

Assessing Diversity on Russian TV

The U.S. view of Russian media is that it is all propaganda all the time to keep the Russian people in line, but it actually encourages diverse and even hostile opinions, says Gilbert Doctorow.

By Gilbert Doctorow

Anyone looking into Russian television programming on both state-owned and privately owned federal channels cannot ignore the heavy presence of political talk shows. They enjoy time on air comparable with formal news broadcasting. Indeed some are wrapped around news bulletins, and all make use of audio-visuals taken from the newsroom to drive the panelists' debates.

The genre of political talk shows is as much a fixture of Russian television around the clock as the daily serials dealing with romance, detective stories and adventure. They tell you that the Russian public, young and old, female and male, is very politicized and keen to hear political views that are divergent from what state news program hosts are reading off their teleprompters. If I had to find a comparable interest in politics in Western Europe, I would name France. I suspect that the U.S. public trails far behind.

But does Russian television present the views of the political opposition to viewers? Does the Kremlin tightly control Russian television for political content? Is Russian mass media monolithic or pluralistic? Are the talk shows journalism or state propaganda?

This review is based on my own participation in nearly all the political talk shows on the Russian national channels from May 2016 through this month. I stress the importance of personal participation because of what I learned about the culture of these shows, about the presenters and producers from chats in the holding pens before and in the refreshments rooms after the shows, as well as from talking to other panelists during the breaks. This is something you cannot get from watching the shows either in live broadcasts or on the Internet postings afterwards (nearly all shows appear on the channels' websites or on youtube.com). Moreover, only by being present on set can you appreciate how the debates are cut in the editing room before they are broadcast in the case of those shows not going out "live" or before posting on the Internet.

The political talk shows in which I participated are as follows and – except as noted – all have their broadcast headquarters in Moscow:

Rossiya-1 (state-owned): 60 Minutes; Sunday Evening with Vladimir Soloviev

Pervy Kanal (state-owned): Time Will Tell

NTV (privately owned): Meeting Place

Zvezda (federal channel of the Russian Armed Forces): Special Article

Pyaty Kanal (state-owned, St Petersburg based channel 5): Open Studio

Pecking Order

In terms of intellectual level of discourse, the Vladimir Soloviev programs are Russia's finest. They operate in several formats besides the one mentioned above. One of the most interesting is what is called "Duels" between exponents of two adversarial positions with breaks for coaching by their respective teams and call-in voting to tabulate who has been more persuasive.

While numbers of viewers or ratings are not available and may in fact not be greater than for other programs on the same channel or than talk shows on Pervy Kanal, the numbers of viewers tracked by Youtube.com for the *Sunday Evening with Vladimir Soloviev* shows often come to 250,000 within 12 hours of posting. Given the demands of such shows on audience knowledge and interest, that is a very impressive showing.

It bears mention that the quality of Soloviev's program is directly related to the level of the guests he attracts. They are chairpersons of the Duma or Federation Council committees, presidents of the Duma parties, and the very best academic minds. The quality also may be attributed to the freedom the moderator enjoys both for his professional standing and as a Kremlin loyalist. He appears to be very much his own man and interacts freely with his panelists. All of this raises the entertainment value as well as the journalistic content.

I would set this in direct contrast to another leading daily talk show program on the same Rossiya-1, *60 Minutes*, where the presenters Yevgeny Popov and his wife Olga Skabeyeva appear to be working strictly from the texts on their teleprompters and instructions given by their managers-producers coming through their ear plugs. The result is loss of spontaneity and authenticity.

In terms of national attention, I would place the *Time Will Tell* show of Pervy Kanal on a level at or above *60 Minutes*. Being an afternoon program with audience of pensioners, it does not draw in first-quality analysts or politicians, although rank-and-file Duma members are frequent visitors. Its outstanding feature is the relative freedom of action of the moderators. Its drawback is the excessively tight control of panelists' access to microphones, which leads to a great deal of clamor and noise. But the control may be justified by its being the first program to broadcast live to the Moscow time

zone, which carries greater political risk than Rossiya-1 shows that broadcast live to the Russian Far East and then are progressively rebroadcast by time zone East to West from recordings to reach Moscow eight hours later.

The commercial station NTV opted for a political talk show modeled on Pervy Kanal's *Time Will Tell*, taking over some staff, virtually duplicating the studio and also occupying live broadcast time in mid-afternoon. Its ratings are said to trail substantially the competition, although the lead presenter came to the job with a lot of relevant experience.

The federal channel Five talk show *Open Studio* operates a split panel sitting in two cities, two in Moscow and four in St. Petersburg, but its home audience is surely in the northern capital. The moderator conducts what might be called sequential interviews with each of the participants, and there is very little cross-talk. One peculiarity of this show is audience call-in of questions.

The Ministry of Defense channel Zvezda has the only talk show that is not broadcast live. From my experience, there was as much shouting on stage as in the noisiest major channel shows, but it was nearly all deleted in the cutting room to yield a smooth flow of debate to the audience. Panelists are taken from a different pool than the major stations, which may be characterized as an advantage, as I will discuss below.

A Constantly Evolving Genre

Russian television programming follows the ratings, because all channels rely on paid commercials, which may take up 12 minutes or more of an hour on air. The hottest competition is between the leading state channels Pervy Kanal and Rossiya-1. They fought tooth and nail to attract audiences to their New Year's 2017 programming. They fight daily in the talk program genre and ratings swing back and forth depending on the hour of day, topicality of the day's subject, prestige or charisma of the invited panelists.

When I appeared on Pervy Kanal's show *Time Will Tell* dedicated to the U.S. presidential election of Nov. 8, the hosts proudly told me their ratings that day spiked to 20 percent, well above their norm of 15 percent. This means that at the given hours of broadcast in the middle of the afternoon Moscow time 20 percent of all Russian television sets were tuned to the show. By contrast, the leading competitors had ratings of 10 percent or less at that given time.

Because of the fight for ratings and fierce competition, the genre of political talk shows is constantly evolving. The technical sophistication of the studios, the decision to broadcast live (and to which time zones) or to distribute pre-recorded and edited videos, hosting by one, usually male, presenter versus male-

female pairs, the level of control of the proceedings before cameras from unseen producers upstairs, the use of evening prime time versus afternoon hours when pensioners and housewives predominate: all of these variables are constantly in play as given shows are enhanced or replaced with each season.

Shouting Matches

It has to be said that Russian political talk shows are meant to be entertaining as well as informative. They are more of a free-for-all than debate governed by Oxford Union type decorum. This reflects the streak in Russian culture that goes in for mixed discipline martial arts contests or single combat “without rules.” It is also calibrated to the time of day and target audience of the given show, as Artyom Sheinin, the moderator of *Time Will Tell* explained to me when I first appeared there: the show’s afternoon time slot attracts a disproportionately high number of retirees who want an “adrenaline shot” at mid-day. The evening programs on the same Pervy Kanal are less excited, so as not to disturb the digestion of those who just returned home from work and are seated in their armchairs in a reflective mood.

Still, even in the evening slots, most talk shows on both state and private channels put a lot of Russian intellectuals off by their noise. The noise predominates at the middle quality range of the genre. At the ends of the middle spectrum in terms of specifics of the audience (Zvezda with its military families or the more staid and traditional St. Petersburg channel 5, where all panelists have a cultivated demeanor and dress in suits and ties), either the clatter is cut in the editing room, as in the former case, or it does not happen at all because of the prevailing culture, the latter case.

Then there is another and very important exception to the practice of shouting matches, namely the top quality shows, in particular those moderated by Vladimir Soloviev. The very important politicians and political commentators whom he attracts expect and receive their due courtesy and are almost never interrupted.

Subject Matter

The talk shows or show segments in which I and other foreigners participate as panelists debate exclusively issues of international relations, as is entirely logical. If we have any value for the Russian viewers, it is as experts bringing in fresh perspectives and challenging what they otherwise hear from the Russian establishment. On domestic issues, our remarks would not be informed, nor would they be welcomed.

The subject matter on the talk shows closely tracks the topics on Russian news. Over the period of my experience from May 2016 to present, the news has

been heavily skewed to Russian relations with Ukraine, military conflict in the Donbas, implementation of the Minsk accords, NATO military exercises near the Russian borders, the NATO battalions arriving in the Baltic States, the Syrian civil war and in particular the liberation of Palmyra and Aleppo, the U.S. presidential campaign, the election results of Nov. 8 and what the new administration of Donald Trump might bring.

On the premier programs of Vladimir Soloviev, international affairs constitute close to 100 percent of the subject matter. However, on other political talk shows, domestic topics in the news may make up between 30 and 50 percent of the programming. Subjects have included the draft law on violence in households, the "Yarovaya" law on electronic surveillance and record keeping, rising monthly fees of apartment owners for building services and repairs, how to deal with the many fatalities caused by joyriding of Russia's golden youth.

Abstract debates on economic issues or social issues are not in the nature of the talk shows, which are so news-driven that the panelists may be interchanged, even the studio hours may be moved back in order to give the production team time to prepare visuals for a show devoted to some "breaking news."

Panelist Diversity

The outstanding fact, which is surely the greatest weakness of the genre, is that the pool of panelists from which the major channels draw overlaps excessively. On any given day, you can tune in to several of these talk shows on different channels and find the very same panelists holding forth.

I do not have a firm explanation for this phenomenon. A casual observer might guess that some of the panelists are making their livelihood by multiple appearances, but there is no way of knowing who is being paid to appear. From my chats at the sidelines, I understand that most panelists are being paid nothing other than their taxi fares if they are locals as most are, or flights and hotel if they are out-of-towners. Foreigners are a special case: it is widely assumed that "enemies" are paid for their trouble, meaning in particular panelists coming from Poland and Ukraine.

Factors that I identify to explain the different channels' drawing on the same pool are availability, known success with the competition and skill of repartee. Appearing on one show draws the attention of the young "producers," meaning administrators, working at other channels. The job prospects of these handlers rise when they bring in and coach fresh talent. In the case of foreigners, it is fluency in Russian, which must be of rather high standard given the pressures of fast and interrupted debate.

As I have indicated in passing above, some of the best local panelists are Russian legislators from the lower or upper houses of the Federal Assembly. Others are journalists, think tank political scientists, area specialists, military experts. Most have well-established professional careers. A very few are young docents seeking public exposure to gain promotions.

By nationality, the foreigners on talk shows panels come from countries which are in the news and which have tense relations with Russia: Ukrainians, Poles, Baltic States, the U.K. and the U.S. Most, but not all deliver, as expected, harsh critiques of Russian foreign policy. In this respect, Russian television for the domestic audience has a totally different set of requirements and objectives than the channel dedicated to foreign audiences, *Russia Today*, where foreign guests are often "friends of Russia."

Among the most experienced foreigners with near native fluency regularly appearing on the Pervy Kanal and Rossiya-1 is the British journalist and lecturer, Owen Matthews, from *Newsweek*. I joined him at a session of *60 Minutes*. Another journalist of major standing with whom I appeared on *Time Will Tell* is David Filipov, Moscow bureau chief of *The Washington Post*. It bears mention that, to my knowledge, neither they nor the other Western critics of President Putin who are invited onto Russian talk shows have written anything about their experiences while their readerships are led to believe by the publications they work for that Russian media are just monolithic propaganda outlets for the Kremlin.

Other U.S.-based guests from the think tank world who appear regularly on the premier talk shows of Rossiya-1 are Ariel Cohen from the Atlantic Council and Dimitri Simes, President of the Center for the National Interest. Both are given 5 or 10 minutes to themselves by satellite link from Washington, D.C. Their statements, usually about political developments in the U.S. from the perspective of "inside-the-Beltway," then are commented upon by the talk show's in-studio panelists. Cohen is also occasionally in the Moscow studio as a panelist. Both speak native Russian.

Finally, there is the unique phenomenon of all Russian talk shows during the time period under review: the journalist Michael Bohm, who spent a decade as editor of the op-ed page of *The Moscow Times* and now provides spice to Russian television by energetically defending the views of the neocons and liberal interventionists in their anti-Russian policies. He is the American whom many Russians love to hate. Nonetheless, his mastery of Russian folk sayings has endeared him even to his harshest detractors.

By party affiliation, the Russian politicians appearing on the political talk shows belong predominantly, but not exclusively to the parties in the

Duma. Among the most frequent guests on the Soloviev shows are leading members of the ruling United Russia party Vyacheslav Nikonov, chairman of the Duma Committee on Education; Aleksey Pushkov, former chair of the Duma Committee on International Affairs; and his predecessor in this post, Konstantin Kosachev, now chair of the same committee on the Federation Council.

Though less often, the other Duma parties are definitely visible on these shows. Vladimir Soloviev gives frequent invitations to the president of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia Vladimir Zhirinovskiy whose nationalist views he obviously shares. LDPR's Duma Deputy Leonid Slutskiy, the new chair of the Committee on International Relations, was on the talk shows soon after his appointment. Gennady Zyuganov, leader of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, is invited far less often to the major talk shows and the invitation is usually in connection with commemoration of some event or personality from the Soviet era.

The political talk shows also regularly invite as panelists members of certain parties that were unable to reach the 5 percent voter threshold to win seats in the State Duma. By rule of thumb at *Time Will Tell*, for example, they constitute 10 percent of the panelists. The parties most commonly invited are Yabloko and Party of Growth.

How Diverse?

So, does Russian television present the views of the Opposition? It all comes down to definitions. What do we mean by the "Opposition"?

For many American experts on Russia, the definition of "opposition" pre-determines the answer to the questions of pluralism, genuine journalism and the like on Russian television. This is because the notion of Russian opposition that has taken hold in the United States is attached to "regime change," not to normal electoral politics. Only those committed to bringing down the "Putin regime" are deemed worthy of the designation "opposition."

In this view, all Duma parties other than the ruling United Russia party – namely the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, Just Russia, and the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia – do not count as opposition.

To be sure, nearly all Duma parties rally behind the foreign policy of Vladimir Putin, though several are still more strident nationalists than the ruling United Russia party. However, in matters of domestic policy, the Duma parties have their own policies and strongly criticize the ruling party seeking to modify its legislative initiatives and to introduce bills of their own. To deny them the status of Opposition is like considering the Democrats and Republicans

in the U.S. an undifferentiated mass because they largely share a bipartisan foreign policy (at least until the advent of Donald Trump). This point is all the more relevant when we consider that a variable but always substantial portion of most talk show programming is devoted to domestic as opposed to foreign policy issues.

Until his death in 2015, Boris Nemtsov and his Parnas movement were THE OPPOSITION in the eyes of American experts. Nemtsov, Milov and Kasyanov were striking out against the corruption with which the Putin regime was said to rely to stay in power, against its authoritarian if not dictatorial ways, and stood in favor of accommodation with the West, which they claimed was obtainable if only Russia cast aside the aggressive, assertive habits of the Putin regime.

Since Nemtsov's death, the new White Knight in Russian politics for American observers has been the blogger Alexei Navalny, who showed his political muscle in the last mayoral elections in Moscow. Never mind that Navalny has little electoral support outside the capital or that his political views are ultra-nationalist. He is determined to bring down the regime and that is enough.

From my observations of the period under review, neither representatives of Parnas nor Navalny and similarly minded, self-styled "non-systemic opposition" were ever admitted to any of the television talk shows whatever the channel precisely because of their seditious intent.

But before our American experts exclaim "gotcha" I would ask them whether they can cite an appearance of leaders from Occupy Wall Street on *Meet the Press*, say in 2009, or at any time since? The American equivalent of "non-systemic opposition" is precisely that kind of folks. No government, including no democratic government, will give such opponents the microphone to foment insurrection on national television, least of all during prime time.

For these reasons, I insist that the question of pluralism and the journalistic mission of informing the audience and bringing to them alternative points of view have to be posed more broadly without reference to specific individuals or parties/movements being given the microphone on air.

Besides the well-known positions of the Yabloko Party leaders who appear in the talk shows among the 10 percent reserved for defenders of the Yeltsin-era accommodation with the West, mention has to be made of Sergei Stankevich, who since 2016 represents the Party of Growth, another non-Duma party. An early ally of Yeltsin who later fell out of favor, spent several years as a political exile in Poland and was later pardoned, Stankevich regularly questions on air the whole logic of Russia's actions in Crimea and in Ukraine's Donbas region.

And, if we take a broad view and look to the airing of ideas challenging the official party line of the Kremlin on international affairs, the foreign guests who are always invited onto the panels are a proxy for the views of the anti-Kremlin domestic opposition, including the non-systemic opposition.

At a minimum, the talk shows in which I have participated were staged to present a discussion of topical issues of international relations by skilled and well-informed experts representing diverse points of view. In that sense, they demonstrate pluralism as opposed to Kremlin propaganda. They are guided by a journalistic interest to address current events and to expose the public to various interpretations.

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How ‘New Cold Warriors’ Cornered Trump

Exclusive: The U.S. intelligence community’s extraordinary campaign of leaks claiming improper ties between President Trump’s team and Russia seeks to ensure a lucrative New Cold War by blocking detente, reports Gareth Porter.

By Gareth Porter

Opponents of the Trump administration have generally accepted as fact the common theme across mainstream media that aides to Donald Trump were involved in some kind of illicit communications with the Russian government that has compromised the independence of the administration from Russian influence.

But close analysis of the entire series of leaks reveals something else that is equally sinister in its implications: an unprecedented campaign by Obama administration intelligence officials, relying on innuendo rather than evidence, to exert pressure on Trump to abandon any idea of ending the New Cold War and to boost the campaign to impeach Trump.

A brazen and unprecedented intervention in domestic U.S. politics by the intelligence community established the basic premise of the cascade of leaks about alleged Trump aides’ shady dealing with Russia. Led by CIA Director John Brennan, the CIA, FBI and NSA issued a 25-page assessment on Jan. 6 asserting for the first time that Russia had sought to help Trump win the election.

Brennan had circulated a CIA memo concluding that Russia had favored Trump and had told CIA staff that he had met separately with Director of National Intelligence James Clapper and FBI Director James Comey and that they had agreed on the “scope, nature and intent of Russian interference in our presidential election.”

In the end, however, Clapper refused to associate himself with the document and the NSA, which agreed to do so, was only willing to express “moderate confidence” in the judgment that the Kremlin had sought to help Trump in the election. In intelligence community parlance, that meant that the NSA considered the idea the Kremlin was working to elect Trump was merely plausible, not actually supported by reliable evidence.

In fact, the intelligence community had not even obtained evidence that Russia was behind the publication by Wikileaks of the e-mails Democratic National Committee, much less that it had done so with the intention of electing Trump. Clapper had testified before Congress in mid-November and again in December that the intelligence community did not know who had provided the e-mails to WikiLeaks and when they were provided.

The claim – by Brennan with the support of Comey – that Russia had “aspired” to help Trump’s election prospects was not a normal intelligence community assessment but an extraordinary exercise of power by Brennan, Comey and NSA Director Mike Rogers.

Brennan and his allies were not merely providing a professional assessment of the election, as was revealed by their embrace of the the dubious dossier compiled by a private intelligence firm hired by one of Trump’s Republican opponents and later by the Clinton campaign for the specific purpose of finding evidence of illicit links between Trump and the Putin regime.

Salacious Gossip

When the three intelligence agencies gave the classified version of their report to senior administration officials in January they appended a two-page summary of the juiciest bits from that dossier – including claims that Russian intelligence had compromising information about Trump’s personal behavior while visiting Russia. The dossier was sent, along with the assessment that Russia was seeking to help Trump get elected, to senior administration officials as well as selected Congressional leaders.

Among the claims in the private intelligence dossier that was summarized for policymakers was the allegation of a deal between the Trump campaign and the Putin government involving full Trump knowledge of the Russian election help and

a Trump pledge – months before the election – to sideline the Ukraine issue once in office. The allegation – devoid of any verifiable information – came entirely from an unidentified “Russian emigre” claiming to be a Trump insider, without any evidence provided of the source’s actual relationship to the Trump camp or of his credibility as a source.

After the story of the two-page summary leaked to the press, Clapper publicly expressed “profound dismay” about the leak and said the intelligence community “has not made any judgment that the information in this document is reliable,” nor did it rely on it any way for our conclusions.”

One would expect that acknowledgment to be followed by an admission that he should not have circulated it outside the intelligence community at all. But instead Clapper then justified having passed on the summary as providing policymakers with “the fullest possible picture of any matters that might affect national security.”

By that time, U.S. intelligence agencies had been in possession of the material in the dossier for several months. It was their job to verify the information before bringing it to the attention of policymakers.

A former U.S. intelligence official with decades of experience dealing with the CIA as well other intelligence agencies, who insisted on anonymity because he still has dealings with U.S. government agencies, told this writer that he had never heard of the intelligence agencies making public unverified information on a U.S. citizen.

“The CIA has never played such a open political role,” he said.

The CIA has often tilted its intelligence assessment related to a potential adversary in the direction desired by the White House or the Pentagon and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, but this is the first time that such a slanted report impinges not only on domestic politics but is directed at the President himself.

The egregious triple abuse of the power in publishing a highly partisan opinion on Russia and Trump’s election, appending raw and unverified private allegations impugning Trump’s loyalty and then leaking that fact to the media begs the question of motive. Brennan, who initiated the whole effort, was clearly determined to warn Trump not to reverse the policy toward Russia to which the CIA and other national security organizations were firmly committed.

A few days after the leak of the two-page summary, Brennan publicly warned Trump about his policy toward Russia. In an interview on Fox News, he said, “I think Mr. Trump has to understand that absolving Russia of various actions that it’s taken in the past number of years is a road that he, I think, needs to be very,

very careful about moving down.”

Graham Fuller, who was a CIA operations officer for 20 years and was also National Intelligence Officer for the Middle East for four years in the Reagan administration, observed in an e-mail, that Brennan, Clapper and Comey “might legitimately fear Trump as a loose cannon on the national scene,” but they are also “dismayed at any prospect that the official narrative against Russia could start falling apart under Trump, and want to maintain the image of constant and dangerous Russian intervention into affairs of state.”

Flynn in the Bull’s Eye

As Trump’s National Security Adviser, Michael Flynn presented an easy target for a campaign to portray the Trump team as being in Putin’s pocket. He had already drawn heavy criticism not only by attending a Moscow event celebrating the Russian television RT in 2016 but sitting next to Putin and accepting a fee for speaking at the event. More importantly, however, Flynn had argued that the United States and Russia could and should cooperate in their common interest of defeating Islamic State militants.

That idea was anathema to the Pentagon and the CIA. Obama’s Defense Secretary Ashton Carter had attacked Secretary of State John Kerry’s negotiating a Syrian ceasefire that included a provision for coordination of efforts against Islamic State. The official investigation of the U.S. attack on Syrian forces on Sept. 17 turned up evidence that CENTCOM had deliberately targeted the Syrian military sites with the intention of sabotaging the ceasefire agreement.

The campaign to bring down Flynn began with a leak from a “senior U.S. government official” to Washington Post columnist David Ignatius about the now-famous phone conversation between Flynn and Russian Ambassador Sergei Kislyak on Dec. 29. In his column on the leak, Ignatius avoided making any explicit claim about the conversation. Instead, he asked “What did Flynn say, and did it undercut the U.S. sanctions?”

And referring to the Logan Act, the 1799 law forbidding a private citizen from communicating with a foreign government to influence a “dispute” with the United States, Ignatius asked, “Was its spirit violated?”

The implications of the coy revelation of the Flynn conversation with Kislyak were far-reaching. Any interception of a communication by the NSA or the FBI has always been considered one of the most highly classified secrets in the U.S. intelligence universe of secrets. And officers have long been under orders to protect the name of any American involved in any such intercepted communication at all costs.

But the senior official who leaked the story of Flynn-Kislyak conversation to Ignatius – obviously for a domestic political purpose – did not feel bound by any such rule. That leak was the first move in a concerted campaign of using such leaks to suggest that Flynn had discussed the Obama administration’s sanctions with Kislyak in an effort to undermine Obama administration policy.

The revelation brought a series of articles about denials by the Trump transition team, including Vice President-elect Mike Pence, that Flynn had, in fact, discussed sanctions with Kislyak and continued suspicions that Trump’s aides were covering up the truth. But the day after Trump was inaugurated, the Post itself reported that the FBI had begun in late December go back over all communications between Flynn and Russian officials and “had not found evidence of wrongdoing or illicit ties to the Russian government...”

Two weeks later, however, the Post reversed its coverage of the issue, publishing a story citing “nine current and former officials, who were in senior positions at multiple agencies at the time of the calls,” as saying that Flynn had “discussed sanctions” with Kislyak.

The story said Flynn’s conversation with Kislyak was “interpreted by some senior U.S. officials as an inappropriate and potentially illegal signal to the Kremlin that it could expect a reprieve from sanctions that were being imposed by the Obama administration in late December to punish Russia for its alleged interference in the 2016 election.”

The Post did not refer to its own previous reporting of the FBI’s unambiguous view contradicting that claim, which suggested strongly that the FBI was trying to head off a plan by Brennan and Clapper to target Flynn. But it did include a crucial caveat on the phrase “discussed sanctions” that few readers would have noticed. It revealed that the phrase was actually an “interpretation” of the language that Flynn had used. In other words, what Flynn actually said was not necessarily a literal reference to sanctions at all.

Only a few days later, the Post reported a new development: Flynn had been interviewed by the FBI on Jan. 24 – four days after Trump’s inauguration – and had denied that he discussed sanctions in the conversation. But prosecutors were not planning to charge Flynn with lying, according to several officials, in part because they believed he would be able to “parse the definition of the word ‘sanctions’.” That implied that the exchange was actually focused not on sanctions per se but on the expulsion of the Russian diplomats.

Just hours before his resignation on Feb. 13, Flynn claimed in an interview with the Daily Caller that he had indeed referred only to the expulsion of the Russian diplomats.

“It wasn’t about sanctions. It was about the 35 guys who were thrown out,” Flynn said. “It was basically, ‘Look, I know this happened. We’ll review everything.’ I never said anything such as, ‘We’re going to review sanctions,’ or anything like that.”

The Russian Blackmail Ploy

Even as the story of the Flynn’s alleged transgression in the conversation with the Russian Ambassador was becoming a political crisis for Donald Trump, yet another leaked story surfaced that appeared to reveal a shocking new level of the Trump administration’s weakness toward Russia.

The Post reported on Feb. 13 that Acting Attorney General Sally Yates, an Obama holdover, had decided in late January – after discussions with Brennan, Clapper and FBI Director James Comey in the last days of the Obama administration – to inform the White House Counsel Donald McGahn in late January that Flynn had lied to other Trump administration officials – including Vice President Mike Pence – in denying that he discussed sanctions with Kislyak. The Post cited “current and former officials” as the sources.

That story, repeated and amplified by many other news media, led to Flynn’s downfall later that same day. But like all of the other related leaks, the story revealed more about the aims of the leakers than about links between Trump’s team and Russia.

The centerpiece of the new leak was that the former Obama administration officials named in the story had feared that “Flynn put himself in a compromising position” in regard to his account of the conversation with Kislyak to Trump members of the Trump transition.

Yates had told the White House that Flynn might be vulnerable to Russian blackmail because of the discrepancies between his conversation with the Ambassador and his story to Pence, according to the Post story.

But once again the impression created by the leak was very different from the reality behind it. The idea that Flynn had exposed himself to a potential Russian blackmail threat by failing to tell Pence exactly what had transpired in the conversation was fanciful in the extreme.

Even assuming that Flynn had flatly lied to Pence about what he had said in the meeting – which was evidently not the case – it would not have given the Russians something to hold over Flynn, first because it was already revealed publicly and second, because the Russian interest was to cooperate with the new administration.

The ex-Obama administration leakers were obviously citing that clumsy (and preposterous) argument as an excuse to intervene in the internal affairs of the new administration. The Post's sources also claimed that "Pence had a right to know that he had been misled..." True or not, it was, of course, none of their business.

Pity for Pence

The professed concern of the Intelligence Community and Justice Department officials that Pence deserved the full story from Flynn was obviously based on political considerations, not some legal principle. Pence was a known supporter of the New Cold War with Russia, so the tender concern for Pence not being treated nicely coincided with a strategy of dividing the new administration along the lines of policy toward Russia.

All indications are that Trump and other insiders knew from the beginning exactly what Flynn had actually said in the conversation, but that Flynn had given Pence a flat denial about discussing sanctions without further details.

On Feb. 13, when Trump was still trying to save Flynn, the National Security Adviser apologized to Pence for "inadvertently" having failed to give him a complete account, including his reference to the expulsion of the Russian diplomats. But that was not enough to save Flynn's job.

The divide-and-conquer strategy, which led to Flynn's ouster, was made effective because the leakers had already created a political atmosphere of great suspicion about Flynn and the Trump White House as having had illicit dealings with the Russians. The normally pugnacious Trump chose not to respond to the campaign of leaks with a detailed, concerted defense. Instead, he sacrificed Flynn before the end of the very day the Flynn "blackmail" story was published.

But Trump's appears to have underestimated the ambitions of the leakers. The campaign against Flynn had been calculated in part to weaken the Trump administration and ensure that the new administration would not dare to reverse the hardline policy of constant pressure on Putin's Russia.

Many in Washington's political elite celebrated the fall of Flynn as a turning point in the struggle to maintain the existing policy orientation toward Russia. The day after Flynn was fired the Post's national political correspondent, James Hohmann, wrote that the Flynn "imbroglia" would now make it "politically untenable for Trump to scale back sanctions to Moscow" because the "political blowback from hawkish Republicans in Congress would be too intense..."

But the ultimate target of the campaign was Trump himself. As neoconservative journalist Eli Lake put it, "Flynn is only the appetizer. Trump is the entree."

Susan Hennessey, a well-connected former lawyer in the National Security Agency's Office of General Counsel who writes the "Lawfare" blog at the Brookings Institution, agreed. "Trump may think Flynn is the sacrificial lamb," she told The Guardian, "but the reality is that he is the first domino. To the extent the administration believes Flynn's resignation will make the Russia story go away, they are mistaken."

The Phony "Constant Contacts" Story

No sooner had Flynn's firing been announced than the next phase of the campaign of leaks over Trump and Russia began. On Feb. 14, CNN and the New York Times published slight variants of the same apparently scandalous story of numerous contacts between multiple members of the Trump camp with the Russian at the very time the Russians were allegedly acting to influence the election.

There was little subtlety in how mainstream media outlets made their point. CNN's headline was, "Trump aides were in constant touch with senior Russian officials during campaign." The Times headline was even more sensational: "Trump Campaign Aides Had Repeated Contacts with Russian Intelligence."

But the attentive reader would soon discover that the stories did not reflect those headlines. In the very first paragraph of the CNN story, those "senior Russian officials" became "Russians known to U.S. intelligence," meaning that it included a wide range of Russians who are not officials at all but known or suspected intelligence operatives in business and other sectors of society monitored by U.S. intelligence. A Trump associate dealing with such individuals would have no idea, of course, that they are working for Russian intelligence.

The Times story, on the other hand, referred to the Russians with whom Trump aides were said to be in contact last year as "senior Russian intelligence officials," apparently glossing over a crucial distinction that sources had made to CNN between intelligence officials and Russians being monitored by U.S. intelligence.

But the Times story acknowledged that the Russian contacts also included government officials who were not intelligence officials and that the contacts had been made not only by Trump campaign officials but also associates of Trump who had done business in Russia. It further acknowledged it was "not unusual" for American business to come in contact with foreign intelligence officials, sometimes unwittingly in Russia and Ukraine, where "spy services are deeply embedded in society."

Even more important, however, the Times story made it clear that the intelligence community was seeking evidence that Trump's aides or associates

were colluding with the Russians on the alleged Russian effort to influence the election, but that it had found no evidence of any such collusion. CNN failed to report that crucial element of the story.

The headlines and lead paragraphs of both stories, therefore, should have conveyed the real story: that the intelligence community had sought evidence of collusion by Trump aides with Russia but had not found it several months after reviewing the intercepted conversations and other intelligence.

Unwitting Allies of the War Complex?

Former CIA Director Brennan and other former Obama administration intelligence officials have used their power to lead a large part of the public to believe that Trump had conducted suspicious contacts with Russian officials without having the slightest evidence to support the contention that such contacts represent a serious threat to the integrity of the U.S. political process.

Many people who oppose Trump for other valid reasons have seized on the shaky Russian accusations because they represent the best possibility for ousting Trump from power. But ignoring the motives and the dishonesty behind the campaign of leaks has far-reaching political implications. Not only does it help to establish a precedent for U.S. intelligence agencies to intervene in domestic politics, as happens in authoritarian regimes all over the world, it also strengthens the hand of the military and intelligence bureaucracies who are determined to maintain the New Cold War with Russia.

Those war bureaucracies view the conflict with Russia as key to the continuation of higher levels of military spending and the more aggressive NATO policy in Europe that has already generated a gusher of arms sales that benefits the Pentagon and its self-dealing officials.

Progressives in the anti-Trump movement are in danger of becoming an unwitting ally of those military and intelligence bureaucracies despite the fundamental conflict between their economic and political interests and the desires of people who care about peace, social justice and the environment.

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

Syrian War Propaganda at the Oscars

The Western-backed war in Syria, like the invasion of Iraq, was so smothered by propaganda that truth was not only the first casualty but has been steadily suffocated for five years, now reaching the Oscars, says Rick Sterling.

By Rick Sterling

The Netflix movie “The White Helmets” may win an Oscar in the “short documentary” category at the Academy Awards on Sunday. It would not be a surprise despite the fact that the group is a fraud and the movie is a contrived infomercial.

Awarding “The White Helmets” an Oscar would fit with the desire of Hollywood to appear supportive of “human rights,” even if that means supporting a propaganda operation to justify another bloody “regime change” war in the Middle East.

Much of what people think they know about the White Helmets is untrue. The group is not primarily Syrian; it was initiated by British military contractor James LeMesurier and has been heavily funded (about \$100 million) by the U.S., U.K. and other governments. The White Helmets are not volunteers; they are paid, which is confirmed in a [Al Jazeera video](#) that shows some White Helmet “volunteers” talking about going on strike if they don’t get paid soon.

Still, most of the group’s heavy funding goes to marketing, which is run by “The Syria Campaign” based in New York. The manager is an Irish-American, Anna Nolan, who has never been to Syria. As an example of its deception, “The Syria Campaign” [website](#) features video showing children dancing and playing soccer implying they are part of the opposition demand for a “free and peaceful” Syria. But the video images are taken from a [2010 BBC documentary](#) about education in Syria under the Baath government.

There is also something almost dated about the Academy selecting this infomercial as an Oscar finalist, let alone the possibility of giving it the award. It’s as if the Syrian propaganda narrative of “good” rebels vs. “bad” government was still viable. In the case of the White Helmets, they were literally made into “white hats” bravely resisting the government’s “black hats.”

Yet, we now know that the propaganda around the “noble” rebels holding out in east Aleppo – with the help of the White Helmets – was largely a lie. The rebels mostly fought under the command structure of Al Qaeda’s Nusra affiliate and its fellow jihadists in Ahrar al-Sham. A [video](#) shows White Helmet workers picking up

the corpse of a civilian after execution by Nusra/Al Qaeda and celebrating the extremists' battle wins.

Western "human rights" groups touted not only the White Helmets but the "moderate rebels" who we now know were largely a P.R. cover for the terrorists and jihadists, as well as an excuse for the U.S. and its allies to funnel in weapons that were then turned over to the extremists.

When eastern Aleppo was finally freed from the armed militants, it was discovered that the White Helmets headquarters were alongside the headquarters of Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate. Civilians from east Aleppo reported that the White Helmets primarily rallied their "humanitarian" operations when the militants were attacked.

Soon after departing Aleppo in government-supplied buses, the White Helmets showed up in the mountains above Damascus where they allied with terrorist groups responsible for poisoning and then shutting off the water source for five million people in Damascus.

Neither Neutral Nor Independent

The White Helmets's claim to be neutral and independent is another lie. They only work in areas controlled by the rebel groups, primarily Al Qaeda's Nusra, and their leaders seek to bring in direct U.S. and NATO military intervention to assure a "regime change" in Syria although it likely would create a vacuum that the extremists would exploit to the further suffering of the Syrian people.

The film is as fraudulent as the group it tries to turn into heroes. The filmmakers never set foot in Syria. Their video footage takes place in southern Turkey where they show White Helmet trainees in a hotel and talking on cell phones. The footage from inside Syria is not from independent journalists but from the White Helmets themselves – and much of it looks contrived.

Khaled Khatib, the White Helmets's photographer who says he filmed the footage inside Syria, reportedly received a U.S. visa and will attend the Oscars. Khatib tweeted the first video he took showing the White Helmets, with a girl who was totally buried being removed without injuries or wounds or even much dirt.

The original video has the logo of Aleppo Media Center (AMC), which was created by the Syrian Expatriates Organization. Their address on K Street in Washington DC suggests this is yet another Western-funded operation similar to the Iraqi National Congress that lobbied and lied on behalf of the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

In the past few days, with perfect timing for the upcoming Oscars, there was yet another "miracle" rescue, another girl buried but then removed and whisked away

in record-breaking time – perfect for social media.

The momentum in support of the White Helmets infomercial raises a question about how this Oscar is awarded. Is it for journalistic authenticity or is it to conform with the political passions of the moment, which themselves are partly contrived by a well-funded propaganda campaign mounted by Western/Israeli/Gulf governments.

Investigative Reports

The true source and real purpose of the White Helmets were exposed almost two years ago by investigative journalists. Max Blumenthal has written a two-part detailed examination of the “shadowy PR firm” behind the White Helmets. And Jan Oberg has written an overview survey of the “pro” and “con” examinations in his work “Just How Gray are the White Helmets”.

More recently, Vanessa Beeley has documented the fact that the White Helmets pretends to be the Syrian Civil Defense when there is a real Syrian Civil Defense, which was begun in the 1950s and is a member of the International Civil Defense Organizations. The White Helmets group was launched as “Syria Civil Defense” in Turkey in 2013 before being re-branded as the “White Helmets” in 2014.

According to on-the-ground interviews in Aleppo, militants began supplying this operation by killing real Syrian rescue workers and stealing their equipment. Since then the White Helmets have been supplied by the West through Turkey with brand new ambulances and related rescue equipment.

Despite exposés about the group, the West’s mainstream media and some “alternative” outlets continue to uncritically promote the White Helmets myth and rely on the group as a source of news about Syria. In 2014-2015, the White Helmets became a rallying point for columnist Nicholas Krisof, the activist group Avaaz and others to campaign for all-out Western assault on the Syrian government and its military.

Perhaps ironically – given the Israeli government’s desire for a “regime change” in Syria – the Israeli mainstream TV program I24 presented both sides of the issue and titled the segment “White Helmets: Heroes or Hoax?” By contrast, the progressive program “DemocracyNow” in the United States has only broadcast a puff piece promoting the “White Helmet” disinformation.

Whether or not the White Helmets snag the Academy Award, they surely deserve recognition for their skillful marketing and advertising. In 2016, the group received the Rights Livelihood Award and was seriously considered for a Nobel Peace Prize. The Oscar nomination for “The White Helmets” movie is just the

latest success in the ongoing campaign of distortion and deception around Syria.

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NYT's Fake News about Fake News

Exclusive: The West's anti-Russian propaganda links Moscow to the blight of "fake news" but the evidence doesn't connect the two. So, The New York Times makes the case with its own "fake news," reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

A grave danger from the Western mainstream media's current hysteria about "[fake news](#)" is that the definition gets broadened from the few made-up stories that are demonstrably false – often fabricated by kids to get more clicks – to include reasonable disputes about the facts of a complex controversy.

This danger has grown worse because The New York Times, The Washington Post and other major Western news organizations have [merged their outrage](#) over "fake news" with the West's propaganda campaign against Russia by claiming without evidence that the Russian government is somehow putting out false stories to undermine Western democracy.

However, when news organizations actually track down "fake news" outlets, they are usually run by some young entrepreneurs from outside Russia who saw made-up stories as a way to increase revenue by luring in more readers eager for "information" that supports their prejudices.

Yet, a front-page Times [article](#) on Tuesday, citing "fake news" as a threat to Europe, contains what arguably is "fake news" itself by claiming that many of the purported 2,500 stories "discredited" by the European Union's East Stratcom operation have "links to Russia" although the Times doesn't identify those links.

The article by Mark Scott and Melissa Eddy then goes on to blur these two separate concepts: "In a year when the French, Germans and Dutch will elect leaders, the European authorities are scrambling to counter a rising tide of fake news and anti-European Union propaganda aimed at destabilizing people's trust in institutions."

But it is this mashing together of "fake news" and what the Times describes as

“anti-European Union propaganda” that is so insidious. The first relates to consciously fabricated stories; the second involves criticism of a political institution, the E.U., which is viewed by many Europeans as elitist, remote and disdainful of the needs, interests and attitudes of average citizens.

Whether you call such criticism “propaganda” or “dissent,” it is absurd to blame it all on Russia. When it comes to “destabilizing people’s trust in institutions,” the E.U. – especially with its inept handling of the Great Recession and its clumsy response to the Syrian refugee crisis – is doing a bang-up job on its own without Russian help.

Yet, rather than face up to legitimate concerns of citizens, the E.U. and U.S. governments have found a convenient scapegoat, Russia. To hammer home this point – to make it the new “groupthink” – E.U. and U.S. leaders have financed propaganda specialists to disparage political criticism by linking it to Russia.

Even worse, in the United States, the Times and other mainstream publications – reflecting the views of the political establishment – have editorialized to get giant technology companies, like Facebook and Google, to marginalize independent news sites that don’t accept the prevailing conventional wisdom.

There is an Orwellian quality to these schemes – a plan for a kind of Ministry of Truth enforced by algorithms to weed out deviant ideas – but almost no one whose voice is allowed in the mass media gets to make that observation. Even now, there is a chilling uniformity in the endless denunciations of Russia as the root of all evil.

Though the Times’ article treats the E.U.’s East Stratcom operatives as 11 beleaguered public servants sticking their fingers in the dike to protect the citizenry from a flood of Russian disinformation, “stratcom” actually is a euphemism for psychological operations, i.e., the strategic use of communications to influence the thinking of a target population.

In this case, the target populations are the European public and – to an ancillary degree – the American people who get to absorb the same propaganda from The New York Times. The real goal of stratcom is not to combat a few sleazy entrepreneurs generating consciously false stories for profit but to silence or “discredit” sources of information that question the E.U. and U.S. propaganda.

More Stratcom

NATO has its own Stratcom command based in Latvia that also is assigned to swat down information that doesn’t conform to Western propaganda narratives. The U.S. Agency for International Development and the U.S.-funded National Endowment for Democracy also pour tens of millions of dollars into media operations with

similar goals as do major Western foundations, such as currency speculator George Soros's Open Society. Last December, the U.S. Congress approved and President Obama signed legislation to create an additional \$160 million bureaucracy to combat "Russian propaganda."

In other words, the West's stratcom and "psychological operations" are swimming in dough despite the Times' representation that these "anti-disinformation" projects are unfairly outgunned by sinister forces daring to challenge what everyone-in-the-know knows to be true.

If these "stratcom" operations were around in 2002-2003, they would have been accusing the few people questioning the Iraq-has-WMD certainty of putting out "fake news" to benefit Saddam Hussein. Now, journalists and citizens who don't buy the full-Monte demonization of Russia and its President Vladimir Putin are put into a similar category.

Instead of trusting in the free exchange of ideas, the new attitude at the Times, the Post and other Western news outlets is to short-circuit the process by smearing anyone who questions the official narratives as a "Putin apologist" or a "Moscow stooge."

Beyond being anti-democratic, this anti-intellectual approach has prevented serious examination of the facts behind the West's war or words against Russia. To shut down that debate, all you need to do is to say that any fact cited at a Russian news outlet must be false or "fake news." Any Westerner who notes the same fact must be a "Putin puppet."

Western "stratcom" doesn't even want to allow Russian media to criticize politicians who are criticizing Russia. The Times article lamented that "Many false claims target politicians who present the biggest obstacles to Moscow's goal of undermining the European Union." The Times, however, doesn't offer any examples of such "false claims."

Instead, the Times writes that Russian news channels had "targeted the [French] presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron, who belongs to the party and is running on a pro-European Union platform."

But what does that mean? Is it now an act of aggression when newscasts in one country criticize a leader of another country? If so, are the European news channels that have "targeted" U.S. President Donald Trump somehow deserving of U.S. government retaliation? Doesn't the E.U. – and by extension The New York Times – accept the idea of political disagreement and debate?

This closed-mindedness is especially dangerous – indeed existentially risky – when applied to a confrontation between nuclear-armed powers. In such a case,

the maximum amount of debate should be encouraged, instead of what amounts to blacklisting dissidents in the West who won't toe the official propaganda lines.

Media Censors

Disturbingly, the leading forces in this suppression of skepticism are the most prestigious newspapers in the United States and Europe. Even after the disastrous experience with the Iraq War and the bogus WMD groupthink, Western news outlets that were party to that fiasco have virtually excluded well-reported articles and documentaries that question the U.S. and E.U. narratives of the New Cold War.

For instance, there has been almost no presentation in the mainstream Western media of an alternative – and I would argue more complete and accurate – narrative of the Ukraine conflict, taking into account the country's complex history and deep ethnic divisions.

It is essentially forbidden to refer to the violent overthrow of elected President Viktor Yanukovich three years ago as a "coup" or a "putsch" or to cite evidence of a U.S.-backed "regime change," such as an intercepted phone call between U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt in which they discussed how to "glue" and how to "midwife" the installation of a new leadership in Kiev.

In the supposedly "free" West, you can only refer to the post-coup events in Crimea, in which the people of the largely ethnic Russia area voted overwhelmingly to secede from Ukraine and rejoin Russia, as a "Russian invasion." No skepticism is allowed even though there were no images of Russian troops wading ashore on Crimea's beaches or Russian tanks crashing across borders. The "invasion" supposedly happened even though no invasion was necessary because Russian troops were already in Crimea under the naval basing agreement at Sevastopol.

Amid the West's current hysteria about "Russian propaganda," U.S. and E.U. citizens are not even given the opportunity to watch well-reported documentaries about key moments in the New Cold War, including an eye-opening investigative report debunking the Western propaganda myth constructed around the death of Russian accountant Sergei Magnitsky or a well-produced historical account of the Ukraine crisis.

Western news outlets and governments even take pride in blocking such dissenting views and contrary information from reaching the American and European publics. Like East Stratcom – the E.U.'s Brussels-based 11-member team of diplomats, bureaucrats and former journalists – establishment institutions see themselves

bravely battling “Russian disinformation.” They see it as their duty not to let their people hear this other side of the story.

If that is what the West’s institutions have come to – dismissing reasonable criticism and thoughtful dissent as “Russian disinformation” – is it any wonder that they are losing the confidence of their people?

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](#)).

Palestinians See More of the Same

President Trump has offered mixed signals about precisely what his attitude toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will be, but Palestinians see little prospects for meaningful improvement, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s recent visit to Washington reaffirmed one thing in terms of U.S./Israeli relations: that not much will change in the United States’ massive one-sided support for Israel, says Palestinian author and activist Ramzy Baroud.

The U.S. will continue to support, arm and publicly defend the ongoing Israeli policy of ethnic cleansing, as things go from bad to worse, Baroud adds, noting that Israel – with U.S. support – has already reduced the Gaza Strip to a fenced-in prison, where well over a million Palestinians don’t even have access to the basics such as food and clean water. Now, the Israeli government has turned its full attention to the West Bank, which is under siege with new Israeli settlements.

I spoke to Ramzy Baroud about the Netanyahu visit, the illegal settlement boom on the West Bank with its concurrent upsurge in settler violence, the implications of moving the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem, and the general daily brutalities of living under the iron fist of Israeli occupation.

Baroud is an internationally-syndicated columnist, a media consultant, and the founder of [PalestineChronicle.com](#). His latest book is *My Father Was a Freedom Fighter: Gaza’s Untold Story*.

Dennis Bernstein: It is good to speak with you on the heels of the visit to the U.S. by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. [...]

This is sort of how the visit, and, I guess, the story of Palestine and Israel, is being framed by the corporate press. This is coming off the BBC, but it's typical: U.S. President Donald Trump has asked Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to "hold off on settlements" in a joint press conference.

Mr. Trump also promised to deliver "a great peace deal" but said Israel and the Palestinians must both compromise. So that's the BBC's characterization. How would you frame the current visit?

Ramzy Baroud: Well, the current visit, really, is a culmination of a whole bunch of events that have been taking place for months now prior to Trump coming to office, and the inauguration, and the aftermath. There's a great sense of euphoria, a great deal of euphoria, among the Israeli political elites. The whole two state solution enterprise is dead. The whole era of being told what to do, or being pressured in any way, or being censured, even in the slightest, most gentle way by previous administrations, that era is over, done with.

And now we are entering into a new era in which Israel single-handedly dictates everything it needs to dictate. Not just on Palestinians but on the United States, thus the so-called international community. So I see this kind of as a celebration of the Israeli political triumph, over the American foreign policy, and the balancing act that they have been playing in the Middle East for, really, in the last 25 years since the Madrid peace talks in '91, until today. It's the end of all of that, and it's ushered in our new era, and that's an Israeli era, for sure.

DB: Well, just to set the tone. You say that ...Trump's pick for the U.S. Ambassador to Israel [David Friedman], is to the right of Netanyahu. You want to say a little bit about that choice, and his desire to move the Embassy to Jerusalem?

RB: Well, that's right. There was a recent article by a Professor Rashid Khalidi in the New Yorker, in which he said this is the first time in the history of U.S./Israeli relations that you could actually swap both ambassadors, the Israeli and American ambassadors, back and forth and you can't even tell which one is there to defend Israel's interests, and which one is there for American interests. There is this cohesion that is happening at last. And it's a perfect scenario for Israel.

The new pick for the ambassador [Friedman] is someone who is very much pro-settlements, does not even refer to the West Bank by its internationally

recognized name. He refers to the occupied territories as Judea and Samaria. It's the land with the biblical reference, made by right-wing ultra-nationalists and religious Jewish politicians. So we are seeing something that's really unprecedented. The attempt at kind of dilly-dallying around this issue is over as far as American foreign policy is concerned.

American foreign policy, now, is exactly what Israel says it is. And I think it was really interesting what Trump said today in the press conference, when he said "I don't care, two states, one state, it's what you guys decide."

But the interesting part about it, is that when you have an occupier and an occupied, someone with powerful military and someone who's, you know, just in a constant state of self-defense, and someone that is commanding one of the Middle East's, the strongest economy, and others who are living in a South African apartheid-like Bantustan, well guess what? You can't really decide equally. One would have to impose his vision on the other.

And that is precisely what Trump is doing. He is giving Israel free hand to behave in any way that is consistent with its interests. And as you heard, what Netanyahu was saying was pretty dark and terrifying actually.

DB: Now, clearly Israel has always been given the gold from the United States. There's always been that kind of relationship. I guess Obama signed off on that deal for \$38 billion ... in aid—the most [to a foreign nation] ever. That certainly was a demonstration of U.S. friendship, if you will. But, how do you see this proceeding? If they go into Jerusalem, if they put the Embassy in Jerusalem, what happens next? How does that reverberate within the Palestinian community? Is it possible that they could just stand by?

RB: Of course not. They will not stand by. And that's what Trump does not understand. I think there's a couple of important points that will have to be stated. The first one is that the U.S. did not put any expectations on Israel, whatsoever.

The \$38 billion and whatever political support and financial backing that they have received through all these years, they haven't put any expectations, except one single expectation. And that is to allow the U.S. the prestige, the leadership, the ability to come and impose itself as the "honesty spokesman," if you will.

Because the peace process was essential for American foreign policy. It is more important than we can possibly imagine. It is that kind of soaked power opportunity to impose themselves, not just on the Palestinians in the occupied territories, but on the rest of the Arabs. If you play along you're a moderate,

if you are against us, you are a radical. That's all the United States expected from Israel. Just use the language of peace, just entertain this discourse and we will give you exactly what you want.

Even that proved to be too much for Israel. They don't want that, and Trump is willing to completely move away from that entire discourse. I think this is really interesting, and I think, eventually, it's going to alter America's standing in the Middle East altogether. What Trump doesn't understand, he is... it's all about making the deal... it's all about business, it's all about looking at who is the powerful party? Who is the weaker party? And he is just thinking of it in terms of dollars and cents. Now, it doesn't work that way in the Middle East.

Even the supposedly powerless and unarmed Palestinians could actually prove to be... their reaction could prove to be truly consequential, as far as American foreign policy is concerned. Palestinians are most likely to react, to mobilize. There are a great deal of efforts at forging a new Palestinian political outlook. They are looking for alternative leadership. They have their alternative allies. They had a meeting in Moscow, between Hamas and Fatah recently.

But also, you could see that entire region as far as destabilizing against the Americans, who are trying to, kind of, maintain their status and their influence in Syria, and Libya, over the Gulf, and so forth. And they find themselves in this huge anti-American backlash, as a result of their blatant support for Israel. Then Trump is going to actually realize, "Okay, this is not as straightforward as I thought it would be." What works in business might not actually work in politics, after all.

DB: What are the realities, at this time, in terms of settlement buildings? How much has been built? How does that look at this point?

RB: Actually, it was interesting what Trump said to Netanyahu when he kind of leaned, you know, sideways and he said very gently, "If you could just hold off on the settlements, just a little bit." The problem is they have already issued approval of 6,000 settlement units throughout Jerusalem and the West Bank. And this number of units goes beyond any assumption of natural growth of settlements. It's way beyond that. It means that they are really now looking into expanding settlements beyond the fast streak it has experienced in the last eight years.

Not just that: they are now talking about legalizing all the illegal settlement outposts, which range from anywhere from 100 to 200 outposts, even more. If you are going to legalize these illegal outposts, it also means... and, of course, by

saying legalize, I mean from an Israeli government, from an Israeli officials point of view, as you know, all Israeli settlements are illegal under international law... But if they are to do so, it means that they would have to provide protection. The army would have to be deployed. There would have to be expansion. There would have to be fortification of these settlements.

So we are really talking about an unprecedented land grab here, on the West Bank. It doesn't matter what happens to the Palestinians in the process. Let's take as much as we can, and let's do that fast because this is the perfect opportunity to do so.

The last point I want to make is, for the first time in 20 years there was a brand new settlement, that has been approved. This is also new, in the sense that Israel has been justifying the expansion of the growth of settlements based on what they call natural expansion. But if they are issuing orders for new settlements, it means they are going back to the 1967 mentality of "This is part of the land of Israel. This is part of Yehudi and Santa Maria. It's our biblical land, and therefore Palestinians have no rights in this land anymore." So, not only the language itself is changing, but there are actually parts on the ground that prove that the action itself is also fundamentally being altered.

DB: Can I ask you to say a little bit about the relationship between the settlements and the military? How the military, if they do use the settlements... because we hear a lot about torture. You reported in your service, in the palestinechronicle.com, you are reporting about the torture of Palestinian teens. How does the settler movement play into this, sort of, growing use of torture, which, obviously, Trump thinks works.

RB: That's right. Well, I think it's important that we delineate this. There are no separate enterprises, the army enterprise and the settlement enterprise. Sometimes the media makes the mistakes of trying to make it look like the settlements are, kind of, behaving at odds with Israeli official policy. They actually don't. And we actually have been saying this from the very, very beginning, that this is a charade in Israel's name. And, the fact that they have just approved and legalized right after... all the settlements that have been built supposedly illegally... the fact that they have done so, it's an indication that this has all been part of the Israeli official program, all along. So, this is really important that we remember.

And also, we need to remember that in 1967, when Israel occupied the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, there were two settlement movements happening. One that was commissioned by the government, as for some strategic reason. And the other one was the religious settlements, that were built for spiritual reasons. At the end of the day, as far as Palestinians are concerned, it makes no difference

whatsoever. This is land grab, our land, private property, lands being confiscated, whether for spiritual reasons or whether for strategic political reasons, it makes no difference. So as far as Palestinians are concerned, they are all working together, it's all one and the same.

The issue of torture, this is related to Gaza, Dennis. In order for anyone from Gaza to leave to Israel, to be treated in Israeli hospitals, or West Bank hospitals, or Jerusalem hospitals, they have to go through the Israeli border area, which is the Arab checkpoint. The Arab checkpoint means they have to meet the intelligence, the Shin Bet, the Israeli internal intelligence, which is equivalent to the FBI. And quite often they are bargain. If you want to get through, you have to divulge information, you have to give us names. Many people refuse to do so, many people get tortured in the process, and many people actually go home, and die as a result.

DB: I think one of the things that isn't at all reported through the corporate press, in any way, shape or form, rarely even a mention... doesn't get into the New York Times, or anywhere. But the way in which... it sort of, you know, you've got the wall, right? That is so tall, you can see it from space, as sort of the anvil. And then you've got the expanding settler movement, as the hammer.

And I say that in the context of thinking about the violence imposed by the settlers, on the peoples whose land they are stealing. That story, which is a continual drumbeat of violence beyond the torture of children, which we... there's a peek through every once in awhile, in a human rights report. Could you talk about that?

RB: That's right. And it is sad that we never hear about it. I just feel like, I've been doing this for a long time, Dennis. And I know you have been doing it for a long time, as well. And we are yet to register any fundamental shift in how mainstream media really perceives the situation in Palestine/Israel. To the contrary, I think it's becoming even more consolidated behind Israel, which is entirely immoral and inexcusable, especially at a time when that country is now really ruled by ultra-nationalists and some, even, fascists like Avigdor Lieberman and others.

And by any political standards these men are fascists. And yet they rarely get any serious criticism in American media. While the settlement movement, I think this is really interesting, Dennis, is the fact that we are... we have seen how the settlers change their political position within Israeli politics from being on the margins, many years ago, in the post-1967, to becoming the center, most important component in the formulation of Israeli...

DB: ... the soul. The soul of the future of Israel.

RB: Absolutely. No question about it. And they have a great deal of influence in the army. They can actually sway Israeli politics, altogether. In some strange way, the life of Netanyahu, as right-wing as he is, he's actually on the left side of those who are truly capable of destroying his coalition at any given moment. They don't care about politics anymore. They are not the savvy Zionists of the past. They are right and they take exactly what we want.

That's why the settlers are being empowered, at this point. They are empowered in the sense that they are getting exactly what they want ... and the Palestinians are paying the price for it.

So, Palestinians are falling victim, not just for Israeli army violence but for settler violence as well. The land that the settlers are usurping from Palestinians, well it has owners and sometimes these owners try to defend their land, and they pay the price for it. And, I don't know if your audience is aware of ... the whole process of how a settlement is even constructed in the first place. But it is a very, very simple process.

The settlers come and they push the people out of the area. And then they claim it as their own, the army is involved. They make it a military zone, they fence it, starts growing, we see caravans moving in, trailers moving in, fences going higher and higher. And eventually it becomes a settlement. Well, Palestinians usually fight back for their land, their olive groves, the schools, for the roads, for the villages. And they pay a very heavy price.

DB: Yes, they do. That's sort of the front line of the suffering. We mentioned the word Gaza. Your most recent book *My Father was a Freedom Fighter: Gaza's Untold Story*, and again when you... it must be absolutely maddening, I know it is, to see what's happening on the ground in Gaza, and hear the way in which, the character of this story, that these are a bunch of fenced-in terrorists, that we have to go to war against to defend Israel's right to exist. That is the theme, that still reverberates in the press.

And with Trump coming in... and I can imagine him using Israel as a model, "See I told you torture works, and the Israelis prove it time and again. It works, that's where they use it. That's why they're so effective blah, blah." Have you been thinking about that?

RB: It is sad to see that the United States at this point in its history, where they really need to have as much sensible policies at home and abroad as possible to stave off various crisis, they actually look at Israel for inspiration. And this is what Trump said today. "Israel is absolutely the most inspiring model." I mean, this is a crisis. It's a moral crisis, but it's political as well.

A place like Gaza has been under siege since 2006. Of course, it has been under occupation since 1967, but under a hermetic siege, for ten years. People are malnourished, people are suffering, they are digging tunnels under various fences in order for them to get food and supplies. Egypt is part of the siege, not just Israel. And not just the siege alone. But there are these intermittent wars that have been taking place in 2008-2009, 2012, 2014.

Thousands of Palestinians perished, tens of thousands have been wounded. Nearly a quarter of the Gaza Strip has been destroyed. And yet we didn't hear anything of that, yesterday. There's no humanitarian process throughout. If this happened in any other part of the world it would really be the headline in every newspaper. But, in Gaza, somehow, this is so irrelevant, so unimportant.

And the one that really need protection is the one whose imposing destruction on other people. It's Israel that needs our protection. It's Israel's security that really matters. Not the security of those desperate, poor souls that have been suffering year after year after year, crying for help, and getting very little, of it. And this is why we really need to keep the focus on this issue, Dennis. Gaza is a central piece to this discussion, and the suffering of the people there is getting worse with time.

DB: People have trouble getting clean, clear water, fresh water. Kids are sick because of that.

RB: The United Nations has decided... rendered Gaza, it's not suitable for human habitation in 2020. Others have actually said it is already not suitable ... because of the issue of the polluted water, and the depleted uranium, as a result of the war, the fact that 100,000 people are still homeless, the fact that half of the population is unemployed, and so forth. With no political horizon, and no respite, whatsoever.

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Was Thomas Jefferson a Rapist?

Exclusive: As Thomas Jefferson's apologists retreat in their denials about Sally Hemings, the new defensive line is to assert that Jefferson's sex with his slave girl was "a relationship," not another r-word, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

On President's Day, The Washington Post published a front-page article about Thomas Jefferson's mansion, Monticello, finally restoring Sally Hemings's room, which was next door to Jefferson's bedroom, a further grudging acknowledgement that Hemings was his concubine.

But the Post could not bring itself to state the obvious. It described Jefferson imposing himself sexually on his female slave as a "relationship," rather than a serial rape that apparently began when Hemings was around 14 years of age.

The Post reported that in 1941, the caretakers of Monticello transformed Hemings's room into a restroom as "the floor tiles and bathroom stalls covered over the story of the enslaved woman, who was owned by Jefferson and had a long-term relationship with him."

But – as grotesque as it may be to erase her room by installing toilets – it is equally grotesque to describe as a "relationship" an older powerful man having sex with a young female slave who had little choice but to submit to his predations and bear his children.

It may be hard for the American people to accept but the evidence increasingly indicates that the author of the Declaration of Independence and the third president of the United States was a pedophile and a rapist.

That is the story that Jefferson's many apologists have most desperately tried to obscure along with his wretched record on race, including the sickening racism in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, that includes his pseudo-science of assessing physiological and mental traits of African-Americans to prove that all men were not created equal.

For generations, the apologists also have challenged slave Sally Hemings's late-in-life remembrance to one of her sons, Madison Hemings, describing how Jefferson had imposed himself on her sexually in Paris after she arrived in 1787 as a teen-age slave girl attending one of his daughters.

According to Madison Hemings's account, his mother "became Mr. Jefferson's concubine [in Paris]. And when he was called back home she was *enciante* [pregnant] by him." Jefferson was insistent that Sally Hemings return with him, but her awareness of the absence of slavery in France gave her the leverage to insist on a transactional trade-off; she would continue to provide sex to Jefferson in exchange for his promise of good treatment and the freedom of her children when they turned 21, Madison Hemings said.

Smearing Hemings

The traditional defense of Jefferson was to portray Sally Hemings as a promiscuous vixen who lied about her relationship with the Great Man to enhance her humble standing. After all, whose word would you believe, that of the estimable Jefferson who publicly decried race mixing or a lowly African-American slave girl?

For decades, the defenders stuck to that dismissive response despite the curious coincidence that Hemings tended to give birth nine months after one of Jefferson's visits to Monticello and the discovery of male Jefferson DNA in Hemings's descendants.

Still, the Jefferson apologists raised finicky demands for conclusive proof of the liaison, as if it were absurd to envision that a relatively young man then in his mid-40s, a widower since his wife died in 1782, would have initiated a sexual relationship with an African-American female, even an attractive light-skinned mulatto like Hemings (who was the illegitimate daughter of Jefferson's father-in-law and thus Jefferson's late wife's half-sister).

Though it's true that unequivocal evidence does not exist – Hemings did not save a semen-stained blue dress so it could later be subjected to DNA analysis – historians have increasingly come to accept the reality of Jefferson's sexual involvement with his young slave girl who was only 14 when she moved into Jefferson's residence in Paris.

So, with this ground shifting under Jefferson's defensive lines, his apologists retreated to a new position, that the relationship was a true love affair and/or that Jefferson's behavior fit with the moral behavior of the times as slave owners frequently raped their female slaves (and thus Jefferson's behavior should not be judged adversely).

Hemings was transformed into a kind of modern-day independent woman making her own choices about matters of the heart. However, given her age and her status as Jefferson's property the relationship could be more accurately described as serial rape.

But the reality may be even worse. Recent historical examinations of records at Jefferson's Monticello plantation have provided support for contemporaneous accounts of Jefferson having sex with at least one other slave girl beside Hemings and possibly more.

Fathering of Slaves

Some scholars, such as historian Henry Wiencek in his 2012 book, *Master of the Mountain: Thomas Jefferson and His Slaves*, give credence to old reports about Jefferson having a direct role in populating Monticello by fathering his

own dark-skinned lookalikes.

“In ways that no one completely understands, Monticello became populated by a number of mixed-race people who looked astonishingly like Thomas Jefferson,” wrote Wiencek. “We know this not from what Jefferson’s detractors have claimed but from what his grandson Jeff Randolph openly admitted. According to him, not only Sally Hemings but another Hemings woman as well ‘had children which resembled Mr. Jefferson so closely that it was plain that they had his blood in their veins.’

“Resemblance meant kinship; there was no other explanation. Since Mr. Jefferson’s blood was Jeff’s blood, Jeff knew that he was somehow kin to these people of a parallel world. Jeff said the resemblance of one Hemings to Thomas Jefferson was ‘so close, that at some distance or in the dusk the slave, dressed in the same way, might be mistaken for Mr. Jefferson.’”

During a dinner at Monticello, Jeff Randolph recounted a scene in which a Thomas Jefferson lookalike was a servant tending to the table where Thomas Jefferson was seated. Randolph recalled the reaction of one guest: “In one instance, a gentleman dining with Mr. Jefferson, looked so startled as he raised his eyes from the latter to the servant behind him, that his discovery of the resemblance was perfectly obvious to all.”

In the 1850s, Jeff Randolph told a visiting author that his grandfather did not hide the slaves who bore these close resemblances, since Sally Hemings “was a house servant and her children were brought up house servants so that the likeness between master and slave was blazoned to all the multitudes who visited this political Mecca” and indeed a number of visitors did make note of this troubling reality.

Even Jefferson admirer Jon Meacham accepted the truth of the Hemings liaison in *Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power*. Meacham cited a quote from Elijah Fletcher, a visitor from Vermont: “The story of Black Sal is no farce – That he cohabits with her and has a number of children by her is a sacred truth and the worst of it is, he keeps the same children slaves an unnatural crime which is very common in these parts This conduct may receive a little palliation when we consider that such proceedings are so common that they cease here to be disgraceful.”

Meacham observed that Jefferson “was apparently able to consign his children with Sally Hemings to a separate sphere of life in his mind even as they grew up in his midst.

“It was, to say the least, an odd way to live, but Jefferson was a creature of his culture. ‘The enjoyment of a negro or mulatto woman is spoken of as quite a

common thing: no reluctance, delicacy or shame is made about the matter,' Josiah Quincy Jr. of Massachusetts wrote after a visit to the Carolinas. This was daily reality at Monticello."

Family Doubts

This "daily reality" was also a troubling concern among Jefferson's white family though the Great Man would never confirm or deny his parentage of a number of Monticello's slaves.

"Frigid indifference forms a useful shield for a public character against his political enemies, but Jefferson deployed it against his own daughter Martha, who was deeply upset by the sexual allegations against her father and wanted a straight answer *Yes or no?* an answer he would not deign to give," wrote Wiencek.

Before his death, Jefferson did free several of Sally Hemings's children or let them run away presumably fulfilling the commitment made in Paris before Hemings agreed to return to Monticello to remain his slave concubine.

"Jefferson went to his grave without giving his family any denial of the Hemings charges," Wiencek wrote.

The historical record increasingly makes Jefferson out to be a serial rapist, exploiting at least one and possibly more girls who were trapped on his property, who indeed were his property, and thus had little choice but to tolerate his sexual advances.

Whipping the Children

The evidence of Jefferson's sexual predations must also be viewed in the context of his overall treatment of his slaves at Monticello. Though Jefferson's apologists pretend that he was a kind master distressed over the inequities of a slave system that he could somehow neither correct nor escape, the latest evidence much of it concealed for generations to protect Jefferson's image reveal him to be a cruel slave-owner who carefully calculated the net worth that his human chattel provided him and having boys as young as 10 whipped.

Some of Jefferson's mistreatment of his slaves derived from another of his hypocrisies, his views about simplicity and solvency. As historian John Chester Miller wrote in his 1977 book, *The Wolf by the Ears*, "To Jefferson, the abandon with which Americans rushed into debt and squandered borrowed money upon British 'gew-gaws' and 'trumpery' vitiated the blessings of peace.

"From Paris an unlikely podium from which to sermonize Jefferson preached frugality, temperance, and the simple life of the American farmer. Buy nothing

whatever on credit, he exhorted his countrymen, and buy only what was essential. 'The maxim of buying nothing without money in our pocket to pay for it,' he averred, 'would make of our country (Virginia) one of the happiest upon earth.'

"As Jefferson saw it, the most pernicious aspect of the postwar preoccupation with pleasure, luxury, and the ostentatious display of wealth was the irremediable damage it did to 'republican virtue.'"

But Jefferson himself amassed huge debts and lived the life of a *bon vivant*, spending way beyond his means. In Paris, he bought fancy clothes, collected fine wines, and acquired expensive books, furniture and artwork. It was, however, his slaves back at Monticello who paid the price for his excesses.

"Living in a style befitting a French nobleman, his small salary often in arrears, and burdened by debts to British merchants which he saw no way of paying, Jefferson was driven to financial shifts, some of which were made at the expense of his slaves. In 1787, for example, he decided to hire out some of his slaves a practice he had hitherto avoided because of the hardship it wreaked upon the slaves themselves," Miller wrote.

Exploiting His Slaves

Upon returning to the United States, Jefferson reinvented himself as a more modestly attired republican, but his tastes for the grandiose did not abate. He ordered elaborate renovations to Monticello, which deepened his debt and compelled his slaves to undertake strenuous labor to implement Jefferson's ambitious architectural designs.

Needing to squeeze more value from his slaves, Jefferson was an aggressive master, not the gentle patrician that his apologists have long depicted.

According to historian Wiencek, Jefferson "directed his manager, Nicholas Lewis, to extract 'extraordinary exertions' of labor from the slaves to stay current with his debt payments. Some slaves had endured years of harsh treatment at the hands of strangers, for to raise cash, Jefferson had also instructed Lewis to hire out slaves. He demanded extraordinary exertions from the elderly: 'The negroes too old to be hired, could they not make a good profit by cultivating cotton?'"

Jefferson was callous as well toward his young slaves. Reviewing long-neglected records at Monticello, Wiencek noted that one plantation report to Jefferson recounted that the nail factory was doing well because "the small ones" ages 10, 11 and 12 were being whipped by overseer, Gabriel Lilly, "for truancy."

His plantation records also show that he viewed fertile female slaves as

exceptionally valuable because their offspring would increase his assets and thus enable him to incur more debt. He ordered his plantation manager to take special care of these “breeding” women.

“A child raised every 2. years is of more profit than the crop of the best laboring man,” Jefferson wrote. “[I]n this, as in all other cases, providence has made our duties and our interests coincide perfectly.”

According to Wiencek, “The enslaved people were yielding him a bonanza, a perpetual human dividend at compound interest. Jefferson wrote, ‘I allow nothing for losses by death, but, on the contrary, shall presently take credit four per cent. per annum, for their increase over and above keeping up their own numbers.’ His plantation was producing inexhaustible human assets. The percentage was predictable.”

To justify this profiting off slavery, Jefferson claimed that he was merely acting in accordance with “Providence,” which in Jefferson’s peculiar view of religion always happened to endorse whatever action Jefferson wanted to take.

Part of that “Providence” presumably supplied him with comely slave girls such as Sally Hemings and allowed Jefferson to do his part in “breeding” his slave stock and assuring more compound profits from his investments.

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](#)).

Trump’s Foreign Policy: Retreat or Rout?

With President Trump’s foreign-policy team sounding a lot like President Obama’s, the new question is whether Trump has caved in to Official Washington’s powers-that-be or is biding his time for a big move, asks Gilbert Doctorow.

By Gilbert Doctorow

After President Trump abruptly fired National Security Advisor Michael Flynn a week ago and senior Trump officials flew to Europe to unveil a foreign-policy agenda that sounded a lot like President Obama’s, even some Trump supporters wondered if Washington’s “shadow government” or “deep state” had triumphed over

their hero.

But another interpretation is possible, that Trump understands that he first must gain control of the national-security and foreign-policy bureaucracies before he can press ahead with plans for détente with Russia and downsizing America's vast web of military bases and geopolitical commitments. In other words, what we're seeing may be a tactical retreat rather than a wholesale rout.

The latest crisis to hit the young Trump administration began on Feb. 13 with Trump's firing of Flynn, a move that Trump seemed to regret almost immediately as he assessed how Flynn's ouster had been engineered.

The orchestration of Flynn's removal entailed illegal use of his wiretapped conversation with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak on Dec. 29 at a time when Flynn was still a private citizen and government rules require "minimization" (or redaction) of an American's intercepted communications.

Holdovers from President Obama's Justice Department then concocted a pretext for an FBI investigation based on the Logan Act, a dusty relic from 1799 that has never been used to prosecute anyone. Flynn was further tripped up because he didn't have total recall of what was said in the conversation and then details of the case were selectively leaked to the press to buttress the narrative of illicit ties between Trump and Moscow.

But what was perhaps even more remarkable about this ambush of Flynn, who had made powerful enemies as director of the Defense Intelligence Agency overseeing its criticism of Obama's Syrian war policies, was the collusion between U.S. intelligence agencies and a mainstream media intent on bringing down President Trump – or at least preventing him from redirecting U.S. foreign policy away from "regime change" wars in the Middle East and toward a détente with Russia.

When Trump hastily demanded Flynn's resignation – at least in part to appease Vice President Mike Pence who complained that Flynn hadn't been fully forthcoming with him – a media feeding frenzy followed. Even Hillary Clinton came out of hiding to radiate pleasure at the announcement of Flynn's firing. (At the Republican National Convention, he had joined chants of "lock her up.") We heard similar delight from media standard-bearers of the "dump Trump" movement – CNN and *The New York Times* – as well as among Trump's former rivals in the Republican primaries who continue to hold key positions on Capitol Hill.

The Early Roll-Out

Next came a stunning about-face in the early roll-out of Donald Trump's new foreign policy, which looked a lot like Barack Obama's old foreign policy. We heard presidential press secretary Sean Spicer say Trump "expected the Russian

government to ... return Crimea” to Ukraine.

Then we heard Defense Secretary James Mattis in Brussels (NATO headquarters), Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in Bonn (G20 Foreign Ministers meeting) and Vice President Pence in Munich (Security Conference) collectively pledge unswerving loyalty to the NATO alliance, insist that any new talks with Russia must be conducted from “a position of strength,” and vow to hold Russia accountable for the full implementation of the Minsk Accords, meaning all sanctions stay in place pending that achievement which the Ukrainian government has consistently blocked while blaming Moscow.

Amid these signals of surrender from the Trump Administration – suggesting continuation of the disastrous foreign policy of the last 25 years – the newly revived enemies of détente on Capitol Hill added more anti-Russian sanctions and threats. In response to alleged violations by the Kremlin of the Treaty on Intermediate and Short-range Missiles (INF) dating back to 1987, Sen. Tom Cotton, R-Arkansas, introduced a bill enabling the re-installation of American nuclear-tipped cruise missiles in Europe. If enacted, this would undo the main achievements of disarmament from the Reagan years and bring us back to a full-blown Cold War.

These developments have unnerved even Trump’s long-time loyalists. Some friendly pundits have claimed that Flynn was the sole adviser to Donald Trump urging accommodation with the Russians and that his departure dealt a fatal blow to détente. Others have urged the President to reconsider what they see as a collapse of will under intense pressure from the powerful neoconservatives and their liberal-hawk allies. Trump’s backers reminded him of the disasters that the policies of American global hegemony have created in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Implicit in this well-meaning and sometimes condescending advice is a failure to understand the political acumen of Donald Trump and his entourage. He did not win the election on Nov. 8 by chance. It was the fruit of a more sophisticated calculation of voter support and Electoral College arithmetic than anyone else could muster. Trump also did not get his most contentious cabinet appointments – Rex Tillerson at State, Betsy DeVos at Education and Jeff Sessions as Attorney General – through the Senate confirmation hearings by luck. It was the fruit of hard work and brains in striking “deals” with political friends and foes.

No White Flag

Consequently, I view the present backtracking on Russia and retreat on a new foreign policy as a tactical repositioning, not the waving of a white flag. It is obvious that no progress on Trump’s less-interventionist foreign policy is

possible until the subversive plotters in the State Department, the Justice Department, the National Security Agency, the CIA and the FBI are sent packing. Arguably, some who broke the law in their haste to hobble Trump's presidency should be held legally accountable. Only if and when his back is secure can Trump begin changing policy.

With the end of the Obama presidency on Jan. 20, there was what might be called addition by subtraction at the State Department with the departures of political appointees who favored the neoconservative/liberal-hawk agenda, people such as Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland, a key architect of the Ukraine crisis, and Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power, a chief advocate for the "regime change" war in Syria.

During Secretary Tillerson's maiden diplomatic voyage to Europe, more pink slips have been passed out to high-level officials on the State Department's "seventh floor," home to the post-9/11 "shadow government" first put in place by Vice President Dick Cheney and then more deeply entrenched during Hillary Clinton's stint as Secretary of State. On a related front, The New York Times has reported that Trump plans to appoint businessman Stephen Feinberg to evaluate and recommend reorganization of the intelligence agencies, viewed as a shake-up to restore order and loyalty to the Chief Executive.

At the same time, we may expect President Trump to rally public opinion around his administration and its policies, both domestic and foreign. His appearance at the Melbourne, Florida airport this weekend where thousands gathered to hear Trump is surely only the first of many such public demonstrations by his supporters.

Donald Trump remains in close contact with his supporter base across the country not only via social media but using weekly, at times daily questionnaires delivered by email and asking the respondents to prioritize his next possible moves. Surely, this grassroots support gives him the confidence to wage battles against the Establishment in a bold manner.

It also must be emphasized that Trump's pre-electoral and post-electoral commitment to détente is not an aberration in his political thinking. What so many people, including supporters, fail to understand is that détente is as essential to Trump for the sake of his domestic programs as détente was critical for Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev to implement his new thinking domestically in the 1980s.

Only via détente – meaning an end to the permanent wars abroad with their heavy operational costs and the dismantling of the vast global network of U.S. military bases – can Trump free up budgetary resources to finance his plans for

massive U.S. infrastructure investments, modernizing the military, and addressing the needs of veterans. The sums involved are on the order of \$600 billion annually which presently go to maintain some 800 military bases in 70 countries, bases which generate much anti-Americanism and entangle the U.S. in regional conflicts.

Gorbachev ultimately failed, squeezed between Moscow's own "deep state" resisting change and a "new order" of greedy opportunists who saw a chance to plunder Russia's riches. For Trump to succeed, he must not only overcome Washington's "deep state" with its vested interests in protecting the status quo but he must enlist the capitalist world's best minds to rebuild America's infrastructure and restore a more broad-based prosperity.

Whether Trump can accomplish such a daunting task is debatable, but he has shown over a long business career the ability to attract and motivate a small team of not more than a dozen devoted assistants to run a multi-billion-dollar real estate empire. Obviously running an enterprise as large and complex as the U.S. government – and its interconnections with the domestic and global economies – is far more difficult. But if he is to succeed, Trump will have to press ahead with his earlier plans for a new and less costly foreign and defense policy.

Gilbert Doctorow is a Brussels-based political analyst. His latest book, *Does Russia Have a Future?* was published in August 2015.

The Did-You-Talk-to-Russians Witch Hunt

Exclusive: Democrats, liberals and media pundits – in their rush to take down President Trump – are pushing a New McCarthyism aimed at Americans who have talked to Russians, risking a new witch hunt, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

In the anti-Russian frenzy sweeping American politics and media, Democrats, liberals and mainstream pundits are calling for an investigative body that could become a new kind of House Un-American Activities Committee to hunt down Americans who have communicated with Russians.

The proposed commission would have broad subpoena powers to investigate alleged connections between Trump's supporters and the Russian government with the apparent goal of asking if they now have or have ever talked to a Russian who might have some tie to the Kremlin or its intelligence agencies.

Such an admission apparently would be prima facie evidence of disloyalty, a guilt-by-association “crime” on par with Sen. Joe McCarthy’s Cold War pursuit of “communists” who supposedly had infiltrated the U.S. government, the film industry and other American institutions on behalf of an international communist conspiracy.

Operating parallel to McCarthy’s Red Scare hearings was the House Un-American Activities Committee (or HUAC), a standing congressional panel from 1945-1975 when it was best known for investigating alleged communist subversion and propaganda. One of its top achievements was the blacklisting of the “Hollywood Ten” whose careers in the movie industry were damaged or destroyed.

Although the Cold War has long been over – and Russia has often cooperated with the U.S. government, especially on national security issues such as supplying U.S. troops in Afghanistan – Democrats and liberals seem ready to force Americans to again prove their loyalty if they engaged in conversations with Russians.

Or perhaps these “witnesses” can be entrapped into perjury charges if their recollections of conversations with Russians don’t match up with transcripts of their intercepted communications, a tactic similar to ones used by Sen. McCarthy and HUAC to trip up and imprison targets over such secondary charges.

Ousted National Security Advisor Michael Flynn has already encountered such a predicament because he couldn’t recall all the details of a phone conversation with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak on Dec. 29, 2016, after Flynn took the call while vacationing in the Dominican Republic.

When Obama administration holdovers at the Justice Department decided to gin up a legal premise to go after Flynn, they cited the Logan Act, a law enacted in 1799 to prohibit private citizens from negotiating with foreign adversaries but never used to convict anyone. The law also is of dubious constitutionality and was surely never intended to apply to a president-elect’s advisers.

However, based on that flimsy pretext, FBI agents – with a transcript of the electronic intercept of the Kislyak-Flynn phone call in hand – tested Flynn’s memory of the conversation and found his recollections incomplete. Gotcha – lying to the FBI!

Under mounting media and political pressure, President Trump fired Flynn, apparently hoping that tossing Flynn overboard to the circling sharks would somehow calm the sharks down. Instead, blood in the water added to the frenzy.

Iran-Contra Comparison

Some prominent Democrats and liberals have compared Trump-connected contacts with Russians to President Richard Nixon's Watergate scandal or President Reagan's Iran-Contra Affair, an issue that I know a great deal about having helped expose it as a reporter for The Associated Press in the 1980s.

The key difference is that Iran-Contra was an unconstitutional effort by the Reagan administration to finance an illegal war against Nicaragua's Sandinista government in defiance of a congressional ban. The Trump-connected communications with Russians – to the degree they have occurred – appear to have been aimed at preventing a new and dangerous Cold War that could lead to a nuclear holocaust.

In other words, Iran-Contra was about enabling a paramilitary force to continue its brutal marauding inside a country that was no threat to the United States while the current "scandal" is about people trying to avoid hostilities between two nuclear superpowers, an existential threat that many mainstream and liberal pundits don't want to recognize.

Indeed, there is a troubling denial-ism about the risks of an accidental or intentional war with Russia as the U.S. media and much of Official Washington's establishment have lots of fun demonizing Russian President Vladimir Putin and jabbing the Russians by shoving NATO troops up to their borders and deploying anti-ballistic missiles in Eastern Europe. For some crazy reason, the Russians feel threatened.

False Narratives

This Russia-bashing and Russia-baiting have been accompanied by false narratives presented in the major U.S. newspapers, including The New York Times and The Washington Post, to justify increased tensions.

For instance, the Post's senior foreign affairs writer Karen DeYoung on Friday described the civil war in Ukraine this way: "That conflict began when Russia invaded and annexed Crimea in 2014, then backed separatists in eastern Ukraine in what has become a grinding war, despite a deal to end it, called the Minsk agreement, negotiated with Putin by the leaders of France and Germany."

But DeYoung's synopsis is simply not true. The crisis began in the fall of 2013 when Ukraine's elected President Viktor Yanukovich backed out of what he regarded as a costly and unacceptable association agreement with the European Union, a move which prompted protests by Ukrainians in Kiev's Maidan square.

The Obama administration's State Department, U.S. neocon politicians such as Sen. John McCain, and various U.S.-backed "non-governmental organizations" then stoked those protests against Yanukovich, which grew violent as trained ultra-

nationalist and neo-Nazi street fighters poured in from western Ukraine.

In early 2014, a coup to overthrow the democratically elected Yanukovych took shape under the guidance of U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt who were caught in a phone call in late January or early February 2014 conspiring to impose new leadership inside Ukraine.

Nuland disparaged a less extreme strategy favored by European diplomats with the pithy remark: "Fuck the E.U." and went on to declare "Yats is the guy," favoring Arseniy Yatsenyuk as the new leader. Nuland then pondered how to "glue this thing" while Pyatt ruminated about how to "midwife this thing."

On Feb. 20, 2014, a mysterious sniper apparently firing from a building controlled by the ultranationalist Right Sektor killed both police and protesters, setting off a day of violence that left about 70 people dead including more than a dozen police.

The next day, three European governments struck a deal with Yanukovych in which he agreed to early elections and accepted reduced powers. But that political settlement wasn't enough for the U.S.-backed militants who stormed government buildings on Feb. 22, forcing Yanukovych and his officials to flee for their lives.

Instead of standing by the Feb. 21 agreement, which the European nations had "guaranteed," Nuland pushed for and got U.S. allies to accept the new post-coup regime as "legitimate," with Yatsenyuk becoming prime minister and several top government posts given to the ultranationalists and neo-Nazis.

Spreading Violence

In the ensuing days, the right-wing violence spread beyond Kiev, prompting Crimea's legislature to propose secession from Ukraine and readmission to Russia, whose relationship to the peninsula dated back to Catherine the Great.

Crimea scheduled a referendum that was opposed by the new regime in Kiev. Russian troops did not "invade" Crimea because some 20,000 were already stationed there as part of a basing agreement at the Black Sea port of Sevastopol. The Russians did provide security for the referendum but there was no evidence of intimidation as the citizens of Crimea voted by 96 percent to leave Ukraine and rejoin Russia, a move that Putin and the Russian duma accepted.

Eastern Ukrainians tried to follow Crimea's lead with their own referendum, but Putin and Russia rejected their appeals to secede. However, when the Kiev regime

launched an “Anti-Terrorism Operation” against the so-called Donbass region – spearheaded by ultra-nationalist and neo-Nazi militias – Russia provided military assistance so these ethnic Russians would not be annihilated.

Karen DeYoung also framed the Minsk agreement as if it were imposed on Putin when he was one of its principal proponents and architects, winning its approval in early 2015 at a time when the Ukrainian military was facing battlefield reversals.

But Assistant Secretary Nuland, working with Prime Minister Yatsenyuk and the Ukrainian parliament, sabotaged the agreement by requiring the Donbass rebels to first surrender which they were unwilling to do, having no faith in the sincerity of the Kiev regime to live up to its commitment to grant limited autonomy to the Donbass.

In other words, Kiev inserted a poison pill to prevent a peaceful resolution, but the Western media and governments always blame the Minsk failure on Putin.

If Karen DeYoung wanted to boil all this history down to one paragraph, it might go: “The Ukraine conflict began when U.S. officials supported the violent overthrow of elected President Viktor Yanukovich, prompting Crimea to rejoin Russia and causing ethnic Russians in the east to rise up against the U.S.-backed coup regime in Kiev, which then sought to crush the rebellion. The Kiev regime later torpedoed a peace deal that had been hammered out by Russian, Ukrainian and European negotiators in Minsk.”

But such a summary would not have the desired propaganda effect on the American people. It would not present the U.S.-backed side as the “white hats” and the pro-Russia side as the “black hats.”

The simple truth is that the story of Ukraine is far more complex and multi-sided than The Washington Post, The New York Times and most mainstream U.S. news outlets want to admit. They simply start the clock at the point of Crimea’s rejection of the post-coup regime and distort those facts to present the situation simply as a “Russian invasion.”

A Whipped-Up Hysteria

The major media’s distortion is so egregious that you could call it a lie, but it is a lie that has proved very useful in whipping up the current anti-Russian hysteria that is sweeping Official Washington and that has given birth to a New Cold War, now accompanied by a New McCarthyism that deems anyone who doesn’t accept the “groupthink” a “Russian apologist” or a “Moscow stooge.”

Since last November’s election, this New McCarthyism has merged with hatred

toward Donald Trump, especially after the outgoing Obama administration lodged unproven accusations that Russia undercut Hillary Clinton's campaign by hacking into the emails of the Democratic National Committee and those of her campaign chairman John Podesta – and slipped that information to WikiLeaks.

Those emails showed how the DNC undercut the rival campaign of Sen. Bernie Sanders and revealed the contents of Clinton's speeches to Wall Street banks as well as pay-to-play aspects of the Clinton Foundation, information that Clinton wanted to keep from the voters.

But no one thought the emails were a major factor in the Clinton-Trump race; indeed, Clinton blamed her stunning defeat on FBI Director James Comey's last-minute decision to reopen and then re-close his investigation into security concerns about her use of a private email server as Secretary of State.

But the script on how Clinton lost was flipped during the Trump transition as President Obama's intelligence agencies floated the Russia-hacked-the-election scenario although presenting no public evidence to support the claims. WikiLeaks representatives also denied getting the material from Russia, suggesting instead that it was leaked by two different American insiders.

A Ministry of Truth

Still, during the post-election period, the anti-Russian hysteria continued to build. In November, The Washington Post highlighted claims by an anonymous group called PropOrNot accusing some 200 Web sites, including Consortiumnews.com and other major independent media outlets, of disseminating Russian "propaganda."

The New York Times joined in the frenzy by calling for leading technology companies to marginalize Web sites that are deemed to be publishing "fake news," a vague term that was applied not just to intentionally false stories but to information that questioned official narratives, no matter how dubious those narratives were. The New McCarthyism was morphing into a New Orwellianism.

The movement toward a Ministry of Truth gained further momentum in December when Congress passed and President Obama signed a military authorization bill that included a new \$160 million bureaucracy to identify and counter alleged "Russian propaganda."

The anger of Democrats and liberals toward President Trump in his first month has added more fuel to the Russia-bashing with some Democrats and liberals seeing it as a possible route toward neutralizing or impeaching Trump. Thus, the calls for a full-scale investigation with subpoena power to demand documents and compel testimony.

While the idea of getting to the full truth has a superficial appeal, it also carries dangers of launching a witch hunt that would drag American citizens before inquisitors asking about any contacts – no matter how innocuous – with Russians.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, HUAC also claimed that all it wanted was the truth about whether some Americans were allied with or sympathetic to Moscow. Sen. Joe McCarthy offered a similar rationale when he was trying to root out “disloyal” Americans with the question, “are you now or have you ever been a communist?”

That Democrats and liberals who hold the McCarthy era in understandable disdain would now seek to rekindle something similar reeks of rank opportunism and gross hypocrisy – doing whatever it takes to “get Trump” and build an activist movement that can revive the Democratic Party’s flagging political hopes.

But this particular opportunism and hypocrisy also carries with it the prospect of blindly ramping up tensions with Russia, diverting more taxpayer money into the Military-Industrial Complex and conceivably sparking – whether planned or unplanned – a nuclear Armageddon that could eliminate life on the planet. Perhaps this anti-Trump strategy should be rethought.

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](#)).

Immigrant Round-ups Stir Fears

During last fall’s campaign, Donald Trump vowed to get rid of the “bad hombres” among the 11 million undocumented people in the U.S., but recent raids appear far less targeted, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

President Donald Trump is keeping his promise to go after undocumented people in the United States, with recent reports of sweeps by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (or ICE) sending waves of fear through the Latino and other immigrant communities in California, Texas and Arizona.

Trump had justified the need for such round-ups as necessary to get rid of “bad

hombres” but immigrant advocates say the raids are indiscriminate, rounding up as many undocumented people as possible.

“It is now clear the Trump Administration is not concerned with public safety,” said California State Senate President Pro Tempore Kevin De Leon. “They are only focused on ripping hard-working men, women, and children from their families and communities. Mass deportations will not make us safer, instead they will simply undermine our state’s economy.”

De Leon issued a statement critical of ICE actions on Feb. 10, saying he had been misled by ICE assurances that refugee advocates had exaggerated when they claimed that more than 100 people had been arrested in raids across Southern California a day earlier.

“I appreciate that ICE finally disclosed details about their recent raids, but stunned to learn that ICE’s public comments made [on Feb. 9] were blatantly false,” said De Leon, noting that ICE later confirmed that it had arrested 160 people.

De Leon, perhaps the most influential elected Latino official in the state of California, called on ICE to work more effectively with the communities of California that De Leon represents. “If you want to ensure ongoing safety of the public and law enforcement personnel, my recommendation is to drop the mass deportation threats roiling our communities and instead focus strictly on dangerous felons,” he said.

Among the groups most targeted for mass deportation are the undocumented day laborers and domestic workers who work the fields and clean the major hotels and the houses of the rich and famous.

Chris Newman is Legal Director for the National Day Laborer Organizing Network or NDLO, which represents tens of thousands of day laborers from coast to coast. I spoke with him earlier this month.

Dennis Bernstein: Could you talk about the concerns that NDLO now has, in terms of the unfolding, what we’ve seen already with these anti-immigrant directives, coming from the President of the United States and the mass sweeps that have followed?

Chris Newman: Well, it’s certainly far worse than we would have imagined, even days before the president was inaugurated. And I think that there’s no question that the Trump administration is trying to terrorize people, trying to terrorize immigrants, trying to terrorize the country, in an effort to try to assert legitimacy for the administration and to try to exercise executive authority.

I do think, again, they are going out of their way to conflate anxieties that people have about the economy, about terrorism, about globalization. They're doing their best to sort of bundle them all up. And the reality is that the real world implications for immigrants are quite dire. And, so, you are quite right. We are left in a position of reacting as the president appears to be making good on many of his campaign promises.

DB: Now, we've seen a couple of high profile cases of them demonstrating their resolve to intimidate and deport. Of course, here in the San Francisco Bay Area, where there was a case where ICE showed up at a daycare center, a medical center, and said they had the wrong address. They were looking for a rapist. But all the kids in the daycare center were terrorized.

We now have seen the arrest of a woman who was in the country 21 years, taken out, essentially, out of the arms of her family. Are you hearing more and more about intimidation, about things happening? Could you give us a sense of how that might be reverberating in the community that you represent?

CN: ... I think that you've put your finger right on it. These actions are a deliberate effort to intimidate and terrorize the community. One of the things I think is commonly misunderstood about the organized xenophobes, the people who are really the propelling force of the Trump campaign: their goal is to limit the foreign born, non-white population of the United States. And deportation is only a piece of how they hope to bring about that agenda. In fact, they want to bring about a far more sophisticated and nefarious plan to effectuate a reduction of the foreign-born, non-white population through attrition.

And so, the idea is to make life sufficiently miserable for immigrants, such that they voluntarily go home. The tipping line that people know about is the South deportation. And, also, such that people are deterred from coming to the United States. And within that context, and within that broader agenda that they have, deportation/criminal enforcement is just one tool. Their goal is to cut access to education, to jobs, to the means of survival, and also to instill fear. And within that context the act of showing courage and resistance contravenes the strategy.

You can look to the deportation of Guadalupe in Phoenix as an example of the brutality of the Trump policy. But you can also look to the way in which the community responded in Phoenix, and the courageous protests as a sign of resistance. And it will also be the new normal. ...

CN: I think that ICE should be called to task for their lack of transparency in all of these enforcement operations. ... ICE public information officers – or spokespeople – have been intentionally obfuscating, precisely to try to create,

I think, a sense of chaos, confusion, and unrest. And, to me, it seems totally unacceptable that, number one, ICE refuses to provide details of enforcement operations. And, number two, that that seems to be an acceptable answer from the mainstream press.

I think ICE must be compelled to answer how many people were detained, and why and where. And, I think, reporters should not accept "No" for an answer. It ... cannot be the new normal that the largest federal interior law enforcement agency does not provide basic information about raids. Particularly when we have a president who has intentionally engaged in a strategy of... we'll call it the disruption, or the intentional, sort of, sowing of chaos, that they've been involved in. Yes, so I don't have details, but ICE should be providing them, forthwith.

DB: Now, let me ask you, on that policy: is this now a pattern in practice, of not saying who's being arrested, why they're being arrested, or where they're taken? Is this a new intensification? How would you describe that?

CN: I would describe it as sort of an unrestrained tendency that's been with the agency since its inception. As you know, we've discussed on your program before, ICE was involved in intentional dishonesty in the rolling out of the so-called Secure Communities Program, which coerced local police to become front line law enforcement agencies.

And this is just not my view, as an attorney with a point of view as an advocate. I mean, this was the view of members of Congress and federal judges starting with a freedom of information request. ICE was intentionally involved in a deliberate strategy of disinformation about that program. ... And for many years, organizations like mine and others have raised questions about whether ICE is, in fact, a rogue law enforcement agency.

But, now, you have a rogue law enforcement agency essentially presided over by a rogue president. And so, I think that the types of tactics of propaganda and, again, misinformation that ICE has been involved in, are now currently, unrestrained.

And so, I do think it is incumbent upon the concerned community members to do, and to look at what Phoenix did, and look at what Puente, in Arizona, did in response to Guadalupe's raid. And we need to model and replicate that type of courage and response.

But, I also think that members of the press are going to have to be more vigilant at holding ICE accountable for the dissembling way in which they're sowing confusion about these enforcement operations.

DB: And, just finally, are you all taking precautions? Are there more meetings? Are there more informational gatherings? Are people being presented with more ways of protecting themselves? How do, you know, to be alert, what to do when they arrive. Is that part of what's going on now in terms of the defense against this?

CN: Without a doubt. I mean, we have one of the most, or the most, xenophobic senator is now the top cop in the United States, in Jeff Sessions, as the new Attorney General. And [it] is now, I think, imperative that people... when you have somebody who has sort of forecasted his intent to roll back civil rights protections that have been won over the last several decades, it's imperative that people... take it upon themselves, not just to prepare to defend themselves, but also to defend constitutional values that have been fought for and won over generations.

And so, yes, indeed, across the country there are high-level "know your rights" informational seminars, such that immigrants are being prepared to defend themselves and to defend the constitution.

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.

Democrats, Liberals Catch McCarthyistic Fever

Exclusive: Democrats and liberals are so angry about President Trump that they are turning to McCarthyistic tactics without regard to basic fairness or the need to avoid a costly and dangerous New Cold War, notes Daniel Lazare.

By Daniel Lazare

America is a strange place and the blow-up over Mike Flynn's conversation with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak is making it even stranger. Liberals are sounding like conservatives, and conservatives like liberals.

Rep. Steve King, an Iowa Republican who serves on the House Judiciary Committee, made perfect sense when he remarked on CNN concerning the intelligence leaks that are now turning into a flood: "We've got to have some facts to work with here. And what troubles me is that ... there are people within the intelligence community that disagree with President Trump [and] that don't want to see his

administration succeed. ... General Flynn has been subject to a political assassination here regardless of what he did or didn't say to President Trump or Vice President Pence."

Quite right. Breitbart News' Joel B. Pollak sounded similarly sensible in asking "whether our nation's intelligence services were involved in what amounts to political espionage against the newly-elected government." So did right-wing talk-show host Michael Savage in describing "the demonization of Putin, Russia, and Flynn" on the part of "neocons, the intel community, and Democrats who want constant antagonism with Russia."

Considering the craziness we usually get from such sources, it was all disconcertingly ... sane. On the liberal side, however, the hysteria has been non-stop. In full prosecutorial mode, *The New Yorker's* Ryan Lizza demanded to know:

"Did Trump instruct Flynn to discuss a potential easing of sanctions with Russia? Did Flynn update Trump on his calls with the Russian Ambassador? Did Trump know that Flynn lied to Pence about those contacts? What did the White House counsel do with the information that he received from [Acting Attorney General Sally] Yates about Flynn being vulnerable to blackmail?"

At *The Nation*, Joan Walsh was thrilled to hear the media asking "the old Watergate question about what the president knew and when."

"We've said it before and we'll say it again," declared Bill Moyers and Michael Winship at Alternet: "there MUST be an investigation by an independent, bipartisan commission of Russia's ties to Donald Trump and his associates and that nation's interference in our elections."

At *The Intercept*, the perennially self-righteous Glenn Greenwald said intelligence agents are "wholly justified" in leaking inside information because "[a]ny leak that results in the exposure of high-level wrongdoing – as this one did – should be praised, not scorned and punished."

Over the Top

Finally, there was *The New York Times*, which, in Thursday's lead editorial, compared the Flynn contretemps to Watergate and Iran-Contra, expressed "shock and incredulity that members of Mr. Trump's campaign and inner circle were in repeated contact with Russian intelligence officials," and called for a congressional investigation into whether the White House has been taken over by Moscow:

"Coming on top of credible information from America's intelligence agencies that Russia tried to destabilize and influence the 2016 presidential campaign, these

latest revelations are more than sufficient reason for Congress to investigate what Moscow has been up to and whether people at the highest levels of the United States government have aided and abetted the interests of a nation that has tried to thwart American foreign policy since the Cold War.”

High-level wrongdoing! Colluding with the enemy! Shock and incredulity! It’s enough to make a concerned citizen reach for the nearest bottle of 151-proof rum. But it’s all nonsense. Liberals are working themselves into a crisis mode on the basis of zero evidence.

Let’s begin with what *The Nation’s* Joan Walsh regards as the key issue: what do we know and when did we know it?

Well, we know that on Thursday, Dec. 29, Barack Obama expelled 35 suspected Russian intelligence operatives for allegedly interfering with the presidential election and imposed sanctions on Russia’s two leading intelligence services. We also know that Flynn had called the Russian ambassador a day earlier to discuss sanctions in general and that although he “never made explicit promises of sanctions relief,” according to unnamed government officials cited by the *Times*, he “appeared to leave the impression it would be possible.”

In *Times*-speak, “appeared to leave the impression” means that the paper is unable to pin down anything that Flynn did that was specifically wrong, but still believes that the conversation was somehow unseemly.

According to *The Washington Post*, the key phone call came after Obama’s Dec. 29 decision to expel the Russian diplomats when Kislyak reached Flynn by phone while the national security advisor-designate and his wife were vacationing at a beachside resort in the Dominican Republic. “As a veteran intelligence officer,” *The Post* said, “...Flynn must have known that a call with a Russian official in Washington would be intercepted by the U.S. government, pored over by FBI analysts and possibly even shared with the White House.”

In any event, whatever he told Kislyak must have been reassuring since Vladimir Putin announced later that day that he would not engage in a tit-for-tat retaliation by expelling U.S. diplomats.

Getting Payback

Irritated by such maturity, the American “state security organs,” as the KGB and other Soviet intelligence services were once called, pounced. Having intercepted the Russian ambassador’s phone call, the FBI relayed the contents to Obama’s Deputy Attorney General Sally Yates, who authorized it to interrogate Flynn about the conversation. Flynn may have lied or not given a complete account or forgotten some of the details about what he and Kislyak discussed. He also may

have given a similarly incomplete account to Vice President Mike Pence, which apparently upset Pence and led to Flynn being tossed overboard.

But if Trump and his team thought that would satisfy the sharks, they were wrong. The press went into a feeding frenzy. But the substance of the complaint against Flynn adds up to very little.

As Obama administration holdovers in the Justice Department searched for a legal justification with which to accuse Flynn of wrongdoing, the only thing they could come up with was the Logan Act of 1799 forbidding private citizens from negotiating with a foreign government that is in dispute with the United States. Adopted during the presidency of John Adams, the law was prompted by Dr. George Logan's unauthorized negotiations with France, contacts that were praised by the Jeffersonians but anathema to the Federalists.

But invoking the Logan Act in any instance is a stretch, much less this one. It has never been used to prosecute anyone; it has never been tested in a court of law; and its constitutionality couldn't be more questionable. Moreover, if the law is dubious when used to threaten a private citizen engaged in unauthorized diplomacy, then using it to go after a designated official of an incoming presidential administration that has been duly elected is many times more so.

As journalist Robert Parry points out, the Logan Act has mainly been "exploited in a McCarthyistic fashion to bait or discredit peace advocates" such as Jesse Jackson for visiting Cuba or House Speaker Jim Wright for trying to end the Contra war in Nicaragua. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Trump Caves on Flynn's Resignation.](#)"]

Of course, the Obama holdovers at Justice also said that Flynn might be vulnerable to Russian blackmail. But if Flynn assumed that the U.S. intelligence was listening in, then the Russians probably did also, which means that both sides knew that there was no secret dirt to be used against him.

In other words, there's no there there. Yet anti-Trump liberals are trying to convince the public that it's all "worse than Watergate."

Strangelovian Flynn

This is not to make Flynn into a martyr of some sort. To the contrary, the man is every bit as nutty as critics say. [*The Field of Fight: How to Win the Global War Against Radical Islam and Its Allies*](#), the book he co-wrote last year with neocon "intellectual" Michael Ledeen, is a paranoid fantasy about Muslim extremists ganging up with North Korea, Russia, China, Cuba and Venezuela to bring down the United States and Israel.

Flynn's appearance at a Feb. 7 White House press briefing in which he announced that "we are officially putting Iran on notice" over a missile test – and then stalked off without taking a single question – was so bizarre as to be positively Strangelovian.

But whether Flynn is a criminal is another matter. As Ronn Blitzer observed in a smart article at Lawnewz.com: "Between the details of the communications being unclear and the complete lack of historical guidance for prosecutors to work off of, chances are slim that he'll face any legal repercussions."

Lying to the FBI is another matter, of course. But grilling someone about whether he violated a moldy old law that should have been repealed centuries ago is the equivalent of giving someone the third degree over whether he washed his hands after using a public restroom. It raises questions about civil liberties and prosecutorial abuse that used to concern liberals – before, that is, they went bonkers over Russia.

Moreover, taking a call from the Russian ambassador is not only legal but, with the inauguration only three weeks away, precisely what one would expect a newly designated national security advisor to do. If the call indeed happened while Flynn was on vacation – and hence without the usual staff support – it's not that surprising that he might not have had total recall of what was discussed. For FBI agents to question him weeks later and test his memory against their transcript of the conversation seems closer to entrapment than a fair-minded inquiry.

The whole area is a gray zone regarding what is and isn't proper for a candidate or an incoming administration to do. Eight years earlier, Barack Obama reached out to foreign leaders to discuss policy changes before he was even elected.

In July 2008, candidate Obama visited Paris to confer with then-French President Nicolas Sarkozy about Israel, Iraq, Afghanistan and NATO. In late November – after the election, that is, but before the oath of office – he telephoned Afghan President Hamid Karzai to discuss how his country might achieve greater stability.

Yet as Robert Charles notes at the conservative Townhall.com website, no one thought to mention the Logan Act or accuse Obama of overstepping his bounds by engaging in private diplomacy.

As to whether it was Trump who instructed Flynn to talk to the Russian ambassador – what Politico calls "the key question" and what *Times* columnist Gail Collins says would be "super-illegal" if true – that is also standard operating procedure.

Poor Donald Trump is getting it from both sides, from those who claim that he was unprepared for his new responsibilities (which he was) and from those who claim that he was too “pro-active” in reaching out to key international players before taking office.

The Crime of Peace

As to Glenn Greenwald’s charge that what Flynn did was not only illegal but wrong, all one can say is: what on earth is so terrible about trying to reduce U.S.-Russian tensions? Of all the things that Trump said on the campaign trail, one of the few that was not completely stupid was his call for better relations with Moscow.

After all, Obama had gotten himself into a serious pickle by the end of his administration in the “intermarium” between the Baltic and the Black Sea. This is where Obama found himself beholden to dangerous nationalist provocateurs from Estonia to Ukraine, where a major NATO arms build-up was making observers increasingly nervous and where serious fighting is now underway. But while one would think that liberals would approve of attempts to defuse a dangerous confrontation, Flynn is under assault for merely giving it a try.

(And what about Greenwald’s usual concern about intrusive electronic surveillance? Isn’t the Flynn case a classic example of law-enforcement agencies using powers to entrap an individual into a possible criminal violation by seeing if his recollection diverges from the official transcript of a wire-tapped conversation?)

Finally there is the *New York Times* editorial, a farrago of half-truths and unsubstantiated assertions. For instance:

–No matter how many times the “paper of record” insists that “Russia tried to destabilize and influence the 2016 presidential campaign,” **it** should realize that saying something doesn’t make it so. In fact, the Director of National Intelligence’s Jan. 6 report on the alleged hacking was so skimpy that even the *Times* conceded that it “contained no information about how the agencies had collected their data or had come to their conclusions” and was therefore “bound to be attacked by skeptics.”

–The charge of “repeated contact with Russian intelligence officials” is similarly evidence-free. The *Times* made the charge in a front-page exposé on Tuesday that was heavy on innuendo but short on facts. It said that Trump associates had “repeated contacts with senior Russian intelligence officials” without saying what those contacts were or whether the individuals in question were even aware of whom they were talking to. It added, moreover, that there was

“no evidence of ... cooperation” with Russian intelligence and that it was “unclear whether the conversations had anything to do with Mr. Trump himself.” There’s no there there as well.

–As for aiding and abetting “a nation that has tried to thwart American foreign policy since the Cold War,” all one can say is that the *Times* is engaging in classic McCarthyism by crying treason with zero data to back it up.

Opportunism and Confusion

So, what’s going on? The simple answer is that Democrats are seizing on Russia because it’s an easy target in a capital city where war fever is already rising precipitously. Little thought seems to have been given to where this hysteria might lead. What if Dems get their way by forcing the administration to adopt a tougher policy on Russia? What if something horrendous occurs as a consequence such as a real live shooting exchange between U.S. and Russian troops? Will that make Democrats happy? Is that really what they want?

The truth is that America is in disarray not only politically but ideologically. Once Sen. Bernie Sanders dropped out of the race last summer, voters were faced with a choice between two right-of-center candidates, one (Hillary Clinton) seemingly bent on a pro-war policy regardless of the consequences and another (Donald Trump) who uttered isolationist inanities but nonetheless seemed to sense that a course change was in order with regard to Russia, Syria, and perhaps one or two other hot spots.

Since the election, both parties have responded by going even farther to the right, Trump by surrounding himself with billionaires and ultra-right fanatics and the Democrats by trying to out-hawk the GOP.

Sanity is in such short supply that the voices of reason now belong to Republicans like Devin Nunes, chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, who told the *Washington Post*, “The big problem I see here is that you have an American citizen who had his phone calls recorded,” or House Speaker Paul Ryan who says that reaching out to the Russian ambassador was “entirely appropriate.”

Even Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Kentucky, seems oddly rational in indicating that he will block legislation seeking to prevent Trump from rolling back anti-Russian sanctions.

All in all, it’s the worst Democratic performance since the *Washington Post* complained in 1901 that Teddy Roosevelt had “fanned the flames of negro aspiration” by inviting Booker T. Washington to dine at the White House. What’s the point of an opposition when it’s even more irresponsible than the party in power?

As Phil Ochs sang about unprincipled liberals back in the 1960s:

Once I was young and impulsive

I wore every conceivable pin

Even went to the socialist meetings

Learned all the old union hymns

But I've grown older and wiser

And that's why I'm turning you in

So love me, love me, love me, I'm a liberal.

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