeing with all those powerful people that Iraq had WMD, even if that judgment turned out to be disastrously wrong.

Sure, American soldiers and the people of Iraq would pay a terrible price, but your career likely would be safe, a calculation that proved true for people like Fred Hiatt, the editorial-page editor of The Washington Post who repeatedly reported Iraq's WMD as flat fact and today remains the editorial-page editor of

The Washington Post.

Similarly, Official Washington's judgment now is that there is no real downside to joining the Resistance to Trump, who is widely viewed as a buffoon, unfit to be President of the United States. So, any means to remove him are seen by many Important People as justified – and the Russian allegations seem to be the weightiest rationale for his impeachment or forced resignation.

Professionally, it is much riskier to insist on unbiased standards of evidence regarding Trump and Russia. You'll just stir up a lot of angry questions about why are you "defending Trump." You'll be called a "Trump enabler" and/or a "Kremlin stooge."

However, basing decisions on dubious information carries its own dangers for the nation and the world. Not only do the targets end up with legitimate grievances about being railroaded – and not only does this prejudicial treatment undermine faith in the fairness of democratic institutions – but falsehoods can become the basis for wider policies that can unleash wars and devastation.

We saw the horrific outcome of the Iraq War, but the risks of hostilities with nuclear-armed Russia are far graver; indeed, billions of people could die and human civilization end. With stakes so high, The New York Times and Mueller's prosecutors owe the public better than treating questionable accusations as flat fact.

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 Syrian-Nuke Evidence Was Faked

Exclusive: In joining Israel and the White House selling military intervention in Syria, the CIA and international inspectors hid key evidence that would undermine the case, says Gareth Porter in a second part of [a two-part series](#).

By Gareth Porter

When Yousry Abushady studied the highly unusual May 2008 CIA video on a Syrian nuclear reactor that was allegedly under construction when Israeli jet destroyed it seven months earlier, the senior specialist on North Korean nuclear reactors

on the International Atomic Energy Agency's staff knew that something was very wrong.



Abushady quickly determined that the CIA had been seriously misled by Israeli intelligence and immediately informed the two highest officials of the Vienna-based IAEA, Director General Mohamed ElBaradei and Deputy Director for Safeguards, Olli Heinonen, that the CIA's conclusions were not consistent with the most basic technical requirements for such a reactor.

But it did not take long for Abushady to realize that the top IAEA officials were not interested in drawing on his expertise in regard to the alleged Syrian reactor. In fact, the IAEA cited nonexistent evidence linking the site to a Syrian nuclear program while covering up real evidence that would have clearly refuted such a claim, according to Abushady and other former senior IAEA officials.

When Abudhsady met with Heinonen to discuss his analysis of the CIA's case in May 2008, Abushady asked to be included on the team for the anticipated inspection of the al-Kibar site because of his unique knowledge of that type reactor.

But Heinonen refused his request, citing an unwritten IAEA rule that inspectors are not allowed to carry out inspections in their countries of origin. Abushady objected, pointing out that he is Egyptian, not Syrian, to which Heinonen responded, "But you are an Arab and a Muslim!" according to Abushady. Heinonen declined a request for his comment on Abushady's account of the conversation.

A Curious Inspection

In June 2008, an IAEA team consisting of Heinonen and two other inspectors took environmental samples at the al-Kibar site. In November 2008, the IAEA issued a

report saying that laboratory analysis of a number of natural uranium particles collected at the site "indicates that the uranium is anthropogenic," meaning that it had been processed by humans.

The implication was clearly that this was a reason to believe that the site had been connected with a nuclear program. But former IAEA officials have raised serious questions about Heinonen's handling of the physical evidence gathered from the Syrian site as well as his characterization of the evidence in that and other IAEA reports.

Tariq Rauf who headed the IAEA's Verification and Security Policy Coordination Office until 2011, has pointed out that one of the IAEA protocols applicable to these environmental samples is that "the results from all three or four labs to have analyzed the sample must match to give a positive or negative finding on the presence and isotopes of uranium and/or plutonium."

However, in the Syrian case the laboratories to which the samples had been sent had found no evidence of such man-made uranium in the samples they had tested. ElBaradei himself had announced in late September, three months after the samples had originally been taken but weeks before the report was issued, "So far, we have found no indication of any nuclear material." So the November 2008 IAEA report claiming a positive finding was not consistent with its protocols.

But the samples had been sent to yet another laboratory, which had come up with a positive test result for a sample, which had then touted as evidence that the site had held a nuclear reactor. That in itself is an indication that a fundamental IAEA protocol had been violated in the handling of the samples from Syria.

One of the inspectors involved in the IAEA inspection at al-Kibar later revealed to a fellow IAEA inspector what actually happened in the sample collection there. Former senior IAEA inspector Robert Kelley recalled in an interview that, after the last results of the samples from the al-Kibar inspection had come back from all the laboratories, the inspector, Mongolian national Orlokh Dorjkhaidav, came to see him because he was troubled by the results and wanted to tell someone he trusted.

Negative Results

Dorjkhaidav told Kelley that all the samples taken from the ground in the vicinity of the bombed building had tested negative for man-made uranium and that the only sample that had tested positive had been taken in the toilet of the support building.

Dorjkhaidav later left the IAEA and returned to Mongolia, where he died in

December 2015. A [video obituary for Dorjkhaidav](#) confirmed his participation in the inspection in Syria. Kelley revealed the former inspector's account to this writer only after Dorjkhaidav's death.

In an e-mail response to a request for his comment on Kelley's account of the Syrian environmental samples, Heinonen would neither confirm nor deny that the swipe sample described by Dorjkhaidav had been taken inside the support building. But in January 2013, [David Albright](#), Director of the Institute for Science and International Security in Washington, D.C., who has co-authored several articles with Heinonen, acknowledged in a commentary on his think tank's website that the al-Kibar uranium particles had been "found in a changing room in a building associated with the reactor."

Given the dispersal of any nuclear material around the site by the Israeli bombing, if man-made uranium was present at the site, it should not have shown up only inside the support facility but should have been present in the samples taken from the ground outside.

Former IAEA senior inspector Kelley said in an e-mail that a "very likely explanation" for this anomaly is that it was a case of "cross contamination" from the inspector's own clothing. Such cross contamination had occurred in IAEA inspections on a number of occasions, according to both Kelley and Rauf.

Kelley, who had been in charge of inspections in Iraq in the early 1990s, recalled that a set of environmental swipes taken from nuclear facilities that the United States had bombed in Iraq had appeared to show that that Iraq had enriched uranium to 90 percent. But it turned out that they had been taken with swipe paper that had been contaminated accidentally by particles from the IAEA laboratory.

But what bothered Abushady the most was that the IAEA report on Syria had remained silent on the crucial fact that none of the sample results had shown any trace of nuclear-grade graphite.

Abushady recalled that when he challenged Heinonen on the absence of any mention of the nuclear graphite issue in the draft report in a Nov. 13, 2008 meeting, Heinonen said the inspectors had found evidence of graphite but added, "We haven't confirmed that it was nuclear-grade."

Abushady retorted, "Do you know what nuclear-grade graphite is? If you found it you would know it immediately."

Heinonen was invited to comment on Abushady's account of that meeting for this article but declined to do so.

After learning that the report scheduled to be released in November would be silent on the absence of nuclear graphite, Abushady sent a letter to ElBaradei asking him not to release the report on Syria as it was currently written. Abushady protested the report's presentation of the environmental sampling results, especially in regard to nuclear-grade graphite.

"In my technical view," Abushady wrote, "these results are the basis to confirm the contrary, that the site cannot [have been] actually a nuclear reactor."

But the report was published anyway, and a few days later, ElBaradei's Special Assistant Graham Andrew responded to Abushady's message by ordering him to "stop sending e-mails on this subject" and to "respect established lines of responsibility, management and communication."

A Clear Message

The message was clear: the agency was not interested in his information despite the fact that he knew more about the issue than anyone else in the organization.

At a briefing for Member States on the Syria reactor issue on Feb. 26, 2009, the Egyptian representative to the IAEA confronted Heinonen on the absence of nuclear-grade graphite in the environmental samples. This time, Heinonen had a different explanation for the failure to find any such graphite. He responded that it was "not known whether the graphite was in the building at the time of the destruction," according to the diplomatic cable reporting on the briefing that was later released by WikiLeaks.

But that response, too, was disingenuous, according to Abushady. "Graphite is a structural part of the reactor core in the gas-cooled reactor," he explained. "It is not something you add at the end."

The IAEA remained silent on the question of graphite in nine more reports issued over more than two years. When the IAEA finally mentioned the issue for the first time officially in a May 2011 report, it claimed that the graphite particles were "too small to permit an analysis of the purity compared to that normally required for use in a reactor."

But American nuclear engineer Behrad Nakhai, who worked at Oak National Laboratories for many years, said an interview that the laboratories definitely have the ability to determine whether the particles were nuclear grade or not, so the claim "doesn't make sense."

News outlets have never reported on the IAEA's role in helping to cover up the false CIA claim of a North-Korean-style nuclear reactor in the desert by a misleading portrayal of the physical evidence collected in Syria and suppressing

the evidence that would have made that role clear.

Heinonen, who was directly responsible for the IAEA's role in the Syria cover-up, left the IAEA in August 2010 and within a month was given a position at Harvard University's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. He has continued to take positions on the Iran nuclear negotiations that were indistinguishable from those of the Netanyahu government. And he is now senior adviser on science and non-proliferation at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, a think tank whose positions on the Iran nuclear issues have closely followed those of the Likud governments in Israel.

Gareth Porter is an independent investigative journalist and historian on U.S. national security policy and the recipient of the 2012 Gellhorn Prize for journalism. His most recent book is *Manufactured Crisis: the Untold Story of the Iran Nuclear Scare*, published in 2014. [For a previous segment of this two-part series, see <https://consortiumnews.com/2017/11/18/israels-ploy-selling-a-syrian-nuke-strike/>]

Israel's Ploy Selling a Syrian Nuke Strike

Exclusive: The Iraq WMD fiasco wasn't the only time political pressure twisted U.S. intelligence judgments. In 2007, Israel sold the CIA on a dubious claim about a North Korean nuclear reactor in the Syrian desert, reports Gareth Porter.

By Gareth Porter

In September 2007, Israeli warplanes bombed a building in eastern Syria that the Israelis claimed held a covert nuclear reactor that had been built with North Korean assistance. Seven months later, the CIA released an extraordinary 11-minute video and mounted press and Congressional briefings that supported that claim.

But nothing about that alleged reactor in the Syrian desert turns out to be what it appeared at the time. The evidence now available shows that there was no such nuclear reactor, and that the Israelis had misled George W. Bush's administration into believing that it was in order to draw the United States into bombing missile storage sites in Syria. Other evidence now suggests,

moreover, that the Syrian government had led the Israelis to believe wrongly that it was a key storage site for Hezbollah missiles and rockets.

The International Atomic Agency's top specialist on North Korean reactors, Egyptian national Yousry Abushady, warned top IAEA officials in 2008 that the published CIA claims about the alleged reactor in the Syrian desert could not possibly have been true. In a series of interviews in Vienna and by phone and e-mail exchanges over several months Abushady detailed the technical evidence that led him to issue that warning and to be even more confident about that judgment later on. And a retired nuclear engineer and research scientist with many years of experience at Oak Ridge National Laboratory has confirmed a crucial element of that technical evidence.

Published revelations by senior Bush administration officials show, moreover, that principal U.S. figures in the story all had their own political motives for supporting the Israeli claim of a Syrian reactor being built with North Korean help.

Vice President Dick Cheney hoped to use the alleged reactor to get President George W. Bush to initiate U.S. airstrikes in Syria in the hope of shaking the Syrian-Iranian alliance. And both Cheney and then CIA Director Michael Hayden also hoped to use the story of a North Korean-built nuclear reactor in Syria to kill a deal that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was negotiating with North Korea on its nuclear weapons program in 2007-08.

Mossad Chief's Dramatic Evidence

In April 2007 the chief of Israel's Mossad foreign intelligence agency, Meir Dagan, presented Cheney, Hayden and National Security Adviser Steven Hadley with evidence of what he said was a nuclear reactor being constructed in eastern Syria with the help of the North Koreans. Dagan showed them nearly a hundred hand-held photographs of the site revealing what he described as the preparation for the installation of a North Korean reactor and claimed that it was only a few months from being operational.

The Israelis made no secret of their desire to have a U.S. airstrike destroy the alleged nuclear facility. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert called President Bush immediately after that briefing and said, "George, I'm asking you to bomb the compound," according to the account in Bush's memoirs.

Cheney, who was known to be a personal friend of Olmert, wanted to go further. At White House meetings in subsequent weeks, Cheney argued forcefully for a U.S. attack not only on the purported reactor building but on Hezbollah weapons storage depots in Syria. Then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who participated in those meetings, recalled in his own memoirs that Cheney, who was

also looking for an opportunity to provoke a war with Iran, hoped to “rattle Assad sufficiently so as to end his close relationship with Iran” and “send a powerful warning to the Iranians to abandon their nuclear ambitions.”

CIA Director Hayden aligned the agency clearly with Cheney on the issue, not because of Syria or Iran but because of North Korea. In his book, *Playing to the Edge*, published last year, Hayden recalls that, at a White House meeting to brief President Bush the day after Dagan’s visit, he whispered in Cheney’s ear, “You were right, Mr. Vice-President.”

Hayden was referring to the fierce political struggle within the Bush administration over North Korea policy that had been underway ever since Condoleezza Rice had become Secretary of State in early 2005. Rice had argued that diplomacy was the only realistic way to get Pyongyang to retreat from its nuclear weapons program. But Cheney and his administration allies John Bolton and Robert Joseph (who succeeded Bolton as the key State Department policymaker on North Korea after Bolton became U.N. Ambassador in 2005) were determined to end the diplomatic engagement with Pyongyang.

Cheney was still maneuvering to find a way to prevent the successful completion of the negotiations, and he saw the story of a Syrian nuclear reactor built secretly in the desert with help from the North Koreans as bolstering his case. Cheney reveals in his own memoirs that in January 2008, he sought to sandbag Rice’s North Korea nuclear deal by getting her to agree that a failure by North Korea to “admit they’ve proliferating to the Syrians would be a deal killer.”

Three months later, the CIA released its unprecedented 11-minute video supporting the entire Israeli case for a North-Korean-style nuclear reactor that was nearly completed. Hayden recalls that his decision to release the video on the alleged Syrian nuclear reactor in April 2008 was “to avoid a North Korean nuclear deal being sold to a Congress and a public ignorant of this very pertinent and very recent episode.”

The video, complete with computer reconstructions of the building and photographs from the Israelis made a big splash in the news media. But one specialist on nuclear reactors who examined the video closely found abundant reason to conclude that the CIA’s case was not based on real evidence.

Technical Evidence against a Reactor

Egyptian national Yousry Abushady was a PhD in nuclear engineering and 23-year veteran of the IAEA who had been promoted to section head for Western Europe in the operations division of agency’s Safeguards Department, meaning that he was in charge of all inspections of nuclear facilities in the region. He had been a

trusted adviser to Bruno Pellaud, IAEA Deputy Director General for Safeguards from 1993 to 1999, who told this writer in an interview that he had “relied on Abushady frequently.”

Abushady recalled in an interview that, after spending many hours reviewing the video released by the CIA in April 2008 frame by frame, he was certain that the CIA case for a nuclear reactor at al-Kibar in the desert in eastern Syria was not plausible for multiple technical reasons. The Israelis and the CIA had claimed the alleged reactor was modeled on the type of reactor the North Koreans had installed at Yongbyon called a gas-cooled graphite-moderated (GCGM) reactor.

But Abushady knew that kind of reactor better than anyone else at the IAEA. He had designed a GCGM reactor for his doctoral student in nuclear engineering, had begun evaluating the Yongbyon reactor in 1993, and from 1999 to 2003 had headed the Safeguards Department unit responsible for North Korea.

Abushady had traveled to North Korea 15 times and conducted extensive technical discussions with the North Korean nuclear engineers who had designed and operated the Yongbyon reactor. And the evidence he saw in the video convinced him that no such reactor could have been under construction at al-Kibar.

On April 26, 2008, Abushady sent a “preliminary technical assessment” of the video to IAEA Deputy Director General for Safeguards Olli Heinonen, with a copy to Director General Mohamed ElBaradei. Abushady observed in his memorandum that the person responsible for assembling the CIA video was obviously unfamiliar with either the North Korean reactor or with GCGM reactors in general.

The first thing that struck Abushady about the CIA’s claims was that the building was too short to hold a reactor like the one in Yongbyon, North Korea.

“It is obvious,” he wrote in his “technical assessment” memo to Heinonen, “that the Syrian building with no UG [underground] construction, can not hold a [reactor] similar [to] NK GCR [North Korean gas-cooled reactor].”

Abushady estimated the height of the North Korean reactor building in Yongbyon at a 50 meters (165 feet) and estimated that the building at al-Kibar at a little more than a third as tall.

Abushady also found the observable characteristics of the al-Kibar site inconsistent with the most basic technical requirements for a GCGM reactor. He pointed out that the Yongbyon reactor had no less than 20 supporting buildings on the site, whereas the satellite imagery shows that the Syrian site did not have a single significant supporting structure.

The most telling indication of all for Abushady that the building could not have been a GCGM reactor was the absence of a cooling tower to reduce the temperature

of the carbon dioxide gas coolant in such a reactor.

“How can you work a gas-cooled reactor in a desert without a cooling tower?” Abushady asked in an interview.

IAEA Deputy Director Heinonen claimed in an IAEA report that the site had sufficient pumping power to get river water from a pump house on the nearby Euphrates River to the site. But Abushady recalls asking Heinonen, “How could this water be transferred for about 1,000 meters and continue to the heat exchangers for cooling with the same power?”

Robert Kelley, a former head of the U.S. Department of Energy’s Remote Sensing Laboratory and former senior IAEA inspector in Iraq, noticed another fundamental problem with Heinonen’s claim: the site had no facility for treating the river water before it reached the alleged reactor building.

“That river water would have been carrying debris and silt into the reactor heat exchangers,” Kelley said in an interview, making it highly questionable that a reactor could have operated there.

Yet another critical piece that Abushady found missing from the site was a cooling pond facility for spent fuel. The CIA had theorized that the reactor building itself contained a “spent fuel pond,” based on nothing more than an ambiguous shape in an aerial photograph of the bombed building.

But the North Korean reactor at Yongbyon and all 28 other GCGM reactors that had been built in the world all have the spent fuel pond in a separate building, Abushady said. The reason, he explained, was that the magnox cladding surrounding the fuel rods would react to any contact with moisture to produce hydrogen that could explode.

But the definitive and irrefutable proof that no GCGM reactor had been present at al-Kibar came from the environmental samples taken by the IAEA at the site in June 2008. Such a reactor would have contained nuclear-grade graphite, Abushady explained, and if the Israelis had actually bombed a GCGM reactor, it would have spread particles of nuclear-grade graphite all over the site.

Behrad Nakhai, a nuclear engineer at Oak Ridge National Laboratory for many years, confirmed Abushady’s observation in an interview. “You would have had hundreds of tons of nuclear-grade graphite scattered around the site,” he said, “and it would have been impossible to clean it up.”

IAEA reports remained silent for more than two years about what the samples showed about nuclear-grade graphite, then claimed in a May 2011 report that the graphite particles were “too small to permit an analysis of the purity compared to that normally required for use in a reactor.” But given the tools available

to laboratories, the IAEA claim that they couldn't determine whether the particles were nuclear grade or not "doesn't make sense," Nakhai said.

Hayden acknowledged in his 2016 account that "key components" of a nuclear reactor site for nuclear weapons were "still missing." The CIA had tried to find evidence of a reprocessing facility in Syria that could be used to obtain the plutonium for a nuclear bomb but had been unable to find any trace of one.

The CIA also had found no evidence of a fuel fabrication facility, without which a reactor could not have gotten the fuel rods to be reprocessed. Syria could not have gotten them from North Korea, because the fuel fabrication plant at Yongbyon had produced no fuel rods since 1994 and was known to have fallen into serious disrepair after the regime had agreed to scrap its own plutonium reactor program.

Manipulated and Misleading Photographs

Hayden's account shows that he was ready to give the CIA's stamp of approval to the Israeli photographs even before the agency's analysts had even begun analyzing them. He admits that when he met Dagan face-to-face he didn't ask how and when Mossad had obtained the photographs, citing "espionage protocol" among cooperating intelligence partners. Such a protocol would hardly apply, however, to a government sharing intelligence in order to get the United States to carry out an act of war on its behalf.

The CIA video relied heavily on the photographs that Mossad had given to Bush administration in making its case. Hayden writes that it was "pretty convincing stuff, if we could be confident that the pictures hadn't been altered." But by his own account Hayden knew Mossad had engaged in at least one deception. He writes that when CIA experts reviewed the photographs from Mossad, they found that one of them had been photo-shopped to remove the writing on the side of a truck.

Hayden professes to have had no concern about that photo-shopped picture. But after this writer asked how CIA analysts interpreted Mossad's photo shopping of the picture as one of the questions his staff requested in advance of a possible interview with Hayden, he declined the interview.

Abushady points out that the main issues with the photographs the CIA released publicly are whether they were actually taken at the al-Kibar site and whether they were consistent with a GCGM reactor. One of the photographs showed what the CIA video called "the steel liner for the reinforced-concrete reactor vessel before it was installed." Abushady noticed immediately, however, that nothing in the picture links the steel liner to the al-Kibar site.

Both the video and CIA's press briefing explained that the network of small pipes on the outside of the structure was for "cooling water to protect the concrete against the reactor's intense heat and radiation."

But Abushady, who specializes in such technology, pointed out that the structure in the picture bore no resemblance to a Gas-Cooled Reactor vessel. "This vessel cannot be for a Gas-Cooled Reactor," Abushady explained, "based on its dimensions, its thickness and the pipes shown on the side of the vessel."

The CIA video's explanation that the network of pipes was necessary for "cooling water" made no sense, Abushady said, because gas-cooled reactors use only carbon dioxide gas – not water – as a coolant. Any contact between water and the Magnox-cladding used in that type of reactor, Abushady explained, could cause an explosion.

A second Mossad photograph showed what the CIA said were the "exit points" for the reactor's control rods and fuel rods. The CIA juxtaposed that photograph with a photograph of the tops of the control rods and fuel rods of the North Korean reactor at Yongbyon and claimed a "very close resemblance" between the two.

Abushady found major differences between the two pictures, however. The North Korean reactor had a total of 97 ports, but the picture allegedly taken at al-Kibar shows only 52 ports. Abushady was certain that the reactor shown in the photograph could not have been based on the Yongbyon reactor. He also noted that the picture had a pronounced sepia tone, suggesting that it was taken quite a few years earlier.

Abushady warned Heinenon and ElBaradei in his initial assessment that the photo presented as taken from inside the reactor building appeared to an old photo of a small gas-cooled reactor, most likely an early such reactor built in the U.K.

A Double Deception

Many observers have suggested that Syria's failure to protest the strike in the desert loudly suggests that it was indeed a reactor. Information provided by a former Syrian air force major who defected to an anti-Assad military command in Aleppo and by the head of Syria's atomic energy program helps unlock the mystery of what was really in the building at al-Kibar.

The Syrian major, "Abu Mohammed," told The Guardian in February 2013 that he was serving in the air defense station at Deir Azzor, the city nearest to al-Kibar, when he got a phone call from a Brigadier General at the Strategic Air Command in Damascus just after midnight on Sept. 6, 2007. Enemy planes were approaching his area, the general said, but "you are to do nothing."

The major was confused. He wondered why the Syrian command would want to let Israeli fighter planes approach Deir Azzor unhindered. The only logical reason for such an otherwise inexplicable order would be that, instead of wanting to keep the Israelis away from the building at al-Kibar, the Syrian government actually wanted the Israelis to attack it. In the aftermath of the strike, the Damascus issued only an opaque statement claiming that the Israeli jets had been driven away and remaining silent on the airstrike at al-Kibar.

Abushady told this writer he learned from meetings with Syrian officials during his final year at the IAEA that the Syrian government had indeed originally built the structure at al-Kibar for the storage of missiles as well as for a fixed firing position for them. And he said Ibrahim Othman, the head of Syria's Atomic Energy Commission, had confirmed that point in a private meeting with him in Vienna in September 2015.

Othman also confirmed Abushady's suspicion from viewing satellite photographs that the roof over the central room in the building had been made with two movable light plates that could be opened to allow the firing of a missile. And he told Abushady that he had been correct in believing that what had appeared in a satellite image immediately after the bombing to be two semi-circular shapes was what had remained of the original concrete launching silo for missiles.

In the wake of the Israel's 2006 invasion of Southern Lebanon, the Israelis were searching intensively for Hezbollah missiles and rockets that could reach Israel and they believed many of those Hezbollah weapons were being stored in Syria. If they wished to draw the attention of the Israelis away from actual missile storage sites, the Syrians would have had good reason to want to convince the Israelis that this was one of their major storage sites.

Othman told Abushady that the building had been abandoned in 2002, after the construction had been completed. The Israelis had acquired ground-level pictures from 2001-02 showing the construction of outer walls that would hide the central hall of the building. The Israelis and the CIA both insisted in 2007-08 that this new construction indicated that it had to be a reactor building, but it is equally consistent with a building designed to hide missile storage and a missile-firing position.

Although Mossad went to great lengths to convince the Bush administration that the site was a nuclear reactor, what the Israelis really wanted was for the Bush administration to launch U.S. airstrikes against Hezbollah and Syrian missile storage sites. Senior officials of the Bush administration didn't buy the Israeli bid to get the United States do the bombing, but none of them ever raised questions about the Israeli ruse.

So both the Assad regime and the Israeli government appear to have succeeded in carrying out their own parts in a double deception in the Syrian desert.

[A second part of this two part-series can be [read here.](#)]

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America's Renegade Warfare

Exclusive: Claiming the right to launch preemptive wars and fighting an ill-defined "global war on terror," the U.S. government has slaughtered vast numbers of civilians in defiance of international law, says Nicolas J S Davies.

By Nicolas J S Davies

Seventy-seven million people in North and South Korea find themselves directly in the line of fire from the threat of a Second Korean War. The rest of the world is recoiling in horror from the scale of civilian casualties such a war would cause and the unthinkable prospect that either side might actually use nuclear weapons.

Since the first Korean War killed at least [20 percent of North Korea's population](#) and left the country in ruins, the U.S. has repeatedly failed to follow through on diplomacy to establish a lasting peace in Korea and has instead kept reverting to illegal and terrifying threats of war. Most significantly, the U.S. has waged a relentless propaganda campaign to discount North Korea's legitimate defense concerns as it confronts the threat of a U.S. war machine that has only grown more dangerous since the last time it destroyed North Korea.

The North has lived under this threat for 65 years and has watched Iraq and Libya destroyed after they gave up their nuclear weapons programs. When North Korea discovered [a U.S. plan for a Second Korean War](#) on South Korea's military computer network in September 2016, its leaders quite rationally concluded that a viable nuclear deterrent is the only way to guarantee their country's safety.

What does it say about the role the U.S. is playing in the world that the only way North Korea's leaders believe they can keep their own people safe is to

develop weapons that could kill millions of Americans?

The Changing Face of War

The Second World War was the deadliest war ever fought, with at least 75 million people killed, about five times as many as in the First World War. When the slaughter ended in 1945, world leaders signed the United Nations Charter to try to ensure that that scale of mass killing and destruction would never happen again. The U.N. Charter is still in force, and it explicitly prohibits the threat or use of military force by any nation.

It was not just the scale of the slaughter that shocked the world's leaders into that brief moment of sanity in 1945. It was also the identities of the dead. Two-thirds of the people killed in the Second World War were civilians, a drastic change from the First World War, only a few decades earlier, when an estimated 86 percent of the people killed were uniformed combatants. The use of nuclear weapons by the United States raised the specter that future wars could kill an exponentially greater numbers of civilians, or even end human civilization altogether.

War had become "total war," no longer fought only on battlefields between soldiers, but between entire societies with ordinary people, their homes and their lives now on the front line. In the Second World War:

–Fleets of warplanes deliberately bombed cities to "dehouse" civilian populations, as British officials described their own bombing of Germany. "As I write this," George Orwell wrote from London in 1941, "Highly civilized human beings are flying overhead, trying to kill me."

–Submarines sank hundreds of merchant ships in an effort to starve their enemies into submission. General Carter Clarke, who was in charge of interpreting Japanese intelligence for President Truman, said in a 1959 interview that Japan surrendered because it faced mass starvation due to the sinking of its merchant shipping, not because of the gratuitous U.S. nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It was estimated that 7 million more civilians would die of starvation if Japan fought on until 1946.

–Genocidal mass extermination campaigns killed civilians based only on their political affiliation or ethnicity. Under cross-examination by a young American prosecutor, Benjamin Ferencz, SS Gruppenfuhrer Dr. Otto Ohlendorf explained patiently to a courtroom in Nuremberg why he found it necessary for the "preemptive defense" of Germany to order the killing of hundreds of thousands of civilians. He explained that even children had to be killed to prevent them too becoming enemies of Germany when they grew up and found out what happened to

their parents.

Despite the U.N. Charter and international efforts to prevent war, people in countries afflicted by war today still face the kind of total war that horrified world leaders in 1945. The main victims of total war in our “modern” world have been civilians in countries far removed from the safe havens of power and privilege where their fates are debated and decided: Yugoslavia; Afghanistan; Iraq; Somalia; Pakistan; Yemen; Libya; Syria; Ukraine. There has been no legal or political accountability for the mass destruction of their cities, their homes or their lives. Total war has not been prevented, or even punished, just externalized.

But thanks to billions of dollars invested in military propaganda and public relations and the corrupt nature of for-profit media systems, citizens of the countries responsible for the killing of millions of their fellow human beings live in near-total ignorance of the mass killing carried out in their name in these “red zones” around the world.

People in ever-spreading war zones are living under the very conditions of total war that the world recoiled from at the end of the Second World War. Like Orwell in London in 1941, they hear highly civilized human beings flying overhead trying to kill them, human beings who know nothing about them beyond the name of the city where they live and its strategic value in wars that offer them, the victims, nothing but death or destitution.

In the case of drones, the human beings trying to kill them from the other side of the world are so highly civilized that they can hop into cars and drive home to have dinner with their families at the end of their shifts, while another “team member” efficiently takes over the “joy-stick” and carries on killing.

People in Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Libya have been subjected to hunger and starvation under sieges and naval blockades that are as brutally effective as German and American submarines were in World War Two. Millions of people in Yemen face an imminent danger of starvation under the U.S.-backed naval blockade and Saudi and Emirati bombing of Yemeni ports.

In retaliation for one missile fired at Riyadh, the Saudi capital, last week, the U.S.-backed coalition completely closed all Yemen’s ports, tightening the blockade on millions of starving people. The requirements of necessity and proportionality, which have been basic principles of customary international law since the Nineteenth Century, lie buried in the graveyards of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Is the U.S. Guilty of Genocide?

The U.S. military occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq quickly adopted “divide and rule” strategies that targeted Pashtuns in Afghanistan and Sunni Arabs in Iraq. When I pointed this out to a friend who teaches military history in 2005, he asked only, “How else can you do it?” I reminded him that “you” don’t have to “do it” at all.

U.S. and allied forces in Iraq have killed at least 10-15 percent of Iraq’s Sunni Arabs and displaced about half of them. Sunni Arabs have been relentlessly targeted for detention, torture and summary execution since 2004, when ex-Drug Enforcement Administration intelligence chief Steven Casteel, retired Colonel James Steele and a CIA team reportedly based on the eighth floor of the Iraqi Interior Ministry recruited, trained and equipped “Special Police” death squads to conduct a reign of terror that tortured and killed tens of thousands of men and boys in Baghdad and elsewhere.

After training by James Steele’s Special Police Training Teams, each Iraqi Special Police unit worked closely with a U.S. Special Police Transition Team (SPTT), and their operations were commanded and controlled from a high-tech command center staffed by U.S. and Iraqi personnel. An SPTT assigned to the notorious Wolf Brigade in Baghdad was from the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, the “Nightstalkers,” who usually provide helicopter transport for U.S. special operations but in this case appear to have used their helicopters mainly to fly detainees to their deaths.

After the exposure of their Al Jadiriyah torture prison in November 2005, the Special Police were rebranded as the National Police (and the Wolf Brigade, incongruously, as the Freedom Brigade). But their torture and killing raged on, under cover of an official narrative of “sectarian violence” which scrupulously ignored the command and control of these forces by the Iraqi Interior Ministry, the CIA and the U.S. military.

At the peak of this campaign in July-October 2006, supported by the U.S. Operations Together Forward I & II, National Police death squads flooded the main morgue in Baghdad with up to 1,600 bodies per month. Thousands more Iraqis were killed and buried elsewhere or just disappeared, while 2 million people were displaced inside Iraq and another 2 million fled the country.

This ethnic cleansing campaign has continued under the U.S.-backed Shiite government and has kept driving Sunni Arab Iraqis into armed resistance groups, of which Islamic State is only the latest, creating pretexts for endless violence against them. Kurdish military intelligence reports have estimated that 40,000 civilians were killed in the recent U.S.-led assault on Mosul, by tens of thousands of bombs and missiles dropped by U.S. and “coalition” warplanes, U.S. Marine 220-lb HiMARS rockets and U.S., French and

Iraqi heavy artillery. This is still only an estimate, and the true number of civilians killed in Mosul was probably higher.

From 2004 on, the ethnic cleansing of Iraq's Sunni Arabs has been a deliberate, calculated element of the U.S.'s "divide and rule" policy in Iraq, with the "intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group." That is the legal definition of genocide in Article II of the 1948 Genocide Convention. The working title of my book about the U.S. invasion and destruction of Iraq was *From Aggression to Genocide*.

As for the killing of "enemy" children, President Obama justified the murder of 16-year-old American Abdulrahman al-Awlaki in Yemen in October 2011, two weeks after the assassination of his father, the Yemeni-American preacher Anwar al-Awlaki. In one of Donald Trump's first acts as president, he authorized a U.S. special operations attack that killed Abdulrahman's 8-year old sister Nawar and other family members in January 2017 – after Trump, on the campaign trail, had vowed to kill the families of suspected terrorists.

Benjamin Ferencz, the by then 81-year-old American lawyer who prosecuted SS Gruppenfuhrer Ohlendorf and his accomplices at Nuremberg, was interviewed by NPR eight days after the mass murders of Sept. 11, 2001.

"It is never a legitimate response to punish people who are not responsible for the wrong done," Ferencz insisted. "We must make a distinction between punishing the guilty and punishing others. If you simply retaliate en masse by bombing Afghanistan, let us say, or the Taliban, you will kill many people who don't approve of what has happened... I say to the skeptics, 'Follow your procedure and you will see what happens.' ... We will have more fanatics and more zealots deciding to come and kill the evil, the United States."

But in the courtroom of American politics, hopelessly corrupted by the CIA's politicized intelligence and manufactured crises and the "unwarranted influence" of the Military Industrial Complex, our leaders chose Ohlendorf's logic over Ferencz's. Neither the millions of people killed in 16 years of war, nor its legacy of ruin and chaos in country after country, nor the utter failure of the "war on terror" on its own terms have led to any change in this illegitimate, criminal and, in the case of Sunni Arabs in Iraq, genocidal U.S. policy.

The Geneva Conventions

As well as the unfulfilled promise of peace in the U.N. Charter, the post-World War II effort to prevent the future mass slaughter of civilians led to a major revision of the Geneva Conventions in 1949. That included a brand new convention, the Fourth Geneva Convention, dedicated entirely to the protection

of civilians in wartime or under military occupation.

Two additional protocols were added to the Geneva Conventions in 1977, to adapt them to the changing nature of war and to provide even greater protections to civilians. The First Additional Protocol has been signed and ratified by 174 countries and the Second by 168 countries. The United States has not ratified either of the Additional Protocols, but it is legally bound by them because treaties that have been ratified by large majorities of countries automatically become part of customary international law, which is universally binding.

To mark the 50th anniversary of the 1949 Conventions in 1999, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) conducted a survey of 17,000 people in 17 countries to see how well people around the world understood “the rules and limits of what is permissible in war” under the Geneva Conventions. The study was titled *People on War – Civilians in the Line of Fire*.

The 17 countries surveyed included 12 where wars had recently been fought, four of the permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, and Switzerland, where the ICRC is based. The introduction to the *People on War* report noted that 90 percent of the people killed in recent wars were civilians and that, in today’s world, “war is war on civilians.” But the report went on:

“...the more these conflicts have degenerated into wars on civilians, the more people have reacted by reaffirming the norms, traditions, conventions and rules that seek to create a barrier between those who carry arms into battle and the civilian population... Large majorities in every war-torn country reject attacks on civilians in general and a wide range of actions that by design or default could harm the innocent.”

People interviewed in Switzerland and the four Security Council permanent member countries were asked to choose between a firm statement that armed forces “must attack only other combatants and leave civilians alone,” and a weaker statement that, “combatants should avoid civilians as much as possible.” About three-quarters of respondents in the U.K., Russia, France and Switzerland chose the first statement, which correctly summarizes the rules of the Fourth Geneva Convention, while 26 percent in the U.K. and 16-17 percent in Russia, France and Switzerland chose the weaker one.

When it came to the United States, though, a very different pattern emerged. Only 52 percent of Americans understood that attacking civilians is strictly prohibited, while 42 percent chose the weaker option, twice as many as in the other four countries. The ICRC report noted that, “Across a wide range of questions, in fact, American attitudes towards attacks on civilians were much more lax.”

The survey also asked whether it is lawful to attack “enemy combatants in populated villages or towns in order to weaken the enemy, knowing that many civilians would be killed.” Once again, while only 20-29 percent of people in the other four countries thought this was allowed, that increased to 38 percent among Americans. Since 1999, this question has arisen again and again across America’s war zones, most recently in the U.S.-led massacres of Iraqi and Syrian civilians in Mosul and Raqqa.

During the U.S. occupation of Iraq, U.N. human rights reports repeatedly reminded U.S. officials of their duty as an occupying power to protect civilians, and notified them that U.S. military operations in civilian areas were routinely violating international humanitarian law. John Pace, who headed the U.N. Assistance Mission to Iraq during the U.S. occupation, compared U.S. efforts to police Iraq by military force to “trying to swat a fly with a bomb,” a fitting metaphor for the entire “war on terror.”

The *People on War* survey also found large discrepancies in attitudes to the Geneva Conventions themselves. In countries that had recently experienced war, only 28 percent of people agreed with a statement that the Conventions “make no real difference” to the brutality of war. But in the U.S. (57 percent) and U.K. (55 percent), twice as many people agreed with that statement.

U.S. War Crimes

We could speculate on why Americans are so exceptionally “lax” in their attitudes toward protecting civilians in wartime. But in practice, the real-world impact of these exceptional attitudes could be overcome if Americans who joined the armed forces received serious training in their responsibilities under the Fourth Geneva Convention. Tragically, they do not.

U.S. military recruits receive only a 50-minute class on the laws of war, focused mainly on the Third Geneva Convention and the rights of POWs, and a refresher of the same 50-minute class before deployment. A retired JAG officer who taught law of war classes and veterans who have sat through them have all told me that the Fourth Geneva Convention and the rights of civilians as “protected persons” were barely mentioned, if at all.

The lax attitude of Americans toward the killing of civilians and the poor training of U.S. troops in their responsibilities under the Geneva Conventions have combined to make invasion and occupation by *American* forces especially deadly, dangerous and terrifying for civilians in Afghanistan, Iraq and wherever U.S. forces are deployed.

In practice, U.S. forces operate under much lower standards than those of the

Geneva Conventions, and civilians whose countries have fallen prey to U.S. aggression do not enjoy the protections guaranteed to them under the laws of war. As I wrote in an article in 2016, this is a classic case of the “normalization of deviance,” a sociological term for the way that powerful institutions like the U.S. military tend to develop weaker, looser norms of conduct than the formal or legal rules that officially apply to them.

Illegal U.S. rules of engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan have included: systematic, theater-wide use of torture; orders to “dead-check” or kill wounded enemy combatants; orders to “kill all military-age males” during certain operations; and “weapons-free” zones that mirror Vietnam-era “free-fire” zones. A U.S. Marine corporal told a court martial prosecuting one of his men for “dead-checking” a wounded Iraqi civilian that “Marines consider all Iraqi men part of the insurgency,” nullifying the critical distinction between combatants and civilians that is the very basis of the Fourth Geneva Convention.

When junior officers or enlisted troops have been charged with war crimes against civilians, they have often been exonerated or given light sentences because courts martial have found that they were acting on orders from more senior officers. But the senior officers implicated in these crimes have been allowed to testify in secret or not to appear in court at all, and have almost never been charged.

To make matters even worse for civilians in Iraq, U.S. military and civilian officials, including Secretary of State Colin Powell, misled the troops they sent to kill and die in Iraq with lies about shadowy connections between the people of Iraq and the young Saudis who committed the crimes of September 11th. In 2006, three years into the war, a Zogby poll of U.S. troops in Iraq found that 85 percent of them still believed that their mission in Iraq was to “retaliate for Saddam’s role in the 9/11 attacks.”

A million Iraqis have paid with their lives for these American lies and the war crimes they have served to justify, while the U.S. officials involved are still walking free, and in many cases still climbing the twisted ladder of success inside the U.S. Military Industrial Complex. Colonel Jeffrey Buchanan, who headed a Special Police Transition Team in Iraq at the time of the exposure of the Al Jadiriyah torture prison in 2005, has been promoted to the rank of Lieutenant General and is currently in charge of hurricane relief to Puerto Rico.

A New Body of Research

After 16 years of ever-spreading and intractable war, a significant body of research is finally emerging to clarify who exactly the U.S. is fighting in its

ever-expanding war zones and what drives civilians to join armed groups like the Taliban, Al Qaeda or Islamic State.

In the looking-glass world of U.S. propaganda, U.S. forces are “fighting them there” so that we don’t have to “fight them here.” But researchers are learning that, like the Iraqis who rose up to resist the illegal U.S. invasion and occupation of their country, most of the people joining armed groups across Africa and the Middle East are only fighting at all because U.S. and allied forces are “fighting them there,” in their countries, cities, villages and homes.

Researchers have interviewed people who have joined armed resistance groups in countries across the world to ask them about what drove them to join an armed group and take part in guerrilla warfare or terrorism. In 2015, the Center for Civilians in Conflict published the results of interviews with 250 people who joined armed groups in Bosnia, Somalia, Gaza and Libya in a report titled, *The People’s Perspective: Civilian Involvement in Armed Conflict*. One of its main findings was that, “The most common motivation for involvement, described by interviewees in all four case studies, was the protection of self or family.”

If most of the people fighting U.S. forces and their allies across the world, from Niger to Ukraine to the Philippines, are just trying to defend themselves and their families against our “counterterrorism” operations, that turns the whole basis of the U.S. “war on terror” on its head. The most effective way to reduce violence and terrorism would obviously be to stop putting them in such an intolerable position in the first place.

Also in 2015, Lydia Wilson, a researcher for the Center for the Resolution of Intractable Conflict at Oxford University, was allowed to interview a number of captured Islamic State fighters in Kirkuk, Iraq. Wilson’s fellow researchers included retired U.S. Major General Doug Stone, who managed U.S. military prisons in Iraq during the U.S. occupation and did some of the first serious Western research into the motivations of Iraqi resistance fighters.

It was hard for Wilson to find captured Islamic State fighters to interview, because Kurdish and U.S.-backed Iraqi government forces summarily execute Islamic State fighters that they capture. But the police in Kirkuk were at least putting prisoners on trial before killing them, so Wilson got permission from the police chief to talk to some prisoners who were awaiting execution.

The first prisoner Lydia Wilson interviewed was captured, tried and sentenced to death for exploding at least four car-bombs and a scooter-bomb in Kirkuk. But his interview was not exceptional – Wilson found that his account of his motivations was repeated by every other prisoner. He explained that his first

loyalty was to his wife and two children, and that he joined ISIS (as Islamic State is commonly known) to support his family. He told Wilson, "We need the war to be over, we need security, we are tired of so much war... all I want is to be with my family, my children."

At the end of the interview, Wilson asked the prisoner if he had any questions. By then he knew that General Stone, one of Wilson's colleagues, was ex-U.S. military, and, instead of asking a question, he just exploded in anger at him, "The Americans came. They took away Saddam but they also took away our security. I didn't like Saddam, we were starving then, but at least we didn't have war. When you came here, the civil war started."

General Stone was not surprised. This was the same outraged speech he had heard from nearly every prisoner since he started interviewing his own prisoners in Iraq in 2007, identifying the poisonous and blood-soaked legacy of the U.S. invasion and occupation as the driving force behind their actions.

Lydia Wilson summarized what she learned about the prisoners in Kirkuk in [an article for *The Nation*](#): "They are children of the occupation, many with missing fathers at crucial periods (through jail, death by execution or fighting in the insurgency), filled with rage against America and their own government. They are not fueled by the idea of an Islamic caliphate without borders; rather, ISIS is the first group since the crushed Al Qaeda to offer these humiliated and enraged young men a way to defend their dignity, family and tribe. This is not radicalization to the ISIS way of life, but the promise of a way out of their insecure and undignified lives; the promise of living in pride as Iraqi Sunni Arabs, which is not just a religious identity, but cultural, tribal and land-based, too."

The recent killing of four U.S. soldiers in Niger surprised many Americans, but the U.S. has [6,000 troops in 53 countries in Africa](#), so we should be ready to welcome home flag-draped coffins from seemingly random countries across the continent. But before our deluded leaders reduce the entire continent of Africa to a new U.S. "battlefield," Americans should take note of a new report published by the U.N. Development Program (UNDP), titled [Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment](#).

This report is based on 500 interviews with militants from across Africa. As its title suggests, the interviewers questioned the militants specifically about the "tipping point" that decided each of them to actually join an armed group such as Boko Haram, Al-Shabab or Al Qaeda. By far the largest number (71 percent) said that some kind of "government action," such as "killing of a family member or friend" or "arrest of a family member or friend," was the final straw that pushed them over the red line from civilian life to guerrilla war. By contrast,

religious ideology was generally not a decisive factor in that decision.

The report concluded, "State security-actor conduct is revealed as a prominent accelerator of recruitment, rather than the reverse." In its section on "Policy Implications," it added, "The *Journey to Extremism* research provides startling new evidence of just how directly counter-productive security-driven responses can be when conducted insensitively."

Across the world, it is obvious, and now well-documented, that U.S. aggression and militarism are causing the very problems they claim to be trying to solve. By design or default, U.S. policy is confusing cause and effect to justify military operations that turn civilians into combatants, fueling an ever-escalating, ever-spreading cycle of increasingly global violence and chaos.

As the world confronts critical problems and demands on its resources, from climate change to poverty and inequality, it can no longer afford to follow the piper of American "leadership" that leads only to war and chaos.

U.S. leaders often raise the specter of "appeasement" to guilt-trip reluctant allies into supporting U.S.-led wars. But maybe it is time for world leaders to recognize that the real appeasement they have been engaged in is the appeasement of the United States, by actively or tacitly encouraging it in an illegal policy of militarism and serial aggression that is spreading violence and chaos across the world.

Surely the real lesson of the 1930s and the Second World War, now reinforced by the experience of the past 20 years, is that it is not enough to simply sign treaties that prohibit aggression and war crimes. The world must be ready to actually enforce the prohibition against the threat or use of military force in customary international law, the 1928 Kellogg Brand Pact and the U.N. Charter – by uniting peacefully and diplomatically to stand up to U.S. aggression and militarism before they lead to a cataclysmic total war that will kill tens or even hundreds of millions of civilians, in Korea or somewhere else.

Nicolas J. S. Davies is the author of *Blood On Our Hands: the American Invasion and Destruction of Iraq*. He also wrote the chapter on "Obama at War" in *Grading the 44th President: a Report Card on Barack Obama's First Term as a Progressive Leader*.

Stumbling Blindly into Cold War Two

As the U.S. and its Western allies lurch into a new and dangerous confrontation

with Russia, the different sides don't even have a thorough understanding of the history behind the tensions, warns Alice Slater.

By Alice Slater

NATO's recent provocative decision to build up its military forces across Europe – by sending four new multinational battalions to Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Poland – comes at a time of great turmoil and intense questioning of global security with new forces for both good and evil straining to make their mark on the course of history.

This weekend, at the Vatican, Pope Francis held an international conference to follow up on the recently negotiated treaty to prohibit the possession, use, or threat of use of nuclear weapons leading to their complete elimination which was negotiated in the United Nations General Assembly this summer by 122 nations, although none of the nine nuclear weapons states participated.

Honored at the conference were members of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), which worked with friendly governments to hold nuclear weapons unlawful, and has recently been awarded the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize for its successful efforts.

The Pope issued a statement that the doctrine of nuclear deterrence in which countries threaten to wreak catastrophic nuclear devastation on their opponents should they be attacked with nuclear bombs has become ineffective against Twenty-first Century threats like terrorism asymmetrical conflicts, environmental problems and poverty. While the church once held that such an insane policy could be moral and lawful, it no longer views it as such. And there are plans for the church to examine the so-called theory of "just war" with an eye to prohibiting the very morality and legality of war itself.

In the U.S., an unprecedented examination of our hidden history has begun. People are questioning the numerous honorary statues memorializing Civil War generals from the South who fought to preserve slavery. Indigenous First Peoples are questioning the adulation given to Christopher Columbus, who "discovered" America for Spain and was responsible for enormous slaughters and bloodshed of natives in the first colonies established in the Americas. Famous and powerful men are being questioned in an avalanche of truth-telling about how they used their professional power to take sexual advantage of women who feared for their career prospects in theater, publishing, business, academia.

Need for Truth about U.S. and Russia

Unfortunately we have barely begun to tell the truth about the U.S. relationship

with Russia and appear to be moving backwards in the U.S. with calls for RT, formerly *Russia Today*, the Russian equivalent of the BBC or Al Jazeera, to be registered in the U.S. as a foreign agent. This is certainly not consistent with the U.S. belief in the sanctity of a free press and will be challenged in the courts.

Indeed, there is a huge effort to misrepresent the provocations of NATO, to gloss over the history of the nuclear arms race— the refusal to take up Mikhail Gorbachev's offer to Ronald Reagan to eliminate all their nuclear weapons provided the U.S. gave up its plans to dominate and control the use of space; the expansion of NATO despite President George H.W. Bush's promises to Gorbachev that NATO would not go any further eastward beyond a unified Germany after the wall fell; Bill Clinton's rejection of Vladimir Putin's offer to cut arsenals to 1,000 nuclear weapons each and call all the parties to the table to negotiate for their elimination provided the U.S. didn't put missiles in Eastern Europe; Clinton leading NATO into the unlawful bombing of Serbia, ignoring Russia's veto of the action in the U.N. Security Council; George W. Bush walking out of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty; the blocking of consensus in the Committee on Disarmament in Geneva to start negotiations on a Russian and Chinese proposal, made in 2008 and again 2015, to ban weapons in space.

Ironically, in light of the recent NATO announcement that it will expand its cyber operations, the U.S. rejection of Russia's 2009 proposal to negotiate a Cyberwar Ban Treaty after the U.S. boasted of having destroyed Iran's uranium enrichment capacity with Israel using the Stuxnet virus in a cyber-attack seems like a gross misjudgment on the part of the U.S. not to have taken Russia up on its proposal.

Indeed, the whole nuclear arms race might have been avoided, if Harry Truman and Josef Stalin could have agreed on a satisfactory arrangement for putting this devastating weapon under U.N. control at the end of World War II. Instead, the U.S. retained control of the technology, and the Soviet Union developed its own bomb.

Now we are entering a New Cold War between the U.S. and Russia. Perhaps the only way to understand this deterioration of U.S.-Russian relationship is to remember President Eisenhower's warning in his 1961 farewell address about the military-industrial complex. The arms manufacturers, with billions of dollars at stake, have corrupted U.S. politics, media, academia and Congress.

U.S. public opinion is manipulated to support war and "blame it on Russia." Meanwhile, the so-called "War on Terror" is a recipe for more terrorism. Like throwing a rock on a hornet's nest, the U.S. sows death and destruction around the world killing innocent civilians in the name of fighting terrorism and thus

invites more terror.

Russia, which lost 27 million people to the Nazi onslaught of World War II, may have a much better understanding of the horrors of war. Perhaps we need a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to reveal the causes and provocation of the historic tensions between the U.S. and Russia. After all, in other spheres, we seem to be entering a new time of truth-telling. And what could be more welcome and important than an honest presentation of the U.S.-Russian relationship over the past century to further better understanding and a peaceful resolution of our differences. With the looming environmental climate catastrophe and the possibility of destroying all life on earth with nuclear devastation, shouldn't we give peace a chance?

Alice Slater serves on the Coordinating Committee of World Beyond War.

The Charmed, Doomed Life of Barry Seal

Exclusive: Tom Cruise's portrayal of drug-smuggler-turned-government-informant Barry Seal is a fast-paced visit back to the Reagan era's shadowy world of the CIA, cocaine and secret wars, writes James DiEugenio.

By James DiEugenio

Barry Seal's life has become the stuff of legend. And much of that legend owes itself to the manner in which his life ended. Seal was killed on the evening of Feb. 19, 1986, machine-gunned in his automobile by agents of the Medellin Cartel, his former employers. There were photos taken of his bullet-riddled body in his car.

His violent and bloody death created headlines and nightly news stories throughout America. In fact, one can say that his murder gave him a higher profile in death than he had in life. And because of the unusual circumstances of his murder – more properly called an assassination – his life now has become the fodder of legend.

Because of all the legerdemain that has sprouted up about Seal, it is not easy to separate fact from fiction. The current film about Seal, *American Made*, does not even try. In fact, it attempts to expand legend into myth. It then plays that myth for fast-action scenes, tongue-in-cheek comedy, and a plot line that moves as quickly as bowling pins falling during a ten-strike. Whatever the failings of director Doug Liman's movie, it is hard to imagine someone being

bored by it.

Before assessing the virtues and faults of *American Made*, let us try and set up some kind of base line for who Seal was, what he did, and how he died. That way we will at least have some kind of basis to measure just how far Liman and screenwriter Gary Spinelli have tilted over into myth. At its start, the film says that it is based on a true story; but at the end it states that the characters are fictitious and any relation to real characters and events is coincidental. Talk about having it both ways.

American Made began as a script by Spinelli entitled *Mena*. Reportedly, in that version, the story was more heavily centered on the CIA operations from that infamous airport in Mena, Arkansas, during America's war in the 1980s against the Nicaraguan Sandinistas. Because of that focus, the role of then-Gov. Bill Clinton was accented, and he was even depicted in a strip-club getting a lap dance.

As the story evolved, the focus changed into a more panoramic view of the 1970s and 1980s through Seal's exploits. The picture begins with a montage of the late 1970s, with Jimmy Carter as president. It then picks up its story line when Ronald Reagan comes to the White House.

Cruise as Seal

When we first encounter Seal – played by Tom Cruise – he is a TWA airline pilot who is a bit bored with his job. He picks up some extra cash by smuggling Cuban cigars into the country. A CIA officer named Schafer (Domhnall Gleeson) approaches him in the airport lounge since he knows about this illegal activity. He tells the pilot he already has a file on him, and this is how he entices Seal to join up with their nascent efforts to militarize the struggle in Central America.

With this opening, one can rightly say that Liman and Spinelli have already romanticized and aggrandized Seal's character. Seal's promising career with TWA ended in the summer of 1972 for something more serious than cigar contraband. He was involved in a conspiracy to ship explosives to Mexico using a TWA plane. Those explosives were reportedly headed for Cuba to be used against the Castro regime. Seal used his vacation time to arrange the deal. (*Smuggler's End*, by Del Hahn, pgs. 31-37)

This is why he was fired by TWA; he did not, as the film depicts, leave on his own accord. But the introduction of the CIA character allows Liman's film to depict CIA man Schafer helping set up Seal in what can only be called an Agency shell company for missions into Central America. And this is what the film says

began Seal's career in Central America. According to *American Made*, it started with reconnaissance missions on rebel groups, and Seal picking up intelligence reports from Panama's Manuel Noriega.

In real life, the Schafer character never actually existed. But Seal had a connection with intelligence services as a pilot for the U.S. Army Special Forces division. (See the online essay "Air Cocaine" by Jeffrey St. Clair and Alexander Cockburn)

Seal joined TWA in 1964 and was fired over the explosives incident eight years later. Since the 14,000 pounds of explosives were destined for Cuban exiles on the island, one has to wonder if, at the very least, the CIA knew about it, or perhaps even sanctioned it. After all, one of the excuses for not proceeding with the later trial of Seal was that it would "threaten national security interests." (ibid)

By several accounts, after his termination Seal began his criminal career in the mid-1970s, smuggling small quantities of marijuana. He built up his business by purchasing a fleet of planes and recruiting several pilots. He quickly became a successful entrepreneur in the black markets of guns and drugs.

By 1978, Seal made a key business decision: he shifted from marijuana to cocaine. Cocaine was less bulky and had a higher profit margin. At this point, with several pilots working for him running several planes across the border into Central America, Barry Seal became a wealthy man. It is not possible to make a serious estimate of how much he was really worth, but he later pegged his wealth at \$50 million. But more than one investigator later said that \$50 million was considerably below the actual figures the Seal operation generated. (ibid)

Meeting the Cartel

In December 1979, Seal was arrested in Honduras on suspicion of drug smuggling, and he was convicted of arms smuggling. Liman's film briefly depicts this incident as something like an overnight stay. In fact, Seal was in prison for eight months.

It is not easy to determine when Seal actually met up with the members of the Medellin Cartel in Colombia and became a key pilot. But almost every commentator says the association came after this prison incident. The film places the prison term while Seal was already doing business with Medellin.

To give a differing example: Roger Reaves was a major cocaine smuggler who was working with the Medellin Cartel when he first met Seal on a plane leaving Honduras after Seal was released. Reaves invited Seal to his home in California

and became very impressed with his flying skills. He offered to sub-contract out some of his work for the cartel, which, at that time, consisted of the Ochoa brothers, Carlos Lehder and Pablo Escobar. (Reaves, *Smuggler*, pgs. 293-298. Reaves is not depicted in the film.)

Differing from the film, Reaves wrote that it was Seal, not CIA officers, who wanted to move the drop point for the incoming shipments of cocaine from Louisiana to the small airfield in Mena. This 1982 move was likely based on the fact that Seal was a Louisiana citizen with a residence in Baton Rouge, and was therefore well known to law enforcement in the Bayous. A second likely reason is because Seal thought it would be easy to buy anonymity in a small town like Mena.

There is little doubt that the CIA followed Seal to Mena. For, as the film shows, Mena doubled as a training base for the Contras, the American-backed rebels trying to overthrow the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. (Jim Naureckas, *FAIR*, October 10, 2017)

It was with this operation, subsidized by the CIA – shipping arms down to the Contras, bringing back tons of cocaine for Medellin – with which Barry Seal redefined the word wealth in the world of smuggling. He further expanded his fleet and pilot corps, since each flight was packed with between 200-500 kilos of cocaine. That kind of load would capture multi-millions on the street, and Seal was paid at least \$2,000 per kilo. As the film depicts, banks had to build new deposit rooms for the rest of their clients, while dedicating their regular deposit repositories solely to Seal's massive holdings.

Government Protection

Somehow, Seal managed to acquire protection for his operation. As a Senate investigation led by Sen. John Kerry noted in 1989, Seal's associates at the Mena airport were targets of grand jury probes into narcotics trafficking. But even though there was evidence sufficient for an indictment on money laundering charges, and despite the willingness of state and federal officials to proceed, the cases were dropped.

Kerry's investigation concluded that the "apparent reason might have revealed national security information." (ibid) That usually means CIA involvement. Another indication of such involvement is the uncovering of a Customs official's report where he explains that a drug inquiry into a pilot had to be cancelled because he "works for Seal and cannot be touched because Seal works for the CIA." (ibid)

Seal's operations also provided work for some local citizens. For instance,

automatic pistols were made in Fayetteville by a gunsmith named William Holmes, who later testified that the CIA asked him to make 250 pistols for Seal. Holmes described the smuggler as “the ramrod of the Mena gun deal.” (St. Clair and Cockburn.)

But in 1983, Seal’s world began to crumble. Operation Screamer was an undercover sting that caught Seal shipping 200,000 Quaaludes into a Fort Lauderdale airport, a key incident that is not depicted in the film. *American Made* simply states that because the Contra resupply effort was not going well, the CIA decided to pull the plug on Seal’s Mena operation.

Seal quickly understands he is being made the fall guy and tries to get everything out. While doing so he is caught by at least four teams of agents: FBI, DEA, state and local police. This scene, with flashlights piercing the darkness and its Keystone Kops overtones, is pure Hollywood invention to create both humor and drama. But, admittedly, it makes for better cinema than a Quaalude bust.

In keeping with Liman’s choice of Hollywood tinsel vs. reality, once Seal is detained, he is taken to the state attorney’s office in handcuffs with about 14 agents around him. The local Arkansas attorney is eager to indict him. But she then gets a call from Gov. Clinton. After taking the call, she walks outside and Seal, who is caught with enough evidence to put him away forever, is set free. The implication in Liman’s film is that Clinton then referred Seal to the White House and Vice President George H.W. Bush’s drug task force.

In reality, Seal was indicted – there was no saving phone call from Clinton or anyone else. After the indictment, it was Seal who approached the DEA offering to turn informant in return for a suspended sentence. His offer was refused and Seal was convicted and faced ten years in prison.

The Danger Zone

At this point, some have surmised that he got some advice from the CIA, for he initiated a call to Vice President Bush’s task force on drugs. (See St. Clair and Cockburn) From there, he was referred to the Miami office of the DEA and worked with two agents for the rest of his life: Ernst Jacobsen and Robert Joura, who are not in Liman’s film.

There is little doubt that Seal was one of the most important, if not the most important, informer the DEA ever had. They thought so highly of him that they paid him \$800,000 per year. To use just one example among many: it was Seal’s work that helped convict Norman Saunders, prime minister of the Turks and Caicos Islands, on drug smuggling charges.

The most famous incident Seal was involved in was a sting operation against the Sandinista government. The idea was to show that somehow the Sandinistas were involved with transshipping drugs through Nicaragua for the Medellin Cartel. Seal had his plane outfitted with automatic cameras as he unloaded a large cargo of cocaine on a Nicaragua runway.

The camera took rather grainy and indistinct photos that appeared to show Seal, Pablo Escobar and a man named Frederico Vaughan, who was allegedly an assistant to a Sandinista cabinet member. In reality, the delivery did not take place at a military base as the Reagan administration claimed, and Vaughan was, to say the least, a very mysterious personage. Some even suspected he was a CIA double agent, in part, because he was calling his American drug contacts from a phone located at either the U.S. or other Western embassies. (Later, the DEA acknowledged that – except for this flight flown into and out of Nicaragua by the U.S. government – there were no other known cases of illicit drugs transiting Nicaragua during the Sandinista reign in the 1980s.)

Blowing Seal's Cover

But the incident capsized Seal's life because the White House was so eager to smear the Sandinistas with this ersatz proof of their supposed drug dealing with the Medellin Cartel that the information was promptly leaked to the media with a front page story in The Washington Times in July 1984. The Reagan administration milked the story for all it was worth, with President Reagan going on TV to accuse top Sandinistas of "exporting drugs to poison our youth." But this exposure ended Seal's value as a DEA informant while also making him a marked man in the eyes of the Medellin Cartel.

In this reviewer's opinion, the film does not do a good job spelling out how this all played out, and its full range of dark overtones. Many have long suspected that the man who leaked the information about Seal's Sandinista sting was White House aide Oliver North, who was overseeing the Contra war.

Liman depicts that Sandinista-sting as part of Seal's downfall, but discounts the machinations around Seal's two trials, one in Florida and one in Louisiana. By this time, Seal had begun to distrust the DEA and had expressed his doubts in a filmed video segment on a Baton Rouge television station.

The judge in the Florida Operation Screamer case cooperated with the DEA and those charges were suspended. But there was a second case in Louisiana, which in keeping with the film's fable, Liman has taking place in Arkansas. This charge was over marijuana importation, and some believe it was manufactured by Louisiana authorities with the help of a dubious witness.

Seal had decided to plead guilty, thinking the judge would go along with the precedent in Florida and simply suspend the charges. But the smuggler was taken by surprise when Judge Frank Palazola sentenced him to probation, a \$35,000 fine, and six months of community service at a local Salvation Army in Baton Rouge. The judge also refused to let Seal have armed bodyguards. And the judge refused to let Seal secretly serve the community service out of state. (See the 1986 special, *Murder of a Witness*, WBRZ TV, Baton Rouge)

This decision, which made Seal in his own words a “clay pigeon,” plus the failure of Attorney General Edwin Meese to intercede has caused decades of controversy over Seal’s murder. In keeping with its comic overtones, the film does not raise any of these serious issues.

A Fast-Paced Adventure

Despite these shortcomings, the film is exceptionally well made. Liman did a lot of thinking beforehand, because although the picture is fast paced, there is little, if any, wasted motion. This extends all the way down to brief animated sequences with maps to demonstrate American foreign policy in Central America.

In addition to the animated sequences, the film skillfully inserts documentary news scenes of Ronald and Nancy Reagan preaching “Just say not to drugs”; stop action shots of Seal trying to find hiding places for his accumulating cash; and a steadicam scene, the camera arcing widely around Seal as he is introduced by the CIA to the empty expanse of Mena.

All of these devices – and more – are edited with a sure, supple hand into a kind of waterfall of forward motion. I don’t think sitting through this film could bore anyone. As pure entertainment, taken on its own terms, it’s as tasty as eating your favorite candy bar.

And that description fits the performance of Tom Cruise. The first time I saw Cruise was in his second film in 1981, *Taps*, a leaden-footed pretentious dud of a film about a student rebellion at a military academy. But I waited around past the end to catch the casting list because I was impressed with his performance in the film’s most unattractive role as a psychotic sniper. Cruise took possession of that part, to the point that he overshadowed the likes of Sean Penn and George C. Scott.

As far as acting goes, Cruise’s subsequent films didn’t fulfill that promise, but his talent peaked out again in 1989 for Oliver Stone in *Born on the Fourth of July*. Since then, his career has largely been a series of actor-star turns, which are heavier in the star quality than the acting.

In this film, unlike in the World War II drama *Valkyrie*, for example, he does

try to capture his character's voice and its southern twang. He gives us Seal's good nature and some humor, but that's about it. Seal was a complex, multi-layered individual who was very hard to figure out because he was so involved in deception, even self-deception. Cruise only gets the surface.

It's instructive to compare *American Made* with an earlier film version of Seal's life, a 1991 HBO television film entitled *Doublecrossed*. That film did not have anywhere near the budget that Liman and Cruise had. But director Roger Young's effort is a much more straightforward telling of Seal's smuggling career than *American Made*. It includes many important points and personages that the current film leaves out. It does not have the sheer entertainment value this film has, but one understands the complexities of Seal's life more than one does with *American Made*. And one can at least ask the proper questions about his assassination.

Hiding the Contra Crimes

At the end of the *American Made*, we see that Doug Liman dedicated the picture to his deceased father, attorney Arthur Liman, who was the Senate's chief counsel to the 1987 Iran/Contra investigation, which is probably why, near the end, the CIA character Schafer suggests to his CIA boss that the way to get funding for the Contras is to sell arms to Iran. At the very end, the film notes the plane that took Seal out of Nicaragua after the staged drug sting was the same plane that was shot down over Nicaragua on Oct. 5, 1986, exposing Oliver North's illegal Contra supply operation.

During those congressional Iran-Contra hearings, a protester screamed for the panel to "ask about the cocaine" before being dragged out of the proceedings. Unfortunately, neither Arthur Liman nor the members of Congress did, leaving the issue of the Reagan administration's collusion with cocaine traffickers largely unexplored.

Despite news articles by The Associated Press and the investigation by Sen. Kerry, the Contra-Cocaine scandal became one of Official Washington's dirty secrets treated by the mainstream news media as a kooky conspiracy theory. The story was finally revived by journalist Gary Webb of the San Jose Mercury News in 1996, but the result was a fierce counterattack against Webb spearheaded by The New York Times, The Washington Post and The Los Angeles Times, resulting in the destruction of Webb's career and contributing to his eventual suicide in 2004. But one result was a belated admission by the CIA's inspector general that, indeed, CIA officers were aware of the Contras' cocaine trafficking but chose to look the other way and protect these CIA clients. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[The Sordid Contra-Cocaine Saga.](#)"]

Doug Liman tips his hat to this disturbing reality ever so briefly when he has the Contra political leader Adolfo Calero meet with Seal and Ochoa and mention Calero's role in drug smuggling for the Contras.

If you want to be entertained about a serious subject then *American Made* is your film. If you wish to learn something more definitive about Barry Seal, see *Doublecrossed*. If you want to be educated about the whole sordid Reagan intervention in Central American, rent *Kill the Messenger*, the fine film that Jeremy Renner made about the tragedy that befell Gary Webb when he dared revive the ugly story of the CIA's complicity in the Contra-cocaine network.

James DiEugenio is a researcher and writer on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and other mysteries of that era. His most recent book is Reclaiming Parkland.

Mocking Trump Doesn't Prove Russia's Guilt

Exclusive: President Trump is getting mocked for "trusting" Vladimir Putin's denial about "meddling" in U.S. politics – and not accepting Official Washington's groupthink – but ridicule isn't evidence, writes ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

If the bloody debacle in Iraq should have taught Americans anything, it is that endorsements by lots of important people who think something is true don't amount to evidence that it actually is true. If endorsements were the same as evidence, U.S. troops would have found tons of WMD in Iraq, rather than come up empty.

So, when it comes to whether or not Russia "hacked" Democratic emails last year and slipped them to WikiLeaks, just because a bunch of people with fancy titles think the Russians are guilty doesn't compensate for the lack of evidence so far evinced to support this core charge.

But the reaction of Official Washington and the U.S. mainstream media to President Trump saying that Russian President Vladimir Putin seemed sincere in denying Russian "meddling" was sputtering outrage: How could Trump doubt what so many important people think is true?

Yet, if the case were all that strong that Russia did “hack” the emails, you would have expected a straightforward explication of the evidence rather than a demonstration of a full-blown groupthink, but what we got this weekend was all groupthink and no evidence.

For instance, on Saturday, CNN responded to Trump’s comment that Putin seems to “mean it” when he denied meddling by running a list of important Americans who had endorsed the Russian-guilt verdict. Other U.S. news outlets and politicians followed the same pattern.

Rep. Adam Schiff of California, the ranking Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee and a big promoter of the Russia-gate allegations, scoffed at what Trump said: “You believe a foreign adversary over your own intelligence agencies?”

The Washington Post’s headline sitting atop Sunday’s lede article read: “Trump says Putin sincere in denial of Russian meddling: Critics call that ‘unconscionable.’”

Sen. Mark Warner of Virginia, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee and another Russia-gate sparkplug, said he was left “completely speechless” by Trump’s willingness to take Putin’s word “over the conclusions of our own combined intelligence community.”

Which gets us back to the Jan. 6 “Intelligence Community Assessment” and its stunning lack of evidence in support of its Russian guilty verdict. The ICA even admitted as much, that it wasn’t asserting Russian guilt as fact but rather as opinion:

“Judgments are not intended to imply that we have proof that shows something to be a fact. Assessments are based on collected information, which is often incomplete or fragmentary, as well as logic, argumentation, and precedents.”

Even The New York Times, which has led the media groupthink on Russian guilt, initially published the surprised reaction from correspondent Scott Shane who wrote: “What is missing from the public report is what many Americans most eagerly anticipated: hard evidence to back up the agencies’ claims that the Russian government engineered the election attack. ... Instead, the message from the agencies essentially amounts to ‘trust us.’”

In other words, the ICA was not a disposition of fact; it was guesswork, possibly understandable guesswork, but guesswork nonetheless. And guesswork should be open to debate.

Shutting Down Debate

But the debate was shut down earlier this year by the oft-repeated claim that all 17 U.S. intelligence agencies concurred in the assessment and how could anyone question what all 17 intelligence agencies concluded!

However, that canard was finally knocked down by President Obama's own Director of National Intelligence James Clapper who acknowledged in sworn congressional testimony that the ICA was the product of "handpicked" analysts from only three agencies – the CIA, FBI and National Security Agency.

In other words, not only did the full intelligence community not participate in the ICA but only analysts "handpicked" by Obama's intelligence chiefs conducted the analysis – and as we intelligence veterans know well, if you handpick the analysts, you are handpicking the conclusions.

For instance, put a group of analysts known for their hardline views on Russia in a room for a few weeks, prevent analysts with dissenting viewpoints from weighing in, don't require any actual evidence, and you are pretty sure to get the Russia-bashing result that you wanted.

So why do you think Clapper and Obama's CIA Director John Brennan put up the no-entry sign that kept out analysts from the State Department and Defense Intelligence Agency, two entities that might have significant insights into Russian intentions? By all rights, they should have been included. But, clearly, no dissenting footnotes or wider-perspective views were desired.

If you remember back to the Iraq WMD intelligence estimate, analysts from the State Department's intelligence bureau, known as INR, offered unwelcome dissenting views about the pace of Iraq's supposed nuclear program, inserting a footnote saying they found it too difficult to predict the fruition of a program when there was no reliable evidence as to when – not to mention if – it had started.

DIA also was demonstrating an unusually independent streak, displaying a willingness to give due consideration to Russia's perspective. Here's the heterodox line DIA took in a major report published in December 2015:

"The Kremlin is convinced the United States is laying the groundwork for regime change in Russia, a conviction further reinforced by the events in Ukraine. Moscow views the United States as the critical driver behind the crisis in Ukraine and the Arab Spring and believes that the overthrow of former Ukrainian President Yanukovich is the latest move in a long-established pattern of U.S.-orchestrated regime change efforts."

So, not only did the Jan. 6 report exclude input from INR and DIA and the other dozen or so intelligence agencies but it even avoided a fully diverse set of

opinions from inside the CIA, FBI and NSA. The assessment – or guesswork – came only from those “hand-picked” analysts.

It’s also worth noting that not only does Putin deny that Russia was behind the publication of the Democratic emails but so too does WikiLeaks editor Julian Assange who has insisted repeatedly that the material did not come from the Russians. He and others around WikiLeaks have strongly suggested that the emails came as leaks from Democratic insiders.

Seeking Real Answers

In the face of Official Washington’s evidence-free groupthink, what some of us former U.S. intelligence analysts have been trying to do is provide both a fuller understanding of Russian behavior and whatever scientific analysis can be applied to the alleged “hacks.”

Forensic investigations and testing of relevant download speeds, reported by members of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS), have undermined the Russia-did-it groupthink. But this attempt to engage in actual evaluation of evidence has been either ignored or mocked by mainstream news outlets.

Still, the suggestion in our July 24 VIPS memo that President Trump ask current CIA Director Mike Pompeo to take a fresh look at the issue recently had some consequence when Pompeo contacted VIPS member William Binney, a former NSA Technical Director, and invited him to explain his latest research on the impossibility of the Russians extracting the Democratic emails via an Internet hack based on known download speeds.

In typically candid terms, Binney explained to Pompeo why VIPS had concluded that the intelligence analysts behind the Jan. 6 report had been making stuff up about Russian “hacking.”

When news of the Binney-Pompeo meeting broke last week, the U.S. mainstream media again rejected the opportunity to rethink the Russia-did-it groupthink and instead treated Binney as some sort of “conspiracy theorist” with a “disputed” theory, while attacking Pompeo’s willingness to discuss Binney’s findings as “politicizing intelligence.”

Despite the smearing of Binney, President Trump appears to have taken some of this new evidence to heart, explaining his dispute with open-mouthed White House reporters on Air Force One who baited Trump with various forms of the same question: “Do you believe Putin?” amid the new jeering about Trump “getting played” by Putin.

Trump’s demeanor, however, suggested increased confidence that the Russian

“hacking” allegations were the “witch hunt” that he has decried for months.

Trump also jabbed the press over its earlier false claims that “all 17 intelligence agencies” concurred on the Russian “hack.” And Trump introduced the idea of a different kind of “hack,” i.e., Obama’s political appointees at the heads of the agencies behind the Jan. 6 report.

Trump said, “You hear it’s 17 agencies. Well it’s three. And one is Brennan ... give me a break. They’re political hacks. ... I mean, you have Brennan, you have Clapper, you have [FBI Director James] Comey. Comey is proven to be a liar and he’s proven to be a leaker.”

Later, in deference to those still at work in intelligence, Trump said, “I’m with our [intelligence] agencies as currently constituted.”

While Trump surely has a dismal record of his own regarding truth-telling, he’s not wrong about the checkered record of the triumvirate of Clapper, Brennan and Comey.

Clapper played a key role in the bogus Iraq-WMD intelligence when he was head of the National Geo-spatial Agency and hid the fact that there was *zero* evidence in satellite imagery of any weapons of mass destruction before the Iraq invasion. When no WMDs were found, Clapper told the media that he thought they were shipped off to Syria.

In 2013, Clapper perjured himself before Congress by denying NSA’s unconstitutional blanket surveillance of Americans. After evidence emerged revealing the falsity of Clapper’s testimony, he wrote a letter to Congress admitting, “My response was clearly erroneous – for which I apologize.” Despite the deception, he was allowed to stay as Obama’s most senior intelligence officer for almost four more years.

Clapper also has demonstrated an ugly bias about Russians. On May 28, as a former DNI, Clapper explained Russian “interference” in the U.S. election to NBC’s Chuck Todd on May 28 with a tutorial on what everyone should know about “the historical practices of the Russians.” Clapper said, “the Russians, typically, are almost genetically driven to co-opt, penetrate, gain favor, whatever, which is a typical Russian technique.”

Brennan, who had previously defended torture as having been an effective way to gain intelligence, was CIA director when agency operatives broke into the computers of the Senate Intelligence Committee when it was investigating CIA torture.

Former FBI Director Comey is infamous for letting the Democratic National

Committee arrange its own investigation of the “hacking” that was then blamed on Russia, a development that led some members of Congress to call the supposed “hack” an “act of war.” Despite the risk of nuclear conflagration, the FBI didn’t bother to do its own forensics.

And, by his own admission, Comey arranged a leak to The New York Times that was specifically designed to get a Special Prosecutor appointed to investigate Russia-gate, a job that fell to his old friend Robert Mueller, who has had his own mixed record as the previous FBI director in mishandling the 9/11 investigation.

There are plenty of reasons to want Trump out of the White House, but there also should be respect for facts and due process. So far, the powers-that-be in Washington – in politics, the media and other dominant institutions, what some call the Deep State – have shown little regard for fairness in the Russia-gate “scandal.”

The goal seems to be to remove the President or at least emasculate him on a bum rap, giving him the bum’s rush, so to speak, while also further demonizing Russia and exacerbating an already dangerous New Cold War.

The truth should still count for something. No one’s character should be assassinated, as Bill Binney’s is being now, for running afoul of the conventional wisdom that Trump – like bête noire Putin – never tells the truth, and that to believe either is, well, “unconscionable,” as The Washington Post warns.

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Remaking Armistice Day into Veterans Day

The holiday now celebrated as Veterans Day – to thank American soldiers – started as Armistice Day, a time for reflection on the horrors of war after millions died in World War I, as Gary Kohls recalls.

By Gary Kohls

One year shy of a century ago, on Nov. 11, 1918, at precisely 11 a.m. Paris time, a cease-fire (aka “truce” or “armistice”) was agreed to and signed by

military negotiators from France, Britain and Germany. The terms of the truce ultimately resulted in the end of the "War to End All Wars" seven months later when the Treaty of Versailles was signed on June 28, 1919.

Germany's surrender to the Allies was regarded as the prudent thing to do after Kaiser Wilhelm's tyrannical monarchy was overthrown by democratic socialist forces earlier in 1918. Erich Ludendorff, a classic example of Prussian militarism, was one of the German generals who first broached the idea of starting the negotiations that eventually led to Germany's surrender.

Ludendorff saw that 1) Germany's army was terminally exhausted, demoralized and poorly equipped; 2) the United States had finally entered the war with fresh troops; 3) the fledgling government at home was in disarray; 4) the war had bankrupted the nation (as all wars eventually do – unless there is enough looting and plundering of the occupied territories); 5) civilians at home were starving; and 6) victory was an impossibility. The writing was on the wall; Germany had no choice but to surrender.

The armistice was signed at Compiègne, France, by four French and British military officers, the German Foreign Minister, two German military officers and one German civilian.

According to the terms of the armistice, Germany agreed to immediately evacuate all occupied territories within two weeks and to surrender 5,000 cannons, 25,000 machine guns, 1,700 planes, and all German submarines. All Allied prisoners of war were to be released by Germany immediately, but German POWs were not to be released until a peace treaty was signed sometime in the future.

The year after the war ended, most of the national leaders that considered themselves victors proclaimed Nov. 11 to be a day of reflection on the horrors of war and for prayers that there never would be another war. All businesses were ordered to stop work for two minutes and stand in silence at exactly 11 a.m., a tradition that continued in the decades that followed. It was called Remembrance Day in the United Kingdom and Armistice Day in the United States.

Nov. 11 was intended to be a day of mourning and repentance for the satanic carnage that killed about 10 million soldiers, wounded another 20 million and inflicted more than 2 million civilian deaths.

The senselessness of that war should have resulted in the courts-martial of every gung-ho officer, the demeaning of every war-mongering politician, and the decertifying of every war-profiteering corporation. But it did not. The warmongers and war-profiteers just went into hibernation.

But the war did result in the dissolution of four empires, their emperors and

kings, and the assorted aristocrats and sycophants who had been so cruelly ripping off the multitudes of poor people for so many centuries. The four empires that collapsed were the German, Austro-Hungarian, Russian and Ottoman empires. And good riddance it was.

Of course, Germany did not celebrate Armistice Day because that Nov. 11 and the date of the signing of the Treaty of Versailles (that formally ended the war) were regarded by many Germans as the dates of treasonous acts committed by Germany's new civilian democratic leaders who signed the documents – holding blameless the German military officers who suggested that the German army surrender in the first place.

The Nov. 11 date was despised by patriotic “Deutschland Uber Alles” Germans, especially the right-wing, pro-monarchist, proto-fascist and “Germany First” nationalists who repeatedly used the “Stab-in-the-Back” and “November Criminals” deception to weaken and then overthrow the Weimar Republic's experiment in democracy.

After 12 years of pro-war propaganda from militarists like Adolf Hitler, Ludendorff and the Nazi Party, democracy never had a chance, especially with all the economic turmoil that followed the war and the 1929 Wall Street crash that spread mass unemployment around the world.

According to Wikipedia, the “Stab-in-the-Back” Myth is the notion, widely believed and promulgated in right-wing, pro-militarist circles in pre-Nazi Germany, that the Imperial German Army did not lose World War I, but rather the German military had been betrayed by the civilians on the home front, especially the pro-democracy groups that overthrew the tyrannical monarchy during the German Revolution of 1918-19.

The Fading of Reflection

Still, elsewhere the tradition of Nov. 11 continued. In 1926, the U.S. Congress passed a resolution declaring that Armistice Day should be a day of “thanksgiving and prayer and exercises designed to perpetuate peace through goodwill and mutual understanding between nations.” In 1938, Congress made Armistice Day an official holiday that was explicitly dedicated to perpetuating world peace. But world peace would not last.

For some, the horrors of World War II reinforced the need to further abhor war. General Omar Bradley delivered an Armistice Day speech in 1948, chastising those who placed their trust in military dominance. He said: “We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount. The world has achieved brilliance without wisdom, power without conscience. Ours is a world of

nuclear giants and ethical infants. We know more about war than we know about peace, more about killing than we know about living.”

But the military and economic entities that are in control of the world didn't take Bradley's admonition seriously. In the post-World War II years, the U.S. was sensing that it could easily establish a powerful global empire. The CIA – created in the years following World War II – was feeling its oats and the Department of War was name-changed to the Department of Defense. Planetary, full-spectrum military and economic dominance by the U.S. was a possibility.

To promote these imperial objectives, anti-war and pro-peace sentiments had to be suppressed. Peace-loving holidays like Mother's Day, Memorial Day, Armistice Day and Labor Day needed to be de-emphasized or co-opted. And so they were. The process was so subtle that the public never flinched.

In June 1954, President Dwight Eisenhower signed a bill changing the name of Armistice Day to Veterans' Day. The stated purpose of the new holiday was “to thank all veterans who had served the United States of America.”

America's neglected or wounded military veterans applauded the change in the Nov. 11 holiday as they seemed to appreciate being thanked for their service, even if many resented the empty sentiments.

One of the (perhaps intended) consequences of the gradual change away from the emphasis on peace was the amnesia over the horrors of war. Both adults and children were easily brain-washed into mindlessly glorifying the diabolical. Keeping America militarily strong was emphasized. In the halls of Congress and in the White House ever since World War II, there was little consideration of the cruelty, stupidity and futility of war.

In our corrupt capitalist society, there is just too much money to be made by war-profiteering corporations and wealthy investors when there are potential military conflicts brewing. The stocks of war industries surge when Donald Trump tweets about bombing foreign nations. And then there are legions of major media outlets that are always ready and willing to cheerlead for wars and rumors of war.

On Veterans Day in America today, none of the people in power are sincerely praying or working for a truly sustainable peace, even during the obligatory two minutes of silence.

Dr. Gary G. Kohls is a retired physician who writes about peace, justice, militarism, mental health and religious issues.

The Balfour Declaration's Century of Turmoil

As Israel continues to occupy Palestinian lands and threatens a new war against Lebanon, much of this turmoil traces back to Great Britain's Balfour Declaration during World I, a century ago, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

Great Britain's Balfour Declaration – a century ago – laid the groundwork for a Zionist state in the Middle East and led to the purging of millions of Palestinians from what became Israel, a human rights crisis that continues to roil the Middle East to this day.

I caught up with noted Palestinian human rights campaigner Mustafa Barghouti in San Francisco where he was lecturing on the Balfour Declaration, a letter from British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour published on Nov. 9, 1917, and promising a Jewish homeland. The letter came during World War I while Great Britain was at war with Turkey's Ottoman Empire.

In June 2002, Dr. Barghouti co-founded the Palestinian National Initiative, and currently serves as its Secretary-General.

Dennis Bernstein: What was the significance of the Balfour Declaration and what does it mean to the Palestinian people?

Mustafa Barghouti: The Balfour Declaration was a major historical crime committed against the Palestinian people. It was a crime that led to a series of other crimes, including the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people in 1948, when 70% of the population were displaced and forced to leave their country. There are still 6 million refugees spread all over the world. It led to the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and Jerusalem in 1967.

But most importantly, the Balfour Declaration was a racist act that discriminated against 90% of the population of Palestine. It gave 10% of the population the right to a homeland and deprived the Palestinians of that right. The result is what we see today, which is a system of apartheid that is much worse than what existed in South Africa.

I believe the Balfour Declaration was also a crime against the Jewish people. It used the Jewish population to serve the colonial interests of the colonial powers of Europe at the time. It pushed the Jewish population toward Zionism.

It put the Jewish people in contradiction with the Palestinians and with the Arabs and created a situation of instability which has existed now for a hundred years.

Britain should apologize for its crime in Palestine and compensate the Palestinian people for the harm caused to them. At the very least, they should recognize the state of Palestine. Theresa May, the prime minister of Britain, added insult to injury by celebrating the anniversary of this declaration in the company of Benjamin Netanyahu. We responded with a fantastic rally in which 50,000 people gathered in the streets of London, occupying key locations for more than five hours.

I spoke in front of these people, as did Jeremy Corbyn, the leader of the Labor Party, who could very soon become the next prime minister of Britain. I think we can clearly say that we control public opinion in Britain.

Dennis Bernstein: What the Balfour Declaration essentially did was take a land where people had been living for generations, centuries, and gave it to another people.

Mustafa Barghouti: Exactly. Britain had no ownership of Palestine and did not even govern Palestine at the time. They took the land of the Palestinian people and gave it to the Jewish people, who were a very small minority in Palestine.

At that time, Palestine was under Ottoman Turkish rule. Ninety percent of the population were Palestinians, whether Muslim or Christians, and ten percent were Jewish.

Balfour was not for the sake of the Jewish people as human beings, it was a case of using the Jewish people for colonial purposes. And it was in the interests of the colonial powers to push the Jewish to become Zionist, although at that time most of the Jewish people did not want Zionism.

The Balfour Declaration was a part of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which divided the Middle East between the French and British colonial powers. Proof that the Jewish people were used for colonial purposes came in 1956 when the British responded to the Egyptian decision to nationalize the Suez Canal by attacking Egypt through Israel. All of this led to the terrible crisis we see today. It was totally unjust, it was absolutely colonial and it created the system of apartheid we have to struggle against today.

Dennis Bernstein: Why do you suppose some of the key leaders in the anti-apartheid movement have said that the situation in Palestine is worse than it was in South Africa?

Mustafa Barghouti: In South Africa, there was never the segregation of roads

that you see in the occupied West Bank, there were never the walls you have here. In South Africa, settlements were not used to ethnically cleanse the population.

Israel takes away 87% of our water resources in the West Bank. A Palestinian in the West Bank is allowed to use no more than fifty cubic meters of water, while an illegal Israeli settler is allowed to use 2,400 cubic meters, 48 times more than a Palestinian.

The Israeli GDP per capita is about \$38,000 while ours does not exceed \$2,000. But Israel obliges us to buy products at the Israeli market price. So we make much less money but have to buy products at their cost. In addition, they force us to pay for water and electricity at double the amount Israelis pay. If we happen to have to send a child to an Israeli hospital, we would be obliged to pay four times what an Israeli would pay.

If you look it up in the dictionary, "apartheid" is defined as "two systems of laws for two peoples living in the same place." That is exactly what Israel has created. Israeli citizens, even if they are illegal settlers violating international law, are treated with respect by the Israeli government, they have rights, they are ruled by civil law. While Palestinians are ruled by military law. They still use against us the Ottoman Turkish Law of 1911, the British Mandatory Law, the British Emergency Law, Jordanian law, Israeli law and 2,400 Israeli military orders. That is why you have things like administrative detention, which means they can arrest any Palestinian without even bringing charges. 56 members of our elected parliament were jailed by Israel, many under administrative detention. Imagine if the Mexican government came to the United States and arrested congress people and put them in jail without even charges!

Dennis Bernstein: People in custody are being subjected to torture, young people are being subjected to torture. This is an ongoing program. I am always stunned by the brutality and the acceptance of that brutality by the United States. If what is going on in Palestine is a form of ethnic cleansing, then we would have to indict the United States.

Mustafa Barghouti: It is unfortunate that US institutions are completely biased toward Israel. Without American support, Israel could not do what it does. The problem is that there are double standards. They speak about freedom, about democracy, about human rights...except when it comes to Palestine. It is as if we are not human beings. We speak about countries having to abide by international law—not having nuclear weapons, for instance—but Israel is above international law. That can only be described as a double standard.

In the long run, this is bad, not only for the Palestinians, but also for the

Jewish people. The system of apartheid and racial discrimination run by the Israeli government is absolutely incompatible with the history of the Jewish people, the people who suffered from the Holocaust, from anti-Semitism and the pogroms in Russia. They should not be oppressors, they should not be discriminating against other people. That is why it does not surprise me to see many wonderful Jewish activists supporting Palestine and the BDS movement. I don't think the Israelis can be free until the Palestinians are free.

Dennis Bernstein: Do you see the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement as an effective movement? It certainly contributed to ending apartheid in South Africa.

Mustafa Barghouti: Of course, it is very effective. It translates international solidarity with the Palestinian people into a material effect. But it must be stated that the BDS movement is not against the Jewish people and it is not anti-Semitic. It is a nonviolent form of action and freedom of expression. It is about individual rights. Those who have come out against BDS are positioning themselves against freedom of choice. If you don't want to boycott Israel, at least boycott settlement activities, which, according to United Nations Security Council resolution 2334, are a violation of international law.

Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.

Did Al Qaeda Dupe Trump on Syrian Attack?

Special Report: Buried deep inside a new U.N. report is evidence that could exonerate the Syrian government in the April 4 sarin atrocity and make President Trump look like an Al Qaeda dupe, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

A new United Nations-sponsored report on the April 4 sarin incident in an Al Qaeda-controlled town in Syria blames Bashar al-Assad's government for the atrocity, but the report contains evidence deep inside its "Annex II" that would prove Assad's innocence.

If you read that far, you would find that more than 100 victims of sarin exposure were taken to several area hospitals *before* the alleged Syrian warplane

could have struck the town of Khan Sheikhoun.

Still, the Joint Investigative Mechanism [JIM], a joint project of the U.N. and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons [OPCW], brushed aside this startling evidence and delivered the Assad guilty verdict that the United States and its allies wanted.

The JIM consigned the evidence of a staged atrocity, in which Al Qaeda operatives would have used sarin to kill innocent civilians and pin the blame on Assad, to a spot 14 pages into the report's Annex II. The sensitivity of this evidence of a staged "attack" is heightened by the fact that President Trump rushed to judgment and ordered a "retaliatory" strike with 59 Tomahawk missiles on a Syrian airbase on the night of April 6-7. That U.S. attack reportedly killed several soldiers at the base and nine civilians, including four children, in nearby neighborhoods.

So, if it becomes clear that Al Qaeda tricked President Trump not only would he be responsible for violating international law and killing innocent people, but he and virtually the entire Western political establishment along with the major news media would look like Al Qaeda's "useful idiots."

Currently, the West and its mainstream media are lambasting the Russians for not accepting the JIM's "assessment," which blames Assad for the sarin attack. Russia is also taking flak for questioning continuation of the JIM's mandate. There has been virtually no mainstream skepticism about the JIM's report and almost no mention in the mainstream of the hospital-timing discrepancy.

Timing Troubles

To establish when the supposed sarin attack occurred on April 4, the JIM report relied on witnesses in the Al Qaeda-controlled town and a curious video showing three plumes of smoke but no airplanes. Based on the video's metadata, the JIM said the scene was recorded between 0642 and 0652 hours. The JIM thus puts the timing of the sarin release at between 0630 and 0700 hours.

But the first admissions of victims to area hospitals began as early as 0600 hours, the JIM found, meaning that these victims could not have been poisoned by the alleged aerial bombing (even if the airstrike really did occur).

According to the report's Annex II, "The admission times of the records range between 0600 and 1600 hours." And these early cases – arriving *before* the alleged airstrike – were not isolated ones.

"Analysis of the ... medical records revealed that in 57 cases, patients were admitted in five hospitals before the incident in Khan Shaykhun," Annex II said.

Plus, this timing discrepancy was not limited to a few hospitals in and around Khan Sheikhoun, but was recorded as well at hospitals that were scattered across the area and included one hospital that would have taken an hour or so to reach.

Annex II stated: "In 10 such cases, patients appear to have been admitted to a hospital 125 km away from Khan Shaykhun at 0700 hours while another 42 patients appear to have been admitted to a hospital 30 km away at 0700 hours."

In other words, more than 100 patients would appear to have been exposed to sarin *before* the alleged Syrian warplane could have dropped the alleged bomb and the victims could be evacuated, a finding that alone would have destroyed the JIM's case against the Syrian government.

But the JIM seemed more interested in burying this evidence of Al Qaeda staging the incident – and killing some expendable civilians – than in following up this timing problem.

"The [JIM] did not investigate these discrepancies and cannot determine whether they are linked to any possible staging scenario, or to poor record-keeping in chaotic conditions," the report said. But the proffered excuse about poor record-keeping would have to apply to multiple hospitals over a wide area all falsely recording the arrival time of more than 100 patients.

The video of the plumes of smoke also has come under skepticism from Theodore Postol, a weapons expert at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who noted that none of the three plumes matched up with damage to buildings (as viewed from satellite images) that would have resulted from aerial bombs of that power.

Postol's finding suggests that the smoke could have been another part of a staging event rather than debris kicked up by aerial bombs.

The JIM also could find no conclusive evidence that a Syrian warplane was over Khan Sheikhoun at the time of the video although the report claims that a plane could have come within about 5 kilometers of the town.

A History of Deception

Perhaps even more significantly, the JIM report ignored the context of the April 4 case and the past history of Al Qaeda's Nusra Front staging chemical weapons attacks with the goal of foisting blame on the Syrian government and tricking the U.S. military into an intervention on the side of Nusra and its Islamic-militant allies.

On April 4, there was a strong motive for Al Qaeda and its regional allies to mount a staged event. Just days earlier, President Trump's administration had

shocked the Syrian rebels and their backers by declaring “regime change” was no longer the U.S. goal in Syria.

So, Al Qaeda and its regional enablers were frantic to reverse Trump’s decision, which was accomplished by his emotional reaction to videos on cable news showing children and other civilians suffering and dying in Khan Sheikhou.

On the night of April 6-7, before any thorough investigation could be conducted, Trump ordered 59 Tomahawk missiles fired at the Syrian air base that supposedly had launched the sarin attack.

At the time, I was told by an intelligence source that at least some CIA analysts believed that the sarin incident indeed had been staged with sarin possibly flown in by drone from a Saudi-Israeli special operations base in Jordan.

This source said the on-the-ground staging for the incident had been hasty because of the surprise announcement that the Trump administration was no longer seeking regime change in Damascus. The haste led to some sloppiness in tying down all the necessary details to pin the atrocity on Assad, the source said.

But the few slip-ups, such as the apparent failure to coordinate the timing of the hospital admissions to *after* the purported airstrike, didn’t deter the JIM investigators from backing the West’s desire to blame Assad and also create another attack line against the Russians.

Similarly, other U.N.-connected investigators downplayed earlier evidence that Al Qaeda’s Nusra was staging chemical weapons incidents after President Obama laid down his “red line” on chemical weapons. The militants apparently hoped that the U.S. military would take out the Syrian military and pave the way for an Al Qaeda victory.

For instance, U.N. investigators learned from a number of townspeople of Al-Tamanah about how the rebels and allied “activists” staged a chlorine gas attack on the night of April 29-30, 2014, and then sold the false story to a credulous Western media and, initially, to a U.N. investigative team.

“Seven witnesses stated that frequent alerts [about an imminent chlorine weapons attack by the government] had been issued, but in fact no incidents with chemicals took place,” the U.N. report said. “While people sought safety after the warnings, their homes were looted and rumours spread that the events were being staged. ... [T]hey [these witnesses] had come forward to contest the wide-spread false media reports.”

Dubious Evidence

Other people, who did allege that there had been a government chemical attack on Al-Tamanah, provided suspect evidence, including data from questionable sources, according to the report.

The report said, "Three witnesses, who did not give any description of the incident on 29-30 April 2014, provided material of unknown source. One witness had second-hand knowledge of two of the five incidents in Al-Tamanah, but did not remember the exact dates. Later that witness provided a USB-stick with information of unknown origin, which was saved in separate folders according to the dates of all the five incidents mentioned by the FFM [the U.N.'s Fact-Finding Mission].

"Another witness provided the dates of all five incidents reading it from a piece of paper, but did not provide any testimony on the incident on 29-30 April 2014. The latter also provided a video titled 'site where second barrel containing toxic chlorine gas was dropped tamanaa 30 April 14'"

Some other witnesses alleging a Syrian government attack offered curious claims about detecting the chlorine-infused "barrel bombs" based on how the device sounded in its descent.

The U.N. report said, "The eyewitness, who stated to have been on the roof, said to have heard a helicopter and the 'very loud' sound of a falling barrel. Some interviewees had referred to a distinct whistling sound of barrels that contain chlorine as they fall. The witness statement could not be corroborated with any further information."

However, the claim itself is absurd since it is inconceivable that anyone could detect a chlorine canister inside a "barrel bomb" by "a distinct whistling sound."

The larger point, however, is that the jihadist rebels in Al-Tamanah and their propaganda teams, including relief workers and activists, appear to have organized a coordinated effort at deception complete with a fake video supplied to U.N. investigators and Western media outlets.

For instance, the Telegraph in London reported that "Videos allegedly taken in Al-Tamanah ... purport to show the impact sites of two chemical bombs. Activists said that one person had been killed and another 70 injured."

The Telegraph quoted supposed weapons expert Eliot Higgins, the founder of Bellingcat and a senior fellow at the fiercely anti-Russian Atlantic Council, as endorsing the Al-Tamanah claims.

"Witnesses have consistently reported the use of helicopters to drop the

chemical barrel bombs used,” said Higgins. “As it stands, around a dozen chemical barrel bomb attacks have been alleged in that region in the last three weeks.”

The Al-Tamanah debunking in the U.N. report received no mainstream media attention when the U.N. findings were issued in September 2016 because the U.N. report relied on rebel information to blame two other alleged chlorine attacks on the government and that got all the coverage. But the case should have raised red flags given the extent of the apparent deception.

If the seven townspeople were telling the truth, that would mean that the rebels and their allies issued fake attack warnings, produced propaganda videos to fool the West, and prepped “witnesses” with “evidence” to deceive investigators. Yet, no alarms went off about other rebel claims.

The Ghouta Incident

A more famous attack – with sarin gas on the Damascus suburb of Ghouta on Aug. 21, 2013, killing hundreds – was also eagerly blamed on the Assad regime, as The New York Times, Human Rights Watch, Higgins’s Bellingcat and many other Western outlets jumped to that conclusion despite the unlikely circumstances. Assad had just welcomed U.N. investigators to Damascus to examine chemical attacks that he was blaming on the rebels.

Assad also was facing the “red line” threat from President Obama warning him of possible U.S. military intervention if the Syrian government deployed chemical weapons. Why Assad and his military would choose such a moment to launch a deadly sarin attack outside Damascus, killing mostly civilians, made little sense.

But this became another rush to judgment in the West that brought the Obama administration to the verge of launching a devastating air attack on the Syrian military that might have helped Al Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate and/or the Islamic State win the war.

Eventually, however, the case blaming Assad for the 2013 sarin attack collapsed.

An analysis by genuine weapons experts – such as Theodore Postol, an MIT professor of science, technology and national security policy, and Richard M. Lloyd, an analyst at the military contractor Tesla Laboratories – found that the missile that delivered the sarin had a very short range placing its likely firing position in rebel territory.

Later, reporting by journalist Seymour Hersh implicated Turkish intelligence working with jihadist rebels as the likely source of the sarin.

We also learned in 2016 that a message from the U.S. intelligence community had warned Obama how weak the evidence against Assad was. There was no “slam-dunk” proof, said Director of National Intelligence James Clapper. And Obama cited his rejection of the Washington militaristic “playbook” to bomb Syria as one of his proudest moments as President.

With this background, there should have been extreme skepticism when jihadists and their allies made new claims about the Syrian government engaging in chemical weapons attacks. But there wasn't.

The broader context for these biased investigations is that U.N. and OPCW investigators have been under intense pressure to confirm accusations against Syria and other targeted states.

Right now, the West is blaming Russia for the collapsing consensus behind U.N. investigations, but the problem really comes from Washington's longtime strategy of coercing U.N. organizations into becoming propaganda arms for U.S. geopolitical strategies.

The U.N.'s relative independence in its investigative efforts was decisively broken early this century when President George W. Bush's administration purged U.N. agencies that were not onboard with U.S. hegemony, especially on interventions in the Middle East.

Through manipulation of funding and selection of key staff members, the Bush administration engineered the takeover or at least the neutralizing of one U.N.-affiliated organization after another.

For instance, in 2002, Bush's Deputy Under-Secretary of State John Bolton spearheaded the takeover of the OPCW as Bush planned to cite chemical weapons as a principal excuse for invading Iraq.

OPCW Director General Jose Mauricio Bustani was viewed as an obstacle because he was pressing Iraq to accept OPCW's conventions for eliminating chemical weapons, which could have undermined Bush's WMD rationale for war.

Though Bustani was just reelected to a new term, the Brazilian diplomat was forced out, to be followed in that job by more pliable bureaucrats, including the current Director General Ahmet Uzumcu of Turkey, who not only comes from a NATO country but served as Turkey's ambassador to NATO and to Israel. [For details, see Consortiumnews.com's “U.N. Enablers of ‘Aggressive War.’”]

Since those days of the Iraq invasion, the game hasn't changed. U.S. and other Western officials expect the U.N. and related agencies to accept or at least not object to Washington's geopolitical interventions.

The only difference now is that Russia, one of the five veto-wielding members of the Security Council, is saying enough is enough – and Russia's opposition to these biased inquiries is emerging as one more dangerous hot spot in the New Cold War.

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](#)).
