

Old Cold War Revives as Castro Dies

As the U.S. plows toward a New Cold War, remnants of the old one resurfaced with the death of Cuban leader Fidel Castro as the mainstream U.S. media flashed back to old Cold War rhetoric, says William Blum.

By William Blum

The most frequent comment I've read in the mainstream media concerning Fidel Castro's death is that he was a "dictator"; almost every heading bore that word. Since the 1959 revolution, the American mainstream media has routinely referred to Cuba as a dictatorship. But just what does Cuba do or lack that makes it a dictatorship?

No "free press"? Apart from the question of how free Western media is, if that's to be the standard, what would happen if Cuba announced that from now on anyone in the country could own any kind of media? How long would it be before CIA money – secret and unlimited CIA money financing all kinds of fronts in Cuba – would own or control almost all the media worth owning or controlling?

Is it "free elections" that Cuba lacks? They regularly have elections at municipal, regional and national levels. They do not have direct election of the president, but neither do Germany or the United Kingdom and many other countries. The Cuban president is chosen by the parliament, The National Assembly of People's Power. Money plays virtually no role in these elections; neither does party politics, including the Communist Party, since all candidates run as individuals.

Again, what is the standard by which Cuban elections are to be judged? Is it that they don't have private corporations to pour in a billion dollars? Most Americans, if they gave it any thought, might find it difficult to even imagine what a free and democratic election, without great concentrations of corporate money, would look like, or how it would operate. Would Ralph Nader finally be able to get on all 50 state ballots, take part in national television debates, and be able to match the two monopoly parties in media advertising? If that were the case, I think he'd probably win; which is why it's not the case.

Or perhaps what Cuba lacks is our marvelous "electoral college" system, where the presidential candidate with the most votes is not necessarily the winner. Did we need the latest example of this travesty of democracy to convince us to finally get rid of it? If we really think this system is a good example of democracy why don't we use it for local and state elections as well?

Is Cuba a dictatorship because it arrests dissidents? Many thousands of anti-war and other protesters have been arrested in the United States in recent years, as in every period in American history. During the Occupy Movement of five years ago more than 7,000 people were arrested, many beaten by police and mistreated while in custody. And remember: The United States is to the Cuban government like Al Qaeda is to Washington, only much more powerful and much closer; virtually without exception, Cuban dissidents have been financed by and aided in other ways by the United States.

Would Washington ignore a group of Americans receiving funds from Al Qaeda and engaging in repeated meetings with known members of that organization? In recent years the United States has arrested a great many people in the U.S. and abroad solely on the basis of alleged ties to Al Qaeda, with a lot less evidence to go by than Cuba has had with its dissidents' ties to the United States. Virtually all of Cuba's "political prisoners" are such dissidents.

While others may call Cuba's security policies dictatorship, I call it self-defense.

William Blum is an author, historian, and renowned critic of U.S. foreign policy. He is the author of *Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II* and *Rogue State: A Guide to the World's Only Superpower*, among others. [This article originally appeared at the Anti-Empire Report, <http://williamblum.org/> .]

Official Washington's 'Info-Wars'

Organs of Official Washington, such as the State Department and The Washington Post, are becoming unhinged over their weakening grip on the narratives that the people are supposed to believe, as William Blum explains.

By William Blum

On November 16, at a State Department press briefing, department spokesperson John Kirby was having one of his frequent adversarial dialogues with Gayane Chichakyan, a reporter for RT (Russia Today); this time concerning U.S. charges of Russia bombing hospitals in Syria and blocking the U.N. from delivering aid to the trapped population.

When Chichakyan asked for some detail about these charges, Kirby replied: "Why don't you ask your defense ministry?"

GC: Do you – can you give any specific information on when Russia or the Syrian Government blocked the UN from delivering aid? Just any specific information.

KIRBY: There hasn't been any aid delivered in the last month.

GC: And you believe it was blocked exclusively by Russia and the Syrian Government?

KIRBY: There's no question in our mind that the obstruction is coming from the regime and from Russia. No question at all.

...

MATTHEW LEE (Associated Press): Let me -- hold on, just let me say: Please be careful about saying "your defense minister" and things like that. I mean, she's a journalist just like the rest of us are, so it's -- she's asking pointed questions, but they're not –

KIRBY: From a state-owned -- from a state-owned –

LEE: But they're not –

KIRBY: From a state-owned outlet, Matt.

LEE: But they're not –

KIRBY: From a state-owned outlet that's not independent.

LEE: The questions that she's asking are not out of line.

KIRBY: I didn't say the questions were out of line.

.....

KIRBY: I'm sorry, but I'm not going to put Russia Today on the same level with the rest of you who are representing independent media outlets.

One has to wonder if State Department spokesperson Kirby knows that in 2011 Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, speaking about RT, declared: "The Russians have opened an English-language network. I've seen it in a few countries, and it is quite instructive."

I also wonder how Mr. Kirby deals with reporters from the BBC, a STATE-OWNED television and radio entity in the U.K., broadcasting in the U.S. and all around the world.

Or the state-owned Australian Broadcasting Corporation, described by Wikipedia as follows: "The corporation provides television, radio, online and mobile

services throughout metropolitan and regional Australia, as well as overseas ... and is well regarded for quality and reliability as well as for offering educational and cultural programming that the commercial sector would be unlikely to supply on its own.”

There’s also Radio Free Europe, Radio Free Asia, Radio Liberty (Central/Eastern Europe), and Radio Marti (Cuba); all (U.S.) state-owned, none “independent”, but all deemed worthy enough by the United States to feed to the world.

And let’s not forget what Americans have at home: PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) and NPR (National Public Radio), which would have a near-impossible time surviving without large federal government grants. How independent does this leave them? Has either broadcaster ever unequivocally opposed a modern American war? There’s good reason NPR has long been known as National Pentagon Radio. But it’s part of American media’s ideology to pretend that it doesn’t have any ideology.

As to the non-state American media ... There are about 1,400 daily newspapers in the United States. Can you name a single paper, or a single TV network, that was unequivocally opposed to the American wars carried out against Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan, Yugoslavia, Panama, Grenada, and Vietnam while they were happening, or shortly thereafter? Or even opposed to any two of these seven wars? How about one?

In 1968, six years into the Vietnam War, the *Boston Globe* (Feb. 18, 1968) surveyed the editorial positions of 39 leading U.S. papers concerning the war and found that “none advocated a pull-out.” Has the phrase “invasion of Vietnam” ever appeared in the U.S. mainstream media?

In 2003, leading cable station MSNBC took the much-admired Phil Donahue off the air because of his opposition to the calls for war in Iraq. Mr. Kirby would undoubtedly call MSNBC “independent.”

If the American mainstream media were officially state-controlled, would they look or sound significantly different when it comes to U.S. foreign policy?

New Cold War Propaganda

On Nov. 25, the *Washington Post* ran an article entitled: “Research ties ‘fake news’ to Russia.” It’s all about how sources in Russia are flooding American media and the Internet with phony stories designed as “part of a broadly effective strategy of sowing distrust in U.S. democracy and its leaders.”

“The sophistication of the Russian tactics,” the article says, “may complicate efforts by Facebook and Google to crack down on ‘fake news’.”

The *Post* states that the Russian tactics included “penetrating the computers of election officials in several states and releasing troves of hacked emails that embarrassed Clinton in the final months of her campaign.” (Heretofore this had been credited to Wikileaks.)

The story is simply bursting with anti-Russian references:

- –An online magazine header – “Trolling for Trump: How Russia Is Trying to Destroy Our Democracy.”
- –“the startling reach and effectiveness of Russian propaganda campaigns.”
- –“more than 200 websites as routine peddlers of Russian propaganda during the election season.”
- –“stories planted or promoted by the disinformation campaign were viewed more than 213 million times.”
- –“The Russian campaign during this election season ... worked by harnessing the online world’s fascination with ‘buzzy’ content that is surprising and emotionally potent, and tracks with popular conspiracy theories about how secret forces dictate world events.”
- –“Russian-backed phony news to outcompete traditional news organizations for audience”
- –“They use our technologies and values against us to sow doubt. It’s starting to undermine our democratic system.”
- –“Russian propaganda operations also worked to promote the ‘Brexit’ departure of Britain from the European Union.”
- –“Some of these stories originated with RT and Sputnik, state-funded Russian information services that mimic the style and tone of independent news organizations yet sometimes include false and misleading stories in their reports.”
- –“a variety of other false stories – fake reports of a coup launched at Incirlik Air Base in Turkey and stories about how the United States was going to conduct a military attack and blame it on Russia”

A former U.S. ambassador to Russia, Michael McFaul, is quoted saying he was “struck by the overt support that Sputnik expressed for Trump during the campaign, even using the #CrookedHillary hashtag pushed by the candidate.” McFaul said Russian propaganda typically is aimed at weakening opponents and critics.

“They don’t try to win the argument. It’s to make everything seem relative. It’s kind of an appeal to cynicism.” [Cynicism? Heavens! What will those Moscow fascists/communists think of next?]

The *Post* did, however, include the following: “RT disputed the findings of the researchers in an e-mail on Friday, saying it played no role in producing or

amplifying any fake news stories related to the U.S. election.” RT was quoted: “It is the height of irony that an article about ‘fake news’ is built on false, unsubstantiated claims. RT adamantly rejects any and all claims and insinuations that the network has originated even a single ‘fake story’ related to the US election.”

It must be noted that the *Washington Post* article fails to provide a single example showing how the actual facts of a specific news event were rewritten or distorted by a Russian agency to produce a news event with a contrary political message.

What then lies behind such blatant anti-Russian propaganda? In the new Cold War such a question requires no answer. The new Cold War by definition exists to discredit Russia simply because it stands in the way of American world domination. In the new Cold War, the political spectrum in the mainstream media runs the gamut from A to B.

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Trump Ponders Petraeus for Senior Job

Exclusive: President-elect Trump’s promise to “drain the swamp” of Washington seems forgotten – like so many political promises – as he meets with swamp creatures, such as disgraced Gen. David Petraeus, says ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

The news that President-elect Donald Trump called in disgraced retired Gen. David Petraeus for a job interview as possible Secretary of State tests whether Trump’s experience in hosting “The Celebrity Apprentice” honed his skills for spotting an incompetent phony or not.

Does Trump need more data than the continuing bedlam in Iraq and Afghanistan to understand that one can earn a Princeton PhD by writing erudite-sounding drivel about “counterinsurgency” and still flunk war? Granted, the shambles in which Petraeus left Iraq and Afghanistan were probably more a result of his

overweening careerism and political ambition than his misapplication of military strategy. But does that make it any more excusable?

In 2007, Adm. William Fallon, commander of CENTCOM with four decades of active-duty experience behind him, quickly took the measure of Petraeus, who was one of his subordinates while implementing a “surge” of over 30,000 U.S. troops into Iraq.

Several sources reported that Fallon was sickened by Petraeus’s unctuous pandering to ingratiate himself. Fallon is said to have been so turned off by all the accolades in the flowery introduction given him by Petraeus that he called him to his face “an ass-kissing little chickenshit,” adding, “I hate people like that.” Sadly, Petraeus’s sycophancy is not uncommon among general officers. Uncommon was Fallon’s outspoken candor.

The past decade has shown that obsequiousness to those above him and callousness toward others are two of Petraeus’s most notable character traits. They go along with his lack of military acumen and his dishonesty as revealed in his lying to the FBI about handing over top-secret notebooks to his biographer/lover, an “indiscretion” that would have landed a less well-connected person in jail but instead got him only a mild slap on the wrist (via a misdemeanor guilty plea).

Indeed, Petraeus, the epitome of a “political general,” represents some of the slimiest depths of the Washington “swamp” that President-elect Trump has vowed to drain. Petraeus cares desperately about the feelings of his fellow elites but shows shocking disdain for the suffering of other human beings who are not so important.

In early 2011 in Afghanistan, Petraeus shocked aides to then-President Hamid Karzai after many children were burned to death in a “coalition” attack in northeastern Afghanistan by suggesting that Afghan parents may have burned their own children to exaggerate their claims of civilian casualties and discredit the U.S., reported The Washington Post, citing two participants at the meeting.

“Killing 60 people, and then blaming the killing on those same people, rather than apologizing for any deaths? This is inhuman,” one Afghan official said. “This is a really terrible situation.”

Yet, on other occasions, the politically savvy Petraeus can be a paragon of sensitivity – like when he is in danger of getting crosswise with the Israel Lobby.

Never did Petraeus’s fawning shine through with more brilliance, than when an (unintentionally disclosed) email exchange showed him groveling before arch-neocon Max Boot, beseeching Boot’s help in fending off charges that Petraeus was

“anti-Israel” because his prepared testimony to a congressional committee included the no-brainer observations that Israeli-Palestinian hostility presents “distinct challenges to our ability to advance our interests” and that “this conflict foments anti-American sentiment, due to a perception of U.S. favoritism for Israel. ... Meanwhile, al-Qaeda and other militant groups exploit that anger to mobilize support.”

So, telling the truth (perhaps accidentally in prepared testimony) made Petraeus squirm with fear about offending the powerful Israel Lobby, but he apparently didn't hesitate to lie to FBI agents when he was caught in a tight spot for sharing highly sensitive intelligence with Paula Broadwell, his mistress/biographer. But, again, Petraeus realized that it helps to have influential friends. A court gave him a slap on the wrist with a sentence of two years probation and a fine of \$100,000 – which is less than he usually makes for a single speaking engagement.

Military Incompetent Without Parallel

And, if President-elect Trump isn't repulsed by the stench of hypocrisy – if he ignores Petraeus's reckless handling of classified material after Trump lambasted Hillary Clinton for her own careless behavior in that regard – there is also the grim truth behind Petraeus's glitzy image.

As a military strategist or even a trainer of troops, Petraeus has been an unparalleled disaster. Yes, the corporate media always runs interference for Official Washington's favorite general. But that does not equate with genuine success.

The Iraq “surge,” which Petraeus oversaw, was misrepresented in the corporate media as a huge victory – because it was credited with a brief dip in the level of violence at the cost of some 1,000 American lives (and those of many more Iraqis) – but the “surge” failed its principal goal of buying time to heal the rift between Shiites and Sunnis, a division that ultimately led to the emergence of the Islamic State (or ISIS).

Then, in early 2014, the crackerjack Iraqi troops whom Petraeus bragged about training ran away from Mosul, leaving their modern U.S.-provided weapons behind for the Islamic State's jihadists to play with.

In part because of that collapse – with Iraqi forces only now beginning to chip away at ISIS control of Mosul – the Obama administration was dragged into another Mideast war, spilling across Iraq and Syria and adding to the droves of refugees pouring into Europe, a crisis that is now destabilizing the European Union.

You might have thought that the combination of military failures and scandalous behavior would have ended David Petraeus's "government service," but he has never lost his skill at putting his finger to the wind.

During the presidential campaign, the windsock Petraeus was circumspect, which was understandable given the uncertainty regarding which way the wind was blowing.

However, on Sept. 1, 2015, amid calls from the mainstream U.S. media and establishment think tanks for President Obama to escalate the U.S. proxy war to overthrow the Syrian government, Petraeus spoke out in favor of giving more weapons to "moderate" Syrian rebels, despite the widespread recognition that U.S.-supplied guns and rockets were ending up in the hands of Al Qaeda's Nusra Front.

The new harebrained scheme – favored by Petraeus and other neocons – fantasized about Al Qaeda possibly joining the fight against the Islamic State, although ISIS sprang from Al Qaeda and splintered largely over tactical issues, such as how quickly to declare a jihadist state, not over fundamental fundamentalist goals.

But more miscalculations in the Middle East would be right up Petraeus's alley. He played an important role in facilitating the emergence of the Islamic State by his too-clever-by-half policy of co-opting some Sunni tribes with promises of shared power in Baghdad and with lots of money, and then simply looking the other way as the U.S.-installed Shia government in Baghdad ditched the promises.

Surge? Or Splurge With Lives

The so-called "surges" of troops into Iraq and Afghanistan are particularly gross examples of the way American soldiers have been used as expendable pawns by ambitious generals like Petraeus and ambitious politicians like former Defense Secretary Robert Gates.

The problem is that overweening personal ambition can end up getting a lot of people killed. In the speciously glorified first "surge," President George W. Bush sent more than 30,000 additional troops into Iraq in early 2007. During the period of the "surge," about 1,000 U.S. troops died.

There was a similar American death toll during President Barack Obama's "surge" of another 30,000 troops into Afghanistan in early 2010, a shift toward a counterinsurgency strategy that had been pressed on Obama by Petraeus, Gates and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Despite the loss of those 1,000 additional U.S. soldiers, the counterinsurgency "surge" had little effect on the course of the Afghan War.

The bloody chaos that continues in Iraq today and in the never-ending war in Afghanistan was entirely predictable. Indeed, it was predicted by those of us able to spread some truth around via the Internet, while being blacklisted by the fawning corporate media, which cheered on the “surges” and their chief architect, David Petraeus.

But the truth is not something that thrives in either U.S. politics or media these days. Campaigning early this year in New Hampshire, then-presidential aspirant Jeb Bush gave a short partial-history lesson about his big brother’s attack on Iraq. Referring to the so-called Islamic State, Bush said, “ISIS didn’t exist when my brother was president. ‘Al Qaeda in Iraq’ was wiped out ... the surge created a fragile but stable Iraq. ...”

Jeb Bush is partially right about ISIS; it didn’t exist when his brother George attacked Iraq. Indeed, Al Qaeda didn’t exist in Iraq until *after* the U.S. invasion when it emerged as “Al Qaeda in Iraq” and it wasn’t eliminated by the “surge.”

With huge sums of U.S. cash going to Sunni tribes in Anbar province, Al Qaeda in Iraq just pulled back and regrouped. Its top leaders came from the ranks of angry Sunnis who had been officers in Saddam Hussein’s army and – when the “surge” failed to achieve reconciliation between Sunnis and Shiites – the U.S. cash proved useful in expanding Sunni resistance to Baghdad’s Shiite government. From the failed “surge” strategy emerged the rebranded “Al Qaeda in Iraq,” the Islamic State.

So, despite Jeb Bush’s attempted spin, the reality is that his brother’s aggressive war in Iraq created both “Al Qaeda in Iraq” and its new incarnation, Islamic State.

The mess was made worse by subsequent U.S. strategy – beginning under Bush and expanding under President Obama – of supporting insurgents in Syria. By supplying money, guns and rockets to “moderate” Sunni rebels, that strategy has allowed the materiel to quickly fall into the hands of Al Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate, Nusra Front, and its jihadist allies, Ahrar al-Sham.

In other words, U.S. strategy – much of it guided by David Petraeus – continues to strengthen Al Qaeda, which – through its Nusra affiliate and its Islamic State spin-off – now occupies large swaths of Iraq and Syria.

Escaping a ‘Lost War’

All this is among the fateful consequences of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq 13 years ago – made worse (not better) by the “surge” in 2007, which contributed significantly to this decade’s Sunni-Shia violence. The real reason for Bush’s

“surge” seems to have been to buy time so that he and Vice President Dick Cheney could leave office without having a lost war on their résumés.

As author Steve Coll has put it, “The decision [to surge] at a minimum guaranteed that his [Bush’s] presidency would not end with a defeat in history’s eyes. By committing to the surge [the President] was certain to at least achieve a stalemate.”

According to Bob Woodward, Bush told key Republicans in late 2005 that he would not withdraw from Iraq, “even if Laura and [first-dog] Barney are the only ones supporting me.” Woodward made it clear that Bush was well aware in fall 2006 that the U.S. was losing.

Indeed, by fall 2006, it had become unavoidably clear that a new course had to be chosen and implemented in Iraq, and virtually every sober thinker seemed opposed to sending more troops.

The senior military, especially CENTCOM commander Gen. John Abizaid and his man on the ground in Iraq, Gen. George Casey, emphasized that sending still more U.S. troops to Iraq would simply reassure leading Iraqi politicians that they could relax and continue to take forever to get their act together.

Here, for example, is Gen. Abizaid’s answer at the Senate Armed Services Committee on Nov. 15, 2006, to Sen. John McCain, who had long been pressing vigorously for sending 20,000 more troops to Iraq:

“Senator McCain, I met with every divisional commander, General Casey, the corps commander, General Dempsey, we all talked together. And I said, ‘in your professional opinion, if we were to bring in more American troops now, does it add considerably to our ability to achieve success in Iraq?’ And they all said no.

“And the reason is because we want the Iraqis to do more. It is easy for the Iraqis to rely upon us do this work. I believe that more American forces prevent the Iraqis from doing more, from taking more responsibility for their own future.”

The U.S. ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, sent a classified cable to Washington warning that “proposals to send more U.S. forces to Iraq would not produce a long-term solution and would make our policy less, not more, sustainable,” according to a New York Times retrospective on the “surge” published on Aug. 31, 2008. Khalilzad was arguing, unsuccessfully, for authority to negotiate a political solution with the Iraqis.

There was also the establishment-heavy Iraq Study Group, created by Congress and

led by Republican stalwart James Baker and Democrat Lee Hamilton (with Robert Gates as a member although he quit before the review was completed). After months of policy review, the Iraq Study Group issued a final report on Dec. 6, 2006, that began with the ominous sentence "The situation in Iraq is grave and deteriorating."

It called for: "A change in the primary mission of U.S. Forces in Iraq that will enable the United States to begin to move its combat forces out of Iraq responsibly... By the first quarter of 2008...all combat brigades not necessary for force protection could be out of Iraq."

Rumsfeld's Known-Knowns

The little-understood story behind Bush's decision to catapult Robert Gates into the post of Defense Secretary was the astonishing fact that Donald Rumsfeld, of all people, was pulling a Robert McNamara; that is, he was going wobbly on a war based largely on his own hubris-laden, misguided advice.

In the fall of 2006 Rumsfeld was having a reality attack. In Rumsfeld-speak, he had come face to face with a "known known."

On Nov. 6, 2006, a day before the mid-term elections, Rumsfeld sent a memo to the White House, in which he acknowledged, "Clearly, what U.S. forces are currently doing in Iraq is not working well enough or fast enough." The rest of his memo sounded very much like the emerging troop-drawdown conclusions of the Iraq Study Group.

The first 80 percent of Rumsfeld's memo addressed "Illustrative Options," including his preferred – or "above the line" – options such as "an accelerated drawdown of U.S. bases ... to five by July 2007" and withdrawal of U.S. forces "from vulnerable positions – cities, patrolling, etc. ... so the Iraqis know they have to pull up their socks, step up and take responsibility for their country."

Finally, Rumsfeld had begun to listen to his generals and others who knew which end was up. The hurdle? Bush and Cheney were not about to follow Rumsfeld's example in "going wobbly." Like Robert McNamara at a similar juncture during Vietnam, Rumsfeld had to be let go before he caused a President to "lose a war."

Waiting in the wings, though, was Robert Gates, who had been CIA director under President George H. W. Bush, spent four years as president of Texas A&M, and had returned to the Washington stage as a member of the Iraq Study Group. While on the ISG, he evidenced no disagreement with its emerging conclusions – at least not until Bush asked him to become Secretary of Defense in early November 2006.

It was awkward. Right up to the week before the mid-term elections on Nov. 7,

2006, President Bush had insisted that he intended to keep Rumsfeld in place for the next two years. Suddenly, the President had to deal with Rumsfeld's apostasy on Iraq. Rumsfeld had let reality get to him, together with the very strong anti-surge protestations by all senior uniformed officers save one – the ambitious David Petraeus, who had jumped onboard for the “surge” escalation, which guaranteed another star on his lapel.

All Hail Petraeus

With the bemedaled Petraeus in the wings and guidance on strategy from arch-neocons, such as retired General Jack Keane and think-tank analyst Frederick Kagan, the White House completed the coup against the generals by replacing Rumsfeld with Gates and recalling Casey and Abizaid and elevating Petraeus.

Amid the mainstream media's hosannas for Petraeus and Gates, the significance of the shakeup was widely misunderstood, with key senators, including Sen. Hillary Clinton, buying the false narrative that the changes presaged a drawdown in the war rather than an escalation.

So relieved were the senators to be rid of the hated-but-feared Rumsfeld that the Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on Dec. 5, 2006, on Gates's nomination had the feel of a pajama party (I was there). Gates told them bedtime stories – and vowed to show “great deference to the judgment of generals.”

With unanimous Democratic support and only two conservative Republicans opposed, Gates was confirmed by the full Senate on Dec. 6, 2006.

On Jan. 10, 2007, Bush formally unveiled the bait-and-switch, announcing the “surge” of 30,000 additional troops, a mission that would be overseen by Gates and Petraeus. Bush did acknowledge that there would be considerable loss of life in the year ahead as U.S. troops were assigned to create enough stability for Iraq's Shiite and Sunni factions to reach an accommodation.

At least, he got the loss-of-life part right. Around 1,000 U.S. troops died during the “surge” along with many more Iraqis. But Bush, Cheney, Petraeus, and Gates apparently deemed that cost a small price to pay for enabling them to blame a successor administration for the inevitable withdrawal from America's failed war of aggression.

The gambit worked especially well for Gates and Petraeus. Amid glowing mainstream media press clippings about the “successful surge” and “victory at last” in Iraq, Gates was hailed as a new “wise man” and Petraeus was the military genius who pulled victory from the jaws of defeat. Their reputations were such that President Obama concluded that he had no choice but to keep them on, Gates as Defense Secretary and Petraeus as Obama's top general in the Middle

East.

Petraeus then oversaw the “surge” in Afghanistan and landed the job of CIA director, where Petraeus reportedly played a major role in arming up the Syrian rebels in pursuit of another “regime change,” this time in Syria.

Although Petraeus’s CIA tenure ended in disgrace in November 2012 when his dangerous liaison with Paula Broadwell was disclosed, his many allies in Official Washington’s powerful neocon community are now pushing him on President-elect Trump as the man to serve as Secretary of State.

Petraeus is known as a master of flattery, something that seemingly can turn Trump’s head. But the President-elect should have learned from his days hosting “The Celebrity Apprentice” that the winning contender should not be the one most adept at sucking up to the boss.

(Now, with the whole Middle East in turmoil, I find some relief in [this brief parody](#) by comedienne Connie Bryan of Petraeus’s performance in training Iraqi troops.)

Ray McGovern works with Tell the Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. He was an Army infantry/intelligence officer and then as a CIA analyst for a total of 30 years, from the administration of John Kennedy to that of George H. W. Bush. He is co-founder of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS).

Relying on Unreliable Syrian Sources

When the mainstream U.S. media reports on Syria, it relies heavily on pro-rebel activists, including members of the White Helmets who have supplied false or dubious claims at key junctures of the war, reports Gareth Porter for Alternet.

By Gareth Porter

The White Helmets, founded to rescue victims trapped under the rubble of buildings destroyed by Syrian and Russian bombing, have become a favorite source for Western news media covering a story on Russian-Syrian bombing. Portrayed as humanitarian heroes for over the past year and even nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize last summer, the White Helmets have been accorded unquestioned credibility by journalists covering the Syrian crisis.

Yet the White Helmets are hardly a non-political organization. [Funded heavily](#) by

the U.S. State Department and the British Foreign Office, the group operates only in areas in northern Syria controlled by an al Qaeda affiliate and their extremist allies—areas to which Western journalists have not had access.

Given that the White Helmets work under the authority of those who hold the real power in east Aleppo and other opposition-controlled zones, the Western media's reliance on this organization for information comes with serious risks of being manipulated.

The highly political role played by the White Helmets in relation to foreign press coverage was dramatically demonstrated after the attack on a Syrian Red Crescent truck convoy in the rebel held area of Urum al-Kubra, just west of Aleppo on September 19. The assault took place immediately after a ceasefire agreed to by Russia, the U.S. and the Syrian government was shattered by a deadly U.S. air attack on Syrian army forces battling ISIS around the city of Deir Ezzor on September 17.

The Obama administration assumed the attack was an airstrike and immediately blamed it on Russian or Syrian aircraft. An unidentified U.S. official told the New York Times that there was "a very high probability" that a Russian plane was near the area just before the attack, but the administration did not make public any evidence in support of that claim. In the days following the attack, news media coverage relied heavily on accounts provided by the White Helmets. The head of the organization in Aleppo, Ammar Al-Selmo, was offering them a personal on-the-scene account.

Selmo's version of the story turned out to be riddled with falsehoods; however, many journalists approached it without an ounce of skepticism, and have continued to rely on him for information on the ongoing battles in and around Aleppo.

Changing Stories

The first detail on which Selmo's testimony revealed itself as dishonest is his claim about where he was located at the moment the attack began. Selmo told Time Magazine the day after the attack that he was a kilometer or more away from the warehouse where the aid convoy trucks were parked at that point—presumably at the local White Helmet center in Urm al-Kubra. But Selmo changed his story in an interview with the Washington Post published September 24, stating he was "making tea in a building across the street" at that moment.

Even more dramatically, Selmo claimed at first that he saw the beginning of the attack. According to the story published by Time on September 21, Selmo said he was drinking tea on the balcony when the bombing began, and "he could see the

first barrel bombs falling from what he identified as a Syrian regime helicopter.”

But Selmo could not have seen a barrel bomb falling from a helicopter or anything else at that moment. In a video shot early the next morning, Selmo declared that the bombing had started at about 7:30pm. In later statements, the White Helmets put the time at 7:12pm. But sunset on September 19 was at 6:31pm, and by roughly 7pm, Aleppo was shrouded in complete darkness.

Someone evidently called Selmo’s attention to that problem after the Time story was published, because by the time he gave his account to the Washington Post, he had changed that part of the story as well. The Post reported his amended account as follows: “Stepping onto a balcony just after 7pm, when it was already past dusk, he said he listened to a helicopter swoop in and drop two barrel bombs on the convoy.”

In videos the White Helmets made the night of the attack, Selmo went even further, asserting on one segment of the video that four barrel bombs had been dropped and in another, that eight barrel bombs had been dropped. The idea that barrel bombs were used in the attack was immediately picked up by self-styled “media activists” on behalf of the opposition authorities in Aleppo the following morning, as the BBC reported. That theme was in line with an effort by opposition sources going back to 2012 to identify “barrel bombs” as uniquely destructive weapons, more reprehensible than conventional missiles.

Questionable Evidence

In a video the White Helmets produced the night of the attack, Selmo addresses viewers by pointing at the indentation of the supposed bomb blast. “You see the box of the barrel bomb?” he asks. But what is shown in the video is a rectangular indentation in the gravel or rubble that appears to be about a foot deep two feet wide and a little more than three feet long. He reaches under the surface and pulls out what look like a damaged shovel blade, based on its shape.

That scene clearly proves Selmo’s claim to have been completely false. Barrel bombs make very large round craters at least 25 feet wide and more than 10 feet deep, so the box-like indentation in the video bore no resemblance whatever to a barrel bomb crater.

Hussein Badawi, who is the local White Helmets director of Urum al-Kubra, is clearly lower than Selmo in the organization’s hierarchy. Badawi appeared briefly next to Selmo in one segment of the video made that night but remains silent, then disappeared. Nevertheless, Badawi directly contradicted Selmo’s claim that the first explosions that night were from barrel bombs. In a White

Helmets video that was translated from Arabic into English, Badawi described those first explosions not as airstrikes but as “four consecutive rockets” near the center of the Red Crescent compound at Urum al-Kubra.

No other visual evidence of a crater such as would have been created by a barrel bomb has come to light. In support of Selmo’s assertion, The Russian-based Conflict Intelligence Team, which is dedicated to refuting Russian government claims, could only cite the video frame of Selmo holding up that single piece of metal.

Bellingcat’s Fake News

The Bellingcat website, whose founder Eliot Higgins is a non-resident fellow of the militantly anti-Russian, State Department-funded Atlantic Council, and has no technical expertise on munitions, pointed to the same frame. Higgins claimed that the piece of metal came from a “crater.” He also cited a second photograph that he said showed a “repaired crater” in the road next to a burnt-out truck. But the area in the photograph that appeared to be covered with fresh dirt is clearly no more than three feet long and a bit more two feet wide—again far too small to be evidence of a barrel bomb explosion.

Selmo’s White Helmet team also distributed to Bellingcat and media outlets what appeared at first glance to be visual evidence of Syrian and Russian air attacks: the crumpled tailfin of a Russian OFAB-250 bomb, which can be seen under the boxes in a photograph taken inside a warehouse at the site. Bellingcat cited those photographs as clinching evidence of Russian use of that bomb in the attack on the aid convoy.

But that photographs of the OFAB tailfin is extremely problematic as evidence of an airstrike. If an OFAB-250 bomb had actually exploded at that point it would have left a crater that was much larger than the one shown in that photograph. The standard rule of thumb is that an OFAB-250, like other any other conventional bomb weighing 250kg would make a crater 24 to 36 feet wide and 10 or 12 feet deep. The magnitude of its crater is shown in a video of a Russian journalist standing in one after the battle for the Syrian city of Palmyra, which had been held by ISIS.

Furthermore, the wall in the photograph only a few feet from the supposed point of impact was clearly not affected by the bomb. That indicates that either no OFAB-250 was dropped in that spot or it was a dud. But the picture of the boxes surrounding the OFAB tailfin also reveals other evidence that there was an explosion. As one observer discovered from a close examination, the boxes display evidence of shrapnel tears. A closeup of one package shows a pattern of fine shrapnel holes.

Only something much less powerful than an OFAB-250 bomb or a barrel bomb would account for those observable facts. One weapon whose shrapnel could cause the pattern seen in the photograph is the Russian S-5 rocket, two variants of which throw out either 220 or 360 small shrapnel fragments.

In the video he made the night of the attack, Selmo had already claimed that Russian aircraft fired S-5s at the site, although he mistakenly called them "C-5s." And a photograph of two S-5 missiles was also distributed to Bellingcat and to news organizations, including the Washington Post. Selmo insisted to Timemagazine that the airstrikes were divided between barrel bombs and missiles fired by Russian jets.

But again Badawi, the White Helmets chief for Urum al Kubra, contradicted Selmo in a separate video, stating that the initial barrage of missiles were launched from the ground. Badawi's admission was very significant, because the Syrian opposition forces have had supplies of Russian S-5s ever since the weapons were smuggled out of Libya to the rebels in large numbers in 2012. They have been using S-5s as ground-launched rockets like the Libyan rebels did, and have designed their own improvised launchers for them.

Badawi claimed the initial four missiles had been fired by Syrian government forces from the defense factories in southern Aleppo governorate. But the government defense plants in southern Aleppo governorate are in al-Safira—more than 25 kilometers away, whereas the S-5s have a range of only 3 to 4 kilometers.

Even more telling is that fact that, despite Selmo's insistence that airstrikes continued for hours and included as many as 20 to 25 distinct attacks, none of the members of the White Helmet team captured a single airstrike in a video, which would have provided clear audio-visual evidence of his claim.

The Atlantic Council's Bellingcat site pointed to a video posted online by opposition sources in Aleppo as providing such audio evidence of jet planes just before the nighttime explosions. But despite a voice on the video declaring that it was a Russian airstrike, the sound stops immediately after the fiery explosion, indicating that it was caused by a ground launched missile, not a missile fired from a jet plane. Thus the confirming evidence of an airstrike claimed by Bellingcat did not actually confirm it at all.

A Go-to Source

Whoever was responsible for the attack on the Syrian Red Crescent aid convoy, it is clear that Ammar al-Selmo, the top White Helmet official in Aleppo, lied about where he was when the attack on the aid convoy began and, at least

initially, misled his audience when he said he witnessed the first stages of the attack with his own eyes. What's more, he made claims of Syrian barrel bombs and Russian OFAB-250 bombs dropped on the convoy that are not supported by any credible evidence.

In light of Selmo's readiness to embellish his account and to support the narrative of a Russian-Syrian attack, Western media should have been far more careful about relying on it as confirming the U.S. charge about the aid convoy attack. But during the weeks of heavy Russian and Syrian bombing in eastern Aleppo that followed the breakdown of the ceasefire, Selmo was frequently quoted by the news media as a source on the bombing campaign. And Selmo exploited the new situation to push the rebels' political agenda.

On September 23, the White Helmets told the news media that three of their four operating centers in east Aleppo had been hit and two of them were out of commission. National Public Radio quoted Selmo as saying he believed the group had been deliberately targeted, because he had "intercepted pilots' communications and heard them getting orders to bomb his colleagues." Curiously, NPR failed to identify Selmo as the head of the White Helmets in east Aleppo, identifying him only as a "White Helmets member."

Five days later the Washington Post reported a similar claim by Ismail Abdullah, another White Helmets official working directly under Selmo. "Sometimes we hear the pilot tell his base, 'We see a market for the terrorists, there is a bakery for the terrorists,'" said Abdullah. "Is it okay to hit them? They say, 'Okay, hit them.'" He further claimed that on September 21, the White Helmets had heard an enemy pilot refer to the "terrorist" civil defense centers. The organization sent a message to U.S. officials in New York for the U.N. General Assembly that they were being targeted, Abdullah added. These dramatic stories helped propel the White Helmets' campaign for the Nobel Peace Prize, which was announced days later but which they ultimately did not win.

A Fabrication

The claim that the White Helmets had overheard pilots asking for and receiving permission to hit targets while in the air is a fabrication, according to Pierre Sprey, a former Pentagon analyst on combat aircraft who played a central role in designing the F-16. "It's inconceivable that this could have been an authentic communication between an attack pilot and a controller," Sprey told AlterNet, referring to Selmo's accounts. "The only time a pilot might initiate a request to hit a target is if he sees gunfire from it. Otherwise it makes no sense."

The day after the Russian and Syrian bombing campaign on rebel-held eastern Aleppo began on September 22, Reuters turned to Selmo for an overall assessment

of the bombing's impact on Aleppo. Selmo bluntly declared, "What's happening now is annihilation."

Following this dramatic statement, Western media continued to cite Selmo as though he were a neutral source. On September 26, Reuters went back to the White Helmets working under him again, citing an estimate by unnamed "civil defense workers" in Aleppo – which could only mean members of the White Helmets – that 400 people had already been killed in less than five days of bombing in and around Aleppo. But after three full weeks of bombing the United Nations and other agencies estimated that 360 people had been killed in the bombing, suggesting that the White Helmets figure had been several times higher than could be documented by non-partisan sources.

It is obviously difficult for the news media to cover events such as the attack on the Syrian Red Crescent aid convoy and the bombing in Aleppo from Istanbul or Beirut. But the hunger for information from the ground should not outweigh the obligation to vet sources. Selmo and his White Helmets should have been recognized for what they are: a partisan source with an agenda reflecting the power to which the organization is accountable: the armed extremists who have controlled east Aleppo, Idlib, and other areas of northern Syria.

The uncritical reliance on claims by the White Helmets without any effort to investigate their credibility is yet another telling example of journalistic malpractice by media outlets with a long record of skewing coverage of conflicts toward an interventionist narrative.

Gareth Porter is an investigative historian and journalist specializing in U.S. national security policy. His latest book is Manufactured Crisis: The Untold Story of the Iran Nuclear Scare (Just World Books, 2014). [This article originally appeared at Alternet at [HTTP://WWW.ALTERNET.ORG/GRAYZONE-PROJECT/HOW-SYRIAN-WHITE-HELMETS-PLAYED-WESTERN-MEDIA](http://www.alternet.org/grayzone-project/how-syrian-white-helmets-played-western-media)]

Washington Post's 'Fake News' Guilt

Exclusive: The "fake news" theme has captivated The Washington Post and the mainstream U.S. media so much that it is stooping to McCarthyistic smears against news outlets that don't toe the State Department's propaganda line, says Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The mainstream U.S. media's hysteria over "fake news" has reached its logical (or illogical) zenith, a McCarthyistic black-listing of honest journalism that simply shows professional skepticism toward Officialdom, including what's said by U.S. government officials and what's written in The Washington Post and New York Times.

Apparently, to show skepticism now opens you to accusations of disseminating "Russian propaganda" or being a "useful idiot" or some similar ugly smear reminiscent of the old Cold War. Now that we have entered a New Cold War, I suppose it makes sense that we should expect a New McCarthyism.

After returning from a Thanksgiving trip to Philadelphia on Saturday, I received word that Consortiumnews.com, the 21-year-old investigative news site that has challenged misguided "group thinks" whether from Republicans, Democrats or anyone else over those two-plus decades, was included among some 200 Internet sites spreading what some anonymous Web site, PropOrNot, deems "Russian propaganda."

I would normally ignore such nonsense but it was elevated by The Washington Post, which treated these unnamed "independent researchers" as sophisticated experts who "tracked" the Russian propaganda operation and assembled the black list.

And I'm not joking when I say that these neo-McCarthyites go unnamed. The Post's [article](#) by Craig Timberg on Thursday described PropOrNot simply as "a nonpartisan collection of researchers with foreign policy, military and technology backgrounds [who] planned to release its own findings Friday showing the startling reach and effectiveness of Russian propaganda campaigns."

The Post granted the group and its leadership anonymity to smear journalists who don't march in lockstep with official pronouncements from the State Department or some other impeccable fount of never-to-be-questioned truth. The Post even published a "blind" (or unattributed) quote from the head of this shadowy Web site as follows:

"The way that this propaganda apparatus supported [Donald] Trump was equivalent to some massive amount of a media buy,' said the executive director of PropOrNot, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to avoid being targeted by Russia's legions of skilled hackers."

The Shoddy Washington Post

As a professional journalist for more than four decades, it is hard for me to comprehend how a supposedly reputable newspaper like The Washington Post would allow some anonymous character to attack the patriotism of American journalists

while hiding the person's name behind the ridiculous excuse that he or she might be targeted by hackers.

In 1985, when I was an investigative reporter for The Associated Press and first exposed Oliver North's secret White House operation in support of the Nicaraguan Contra rebels, I got some flak for using North's name because he claimed that he might be targeted by assassins – even though he was not officially a covert operative. His name and title were listed in the White House directory, for instance.

So, as silly and unfounded as North's worries were – and The Washington Post then followed me in publishing North's name – at least North's concerns dealt with his personal safety. But now we have the Post treating an alleged study by supposed “independent researchers” as needing the protection of anonymity to allow the Web site's executive director to expound on the group's slanderous assessments without giving his or her name.

In such a case, how is the public supposed to evaluate the smears and whether these researchers are indeed “independent” or are funded by some actual propaganda network, like those financed by the National Endowment for Democracy or USAID or financial speculator George Soros or some military-industrial-complex think tank?

Indeed, isn't what this Post-promoted Web site doing the essence of McCarthyistic “fake news” – making vague accusations and imposing guilt by association, suggesting that all the Web sites on its list are either treasonous or dupes?

Though the Post doesn't seem to care about fairness regarding the 200 or so Web sites subjected to this McCarthyism, the smear operation doesn't even present evidence that anyone actually is part of this grand Russian propaganda conspiracy. The PropOrNot site admits that the criteria for its “analysis” are “behaviorial,” not evidentiary.

In other words, the assessment is based on whether this anonymous group doesn't like that some journalist is questioning the State Department's propaganda line or has come up with information that isn't convenient to the NATO narrative on a topic that also involves Russia, Ukraine, Syria or some other international hot spot.

Then, you and other journalists are slimed as either active Russian intelligence operatives or “they are at the very least acting as bona-fide ‘useful idiots’ of the Russian intelligence services, and are worthy of further scrutiny,” according to PropOrNot.

A Cold War Slur

As the Post recognized in its article, the phrase “useful idiot” or “useful fool” comes from the old Cold War – when journalists and citizens who didn’t march in lock-step with Washington’s propaganda were so stigmatized. That such a grotesque and pejorative phrase was used in this supposedly “independent” study should have been a warning to any professional newspaper to toss the report in the trash can. Instead, The Washington Post embraced it as gospel.

What is further remarkable about this bizarre “study” is that it mixes together a wide variety of diverse political, ideological and journalistic groups, including some of the best independent journalism sites on the Internet, such as Counterpunch, Truthdig, Naked Capitalism, Zero Hedge, Truth-out, WikiLeaks and – I would humbly suggest – Consortiumnews.

Also, neither truth nor fact-based journalism appears to be involved in this “analysis.” No one from this Web site or from The Washington Post contacted me about any alleged inaccuracies or “propaganda” in Consortiumnews’ stories.

Obviously, there have been times when we have challenged “facts” as claimed by the U.S. government and the Post, including their 2002-03 assertions about Iraq’s fictional WMD. (Back then, we were denounced by George W. Bush’s fans as “Saddam apologists.”)

We also have cited cases of disagreements inside the U.S. intelligence community about other “group thinks” that were being pushed by the State Department and the mainstream U.S. news media, such as the CIA’s internal doubts about who was responsible for the Aug. 21, 2013 sarin gas attack outside Damascus, Syria.

Consortiumnews also has cited disclosures buried deep inside articles by the Post and New York Times regarding the important role of neo-Nazis and other ultra-nationalist militias in the putsch that ousted Ukraine’s elected President Viktor Yanukovich on Feb. 22, 2014, and in the subsequent civil war.

I guess readers are supposed to ignore these occasional bursts of honesty from some reporter in the field who feels obliged to mention the Swastikas and other Nazi symbols festooning the rooms and uniforms of these U.S.-backed “freedom fighters” – although the reporter and editors know well enough to stick these references near the end of stories where few people are likely to read. Our “propaganda guilt” is that we read to the end of these articles and highlight these important admissions.

Then, there are times when Consortiumnews has referred to these occasional admissions about neo-Nazis and compared them to positive mainstream references to these same neo-Nazis. For instance, the Times itself included at least one

brief reference to this neo-Nazi reality, though buried it deep inside an article. On Aug. 10, 2014, a Times' article mentioned the neo-Nazi Azov battalion in the last three paragraphs of a lengthy story on another topic.

"The fighting for Donetsk has taken on a lethal pattern: The regular army bombards separatist positions from afar, followed by chaotic, violent assaults by some of the half-dozen or so paramilitary groups surrounding Donetsk who are willing to plunge into urban combat," the Times reported.

"Officials in Kiev say the militias and the army coordinate their actions, but the militias, which count about 7,000 fighters, are angry and, at times, uncontrollable. One known as Azov, which took over the village of Marinka, flies a neo-Nazi symbol resembling a Swastika as its flag." [See Consortiumnews.com's "NYT Discovers Ukraine's Neo-Nazis at War."]

Yet, later the Times published a story about the Ukrainian government's defense of the port of Mariupol against ethnic Russian rebels and the Azov battalion was treated as the last bastion of civilization battling against the barbarians at the gate. Remarkably, the article left out all references to the Azov battalion's Nazi Swastikas. [See Consortiumnews.com's "NYT Whites Out Ukraine's Brown Shirts."]

It is that exposure of the mainstream U.S. media's distortions of the reality in Ukraine that has apparently earned Consortiumnews a spot on this strange list of willful disseminators of "Russian propaganda" or "useful idiots."

Washington Post 'Fake News'

It also might be noted that Consortiumnews has repeatedly pointed out how The Washington Post falsely reported as flat fact that Iraq was hiding WMD yet the editors responsible for this acceptance of State Department propaganda, which got some 4,500 American soldiers killed along with hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, have never faced accountability. [See Consortiumnews.com's "A Media Unmoored from Facts."]

Ironically, too, it should be noted that on Saturday, The New York Times, which also has been flogging the "fake news" theme, ran a relatively responsible article revealing how a leading "fake news" Web site was not connected to Russia at all but rather was an entrepreneurial effort by an unemployed Georgian student who was using a Web site in Tbilisi to make some money by promoting pro-Trump stories, whether true or not.

The owner of the Web site, 22-year-old Beqa Latsabidse, said he had initially tried to push stories favorable to Hillary Clinton but that proved unprofitable so he switched to publishing anti-Clinton and pro-Trump articles whether true or

not.

The front-page Times article revealed what has been happening – entrepreneurs who want to make money have been peddling pro-Trump “news” because that’s what gets the clicks and thus the advertising dollars. That behavior does not implicate Consortiumnews or any other independent Web site that happens to challenge State Department propaganda. (Consortiumnews relies on donations from readers and some book sales to meet its modest \$200,000-a-year budget.)

To merge these two groups – profit-driven sites that don’t care what the truth is and honest journalism sites that show professional skepticism toward government propaganda whatever its source – is a kind of classic example of “fake news” although in this case the mysterious Web site PropOrNot and The Washington Post are peddling the disinformation.

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](#)).

Still Not Thanking Native Americans

Returned to its historical roots, Thanksgiving would be a day to express thanks to Native Americans whose generosity saved the Pilgrims, but that never seems to be a lesson learned, as Dennis J Bernstein reports on the Dakota pipeline standoff.

By Dennis J Bernstein

Late Sunday night – at the start of Thanksgiving week – Native American protesters were attacked by law enforcement agents near the site of the Dakota Access pipeline, a project that Native Americans and environmentalists have been trying to block.

Police and other security forces deployed tear gas, rubber bullets, percussion grenades and water hoses to stop about 400 protesters from crossing the Blackwater Bridge on state Highway 1806, about a mile from an uncompleted section under Lake Oahe, a Missouri River reservoir, where work has been on hold by order of federal agencies.

“As medical professionals, we are concerned for the real risk of loss of life

due to severe hypothermia under these conditions,” the Standing Rock Medic & Healer Council said in a statement posted on Facebook. One hundred sixty-seven people were injured and seven were taken to the hospital, according to Jade Begay, a spokeswoman for the Indigenous Environmental Network.

Sunday’s standoff began around 6 p.m. local time, when a group of about 100 “water protectors” attempted to clear burned out trucks that were blocking the bridge, which is on the most direct route from the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation to Bismarck, North Dakota. The trucks have been in place for several weeks, and law enforcement has constructed a barricade behind them, forcing all traffic to take an approximately 20-mile detour.

“The purpose of this action was to do something to remove that barricade because it’s dangerous,” said Begay, a member of the Tesuque Pueblo and Diné, who has been at the Standing Rock encampments since September. “That barricade poses a danger not just to everyone at the camp, but also to Cannon Ball and other communities that are south.”

“They’re using that barricade as an excuse for us not to be able to lawfully protest,” said Frank Archambault, a member of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe from Little Eagle, South Dakota. “We got word that the drill is now on the pad so tensions are high right now.”

The 1,200-mile, four-state pipeline is intended to carry oil from western North Dakota to a shipping point in Illinois. But construction of the \$3.8 billion pipeline has been protested for months by the Standing Rock Sioux, whose reservation lies near the pipeline route and there are fears a leak could contaminate the drinking water. They also worry that construction could threaten sacred sites.

Cheryl Angel, an Elder member of the Rosebud Nation, was an eyewitness to what happened Sunday night [Nov. 20] in sub-freezing weather with water hoses.

Cheryl Angel: I’m a member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe. I am Sasusaku, Lakota. I currently live at Cannonball, to support Standing Rock, in their efforts to save the water that millions of Americans [depend upon]. [On the evening of November 20th], after a day of prayer and ceremony at all three camps, our security attempted to open the bridge by removing the burnt out trucks that the North Dakota authorities had put there themselves, and had started on fire themselves and left on the bridge.

So our security forces tried to remove them from the bridge and the North Dakota authorities then decided to escalate their presence by calling in a militarized vehicle, and I’m going to say ... maybe 100 more law enforcement vehicles. There

were so many you couldn't even count them. You need to understand that ... what separates the tribe from the pipeline area that's being excavated is the Cannonball River. At some points it's about 40 feet wide, at other points it's only 20 feet wide. But there is a bridge that connects between those two lands, those two boundaries. And that's where the armored vehicles were parked that were already burnt out.

Dennis Bernstein: And, in terms of what happened... we understand that a number of people were wounded with these tear gas canisters. We understand that they were using water hoses in, I guess, 20 – 25 degree [Fahrenheit] weather. Tell us more about that kind of violence. So people can really, you know, get a human face on what's going on there.

CA: I felt like I was in a war zone. I had ... been called to a meeting so I was heading for the meeting. I could hear young warriors running through the camps, saying "Everybody to the north bridge." So everybody answered the call. They got in their vehicles and they drove to the north bridge. So both sides of the road had cars facing north. People were walking on the sides of the road.

I had taken a back path that the deer, the wildlife, use and I entered from between two hills on a deer path. And I walked through the trees up along the fence and then from that point on ... there was flood lights, there was at least 40 floodlights on the north side of the river, about a quarter mile apart, along the entire path of that pipeline. So it's like moonlight... it's like daylight on the north side of the river. On the south side, not so much. And people had gathered there, they had... they were singing at the front line. They were playing music at the front line. They were chanting "Water is life."

By the time I had gotten there, people were coming back, soaked in water, and it was really cold out, and the wind had picked up. And truckloads of people with assistance had brought blankets and jackets, and water, and goggles and face masks. So when you entered the bridge you could look to your right and pick up a blanket, and pick up a goggle, and pick up a face mask, and you could walk further to where the encounter was taking place.

So, I kept to the right of the bridge, and I went down to where the razor wire is, because it's like a war zone there. I'm not kidding. They have floodlights, they have the tank right centered on the bridge, and there was no instructions. They ... had a water cannon there. I heard throughout the night that they had used seven fire engine trucks. They emptied seven of them. It was unbelievable. I didn't think that they would continue to water cannon people. And I asked them... I went to the front lines and said "Stop this... please go home. We're here praying for you. We'll find you new jobs. Pray with us, stand with us. We're protecting the water for millions."

And they didn't listen, they stood behind the barbed wire and they continued ... they would lift their rifles and they would pick out, literally pick out, individuals in the crowd and they would shoot them. And so water protectors had plastic container tops, and they were using those as shields. And they were protecting people whenever they could. I was on the front line. I was very, very lucky, because I didn't get shot. I got maced, I got peppered sprayed, I got water cannoned.

The force of a water cannon if you haven't had one... it knocks you off your feet. And we had built fires to warm up the people who were soaking wet, in the frigid weather, people are shaking, they were drenched in water and tear gas. Our medics were out there in full force, doing what was necessary to keep people breathing. People were sharing their inhalers. Those who couldn't breathe... it was unbelievable. I didn't think that things would come to this end. But unless Obama stands up, unless people start calling their senators, our lives are in danger, not only the water, but our lives, are physically in danger. So, it hurts me to talk like this. But a call needs to be made. Hundreds of calls need to be made.

Our water needs to be protected. We need support up here. We need wool blankets. We need wool clothes. We need to replenish our first aid kits. We need more thermal blankets. We need batteries. We need jerky. We need those snack bars that you eat, when you're not able to eat a hot meal. Thermoses. We need... I think we need hundreds of thermoses, because we can't even carry hot water with us anywhere we go. It was just unbelievable. It was... between being shot with water and then dodging bullets, I'm trying to deliver a peaceful message, and saying prayer. It was hard.

I mean, I slid down the hill, I was knocked off the hill by a water cannon, people picked me up. There was a man standing right next to ... a military vehicle, without any face protection, without any blanket and he was singing. And he kept singing, and they just kept spraying him over and over. I picked up an army blanket, I covered him up with it. I stood beside him. We sang together, we prayed together. And they still shot at us, they still maced us, and they still used the water cannon on whoever they wanted to... on everybody that was within their reach, everybody.

And the fires that were started to protect everybody, to warm people up... those fires that were set to warm people up because there was no warming station at that site, were targeted by the police... were targeted by the water cannons. [...] The fires that were keeping us warm, they intended on [extinguishing the fires that were there for warmth] and that was their intent.

We didn't start the fires, only the warming stations. The fires that were

started randomly out in the field those were by the tear gas canisters that they were shooting off there. They were shooting canisters at us, into the crowd, everybody at one point thought they were trapped on the bridge because lights were coming over from the south of us. And those turned out to be our own warriors, our own water protectors, our own horse riders to support us. They stood up on the hill, on both sides of the bridge, on the south end, and we were down at the bottom on the bridge, up against the razor wire. I asked them to stop, repeatedly, repeatedly. They wouldn't stop. They just kept going.

But the thing that really hurt me the most, is when they were trying to put out the fires that were literally saving peoples' lives. I had got knocked down and was totally drenched in water, I walked over to the fire to warm up and I was only there long enough to empty the water out of my shoes and then they started targeting the fires. So the protectors put up a shield. And for thirty seconds they stood there with a continuous blast of water, and they were totally drenched. And then they all split. First the water hit the fire and there was so much steam and smoke that came out of there. We were blinded.

But there were two of us and we grabbed one of those Teflon, Mylar body armors, and we stretched it between us, and we knelt down on it, and held it between us, we crouched together, we covered one end of the fire. And we just sat there and we prayed. And they kept putting the water over us, until we were completely drenched, again, over and over.

And I could hear a young girl, when the smoke cleared, she was saying "grab the logs, grab the logs" and so people ran over, they grabbed the logs out of the fire and they ran a few yards south, put them together and started another fire, so people could warm up before they were taken to the medic tents. Because there were hundreds of people soaking wet. They weren't dressed in wool.

When I make a call out for clothing it's not for any cotton, it's not for polyester, it's for waterproof jackets and there's hardly any waterproof tents at all, snow pants, snow bibs, anything that's waterproof, and wool. We need wool sweaters, wool socks, wool gloves, wool jackets. Those are the things that we need right now.

I wish the Red Cross would show up. I really do wish that whoever has power to send the Red Cross over there [would]. We could do that because we are in a state of emergency. That's how it was on the front line.

DB: It's really important ... you sort of hit this really hard but just to underline it... because places like NPR and the local police are saying that they had the water there because you all were starting fires, and that you were throwing Molotov cocktails. That was the story that was coming out of the

police, and the local press. You want to talk a little bit more about that?

CA: I'm not afraid to call a liar to their face. If they're going to post things like that they should be standing on the front lines, getting eyewitness testimony, instead of just passing on the lies [that] the sheriff, ... and the governor of North Dakota, and the DAPL are putting out. Because they are taking their own words and using them against the people, to not know the truth. And that should be a crime. It should be.

If I was lying to get people to hurt other people, would I be called a good person? Would I be fit to wear a uniform? Would I be fit to lead a state? I don't think so. Not according to the values that America claims that it follows. And so, NPR, get on the front line, take your own video, because you weren't there. So I would like all these major media outlets to quit reprinting lies that are undocumented, undocumented statements from the police.

All that happened is our security wanted to open that road, because it is a public road. And that's what they said to us when we had our vehicles parked on it. On October 24th they said "go on" they said "we need to open the road. It's a public road. Move your cars." So why can't we move those 3 trucks off the bridge? It's a public road. That's how it all started.

DB: But those are two burnt trucks?

CA: That the military forces had placed there themselves. The North Dakota officials put those there and they started them on fire. And before they left they said, "Please stay away from the vehicles. They have propane inside of them, they're explosive devices." Which, of course, made everybody to move back from the bridge. And they left them there. And then they put razor wire, which is also unconstitutional. You cannot use that type of razor wire. I mean you only see those in war zones. You don't see them in the United States. But I'm starting to feel we're in a warzone. So it's a battle, people. We need bodies, up front.

We need the world to know that water is a precious commodity and it is sacred to natives. When you understand its relationship to life you will understand the sacredness of it. And we need your support. We need this economy to stop being the oil and gas industries, it's not good for our country. We need to divest from fossil fuels, and start being a leader in the world by adopting a green policy and getting new jobs for these people who are in the oil industry. Thank you for listening to me. My flight is about to leave. And I'm leaving for ceremony. I'll be in ceremony for four days. And I'll be available after four days. And things will probably change by then too.

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. [To support the DAPL protesters, [click here](#).]

The West’s Media Delusions

Exclusive: The U.S. mainstream news media often holds itself out as the world’s gold standard, home for careful reporting and diverse opinions compared to Russia’s monolithic propaganda, but the reality is quite different, says James W Carden.

By James W Carden

In a wide ranging and necessary survey of Russian political programming, Dr. Gilbert Doctorow, himself a frequent guest on those shows, observes that:

“The charges – that Russian media are only an instrument of state propaganda directed at the domestic population to keep Russian citizens in line and at foreign audiences to sow dissent among Russia’s neighbors and within the European Union – are taken as a matter of faith with almost no proofs adduced. Anyone who questions this ‘group think’ is immediately labeled a ‘tool of Putin’ or worse.”

Dr. Doctorow has launched an important conversation in light of the release of yet another alarmist media report, this time by a British neoconservative group named (oddly) after a long deceased Democratic Senator from Washington State (Henry “Scoop” Jackson), which seeks to stifle debate on Russia policy in the West by smearing dissenters from the Russia-bashing conventional wisdom as “Putin’s useful idiots.”

Doctorow’s experience with the Russian media therefore serves a double use: to combat willful Western misconceptions of the Russian media landscape as well as to serve as a useful point of comparison with U.S. media outlets and their coverage of Russia.

If we take the example of the purportedly liberal cable news outlet MSNBC, we find, paradoxically, that the hard-right neoconservative stance toward Russia goes virtually unopposed. Regarding Russia, in comparison with their principal center-left cable news rival CNN, which, to its credit occasionally makes room for the minority “detente” point of view, MSNBC leaves about as much room for

dissent as the Soviet-era Pravda – actually, perhaps less.

New McCarthyism

As it happens, there was a similar disparity when it came to the way the two networks covered the U.S. presidential election. While CNN went about bringing much needed balance to its coverage, albeit in the most inept way possible – by hiring paid flacks from each of the campaigns to appear alongside actual journalists, MSNBC (like Republican rival FOX News) wholly dispensed with any pretense of objectivity and served as little more than as a mouth piece for the disastrous Clinton campaign.

As such, the “liberal” network found itself in the vanguard of the new McCarthyism which swept the 2016 campaign, but which has, in fact, been a feature of the American debate over Russia policy since at least the beginning of the Ukraine crisis in late 2013 – if not earlier.

Examples abound, but perhaps the most striking case of the neo-McCarthyite hysteria which MSNBC attempted to dress up as its legitimate concern over U.S. national security was a rant that Rachel Maddow unleashed on her audience in June when Maddow opened her show with a monologue dedicated to the proposition that Donald Trump was in league with Vladimir Putin.

Maddow, in her signature smarter-than-thou tone, informed readers that the “admiration” between Putin and Trump “really is mutual. I mean, look at this headline, ‘Putin praises Trump. He’s brilliant and talented person.’ ‘Putin praises bright and talented Trump.’ ‘Vladimir Putin praises outstanding and talented Trump.’ There was some controversy over how to exactly translate Putin’s remarks, but Putin took care to flatter Donald Trump publicly, exactly the way Donald Trump likes to be flattered, and that’s apparently enough for Donald Trump, that’s all he needs to hear, that’s all he needs to know, to tell him, how great Vladimir Putin is.

“Putin likes Trump, he must be smart, must be great. So, that is the very, very unusual context here, that you have a Republican presidential nominee who is very, very susceptible to flattery. It’s the most powerful thing in the world to him. If you compliment him, he will never forget it and that’s kind of all he needs to know about you.”

Maddow went on in this vein for quite a while longer (meaning: little actual content but lots of “very, very’s” and eye-rolling). But her central insight, such as it was, was little more than a regurgitation of Democratic National Committee talking points. To no one’s surprise, Maddow’s accusations were repeated almost verbatim in the press releases issued by the Clinton campaign

which accused Trump of being little more than a Russian fifth columnist.

Maddow's evidence-free, innuendo laden June rant took on an added importance because she was the messenger. After the risible, self-important sports journalist Keith Olbermann left the network in 2011, Maddow took over as the network's house intellectual. So her words carry weight with its viewers in a way, say, Mika Brzezinski's do not.

Nevertheless at no point at which I am aware did Maddow ever host a guest who pushed back against the still unproven charges that the Russian government had interfered in the U.S. election or that Donald Trump was, in the words of former CIA functionary Mike Morell, an "unwitting agent of the Kremlin" – never mind that as recently as Nov. 15, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Corker admitted he had "no proof" of Moscow's interference in the U.S. election.

While it is unclear whether MSNBC's Joy Reid is seen as "serious" a voice as Maddow, it is unquestionable that she has emerged as the network's most enthusiastic practitioner of the new McCarthyism.

Days before the election Reid hosted Newsweek's increasingly unhinged Kurt Eichenwald and former Naval officer Malcolm Nance who has repeatedly and without evidence claimed the Wikileaks-Podesta emails were fake.

Why, asked Reid, are the Russians backing Trump? As if that assertion was beyond dispute. Well, said Eichenwald, "They hate Hillary Clinton..." Oh. Reid then went on to wonder why the FBI is down-playing the intelligence community's allegedly deep concern that Russia was interfering in the election.

Putin-Bashing

Days later, right after the election, Reid re-assembled a panel featuring Nance, the reliable Putin critic Nina Khrushcheva and Esquire's Charles Pierce to reinforce the message that MSNBC had been pushing since the summer: that the Russian government had its hand on the scale of the U.S. election. Pierce, in particular, was apoplectic.

That Reid's roundtable featured Pierce made a good deal of sense. Throughout the campaign, Pierce has been determined to draw a direct link between the Trump campaign and Putin. A sample of his output helps tell the tale. On July 24, Pierce published "Donald Trump's and Vladimir Putin's Shared Agenda Should Alarm Anyone Concerned About Democracy" in which Pierce speculated that "Trump seems increasingly dependent on money from Russia and from the former Soviet republics within its increasingly active sphere of influence."

In his offering of Sept. 9, Pierce protested that "It's not 'red-baiting' to be

concerned about Russian interference in our elections.” Pierce, perhaps moved to madness by *The Nation* editorial “Against Neo-McCarthyism,” sounded as though he were channeling the ghost of James Jesus Angleton, asking, “Are we supposed to believe that Donald Trump really went on RT television by accident? That nobody on his staff knew that the Russian government’s American network picks up Larry King’s podcast?”

About a month before the election, on Oct. 11, Pierce informed readers of the once-great *Esquire*, “Vladimir Putin Is Determined to See Trump in the Oval Office.” Still worse, according to Pierce, “There is little question now that Vladimir Putin is playing monkey-mischief with the 2016 presidential election, and that the Trump campaign is the primary beneficiary of that.”

All of the aforementioned is to demonstrate that the American media’s much touted pluralism is little more than a fiction when it comes to reporting on Russia. The diversity of Left-Right voices on the political spectrum that Doctorow has encountered in Moscow indicates that the widespread perception that Moscow’s political culture is monolithic compared to that of the Washington’s is, at the very least, challengeable.

James W Carden is a contributing writer for *The Nation* and editor of *The American Committee for East-West Accord’s eastwestaccord.com*. He previously served as an advisor on Russia to the Special Representative for Global Inter-governmental Affairs at the US State Department.

Demonizing Russian Media

The West is escalating its demonization of Russian media as weapons of “information warfare” that need neutralizing, but Gilbert Doctorow finds that accusation just another part of the West’s own propaganda war.

By Gilbert Doctorow

One of the West’s top points in condemning Vladimir Putin’s “regime” since 2007 has been his alleged suppression of democratic institutions, including an assault on media freedom and imposition of government-directed propaganda. This week, the accusation was repeated in a resolution of the European Parliament calling for stronger counter-measures in defense of European values against “information warfare” from Moscow.

The charges – that Russian media are only an instrument of state propaganda

directed at the domestic population to keep Russian citizens in line and at foreign audiences to sow dissent among Russia's neighbors and within the European Union – are taken as a matter of faith with almost no proofs adduced. Anyone who questions this “group think” is immediately labeled a “tool of Putin” or worse.

I experienced this firsthand in March 2015 when, as one of three debaters on “The Network,” a Euronews public affairs program, I objected to remarks by a fellow panelist, Chairman of the European Parliament's Foreign Relations Committee Elmar Brok, who maintained that Putin crushed all liberties and his country has no free press.

Based on my familiarity with the many different political lines of the Russian print media and of the patently unintimidated Kremlin-critics behind the national radio station Ekho Moskvyy and television station Dozhd', I countered that, for example, Russian coverage of events in the Donbass was more multi-sided and free than coverage in the U.S.

Brok lashed out with the slanderous question: “And how much did the Kremlin pay you to say that?” The broadcaster then allowed this video-taped exchange to air freely.

I have ruminated on this exchange ever since and sought incontrovertible proof of the relative freedom of expression on Russian broadcast media. My close examination of the wildly popular political talk shows on Russian television first as a spectator and then as a participant has provided just that.

I have written previously about my initial experience going back six months to when I first took part in a program on the Rossiya 1/Vesti 24 state channel, Yevgeni Popov's “Special Correspondent.” I mentioned at the time the nearly permanent presence on these programs of domestic opposition figures as well as of foreigners from the U.S., Ukraine, Poland and Israel, in particular, who could be counted on to present views on the political topic of the day's discussion at sharp variance with the Kremlin line.

Assessing the Talk Shows

In early autumn I appeared on the same presenter's new show “Sixty Minutes,” as well on what is probably the most respected show of this genre, “Sunday Evening with Vladimir Soloviev,” another Rossiya 1 production. Soloviev has done feature-length television interviews with Vladimir Putin and may be considered to be as close to power as people in this medium get. His personal views are probably more nationalist than the ruling United Russia party, but on his shows he, too, gives time on air to very diverse Russian and foreign views.

In the past month, I broadened my experience with the Russian talk show format by participating in shows on the other major state channel, Pervy Kanal (“Time Will Tell”) and on the country’s largest commercial television channel, NTV (“The Meeting Place”). This accelerated learning was facilitated by the U.S. presidential elections, which made Russian-speaking talking heads from America like myself a rather hot commodity on Russian television at least briefly.

In speaking to fellow panelists during break time, in interviews with presenters, I gathered some inside information about the production side of the talk shows, including their target audiences, their technical aspects and their substantive positioning.

Anyone looking over Russian television programming in general quickly finds that talk shows as a format take up a very large part of broadcast time. Of course, the focus of talk shows may be highly diverse, and political talk shows were traditionally an evening phenomenon, as is the case with the Rossiya 1 shows cited above, while daytime programming more typically focuses on housewives’ concerns, daydreams of romance or tips for cooking, and the like.

In this sense, it was a bold move when two years ago Pervy Kanal decided to launch a daily two-hour political talk show (“Time Will Tell”) in mid-afternoon. As expected, the target audience proved to be stay-at-home women and viewers aged 50 and above, although it appears there are also a fair number of viewers watching the program in the work place.

Going Daytime

The ratings captured by this show typically are in the 20s, meaning that 20 or so percent of all television viewers in Russia at the given time are tuned to the given program, yielding an audience numbering in the millions. On Nov. 9, when I appeared on the show dedicated to analysis of the U.S. election results, the numbers spiked to 30 percent, as one might well understand given the very great interest among ordinary Russians in the outcome of the race for the U.S. presidency and the outlook for war or peace.

As “Time Will Tell” presenter Artyom Sheinin explained to me, the decision to appear on daytime television called for certain production decisions differentiating the programs from the evening talk shows. Firstly, the expectation of a less sophisticated audience meant that the language of panelists should be free of political science jargon and allusion to little known names or philosophies.

Said Artyom, panelists are asked to pitch their arguments as they would “talking to their kids, their mom or their lover.” On the other hand, overly calm

discussion is not seen as a benefit. The presenter explains that his audience sitting at home at mid-day is in need of "an adrenaline shot," and the normal penchant of Russian panelists to shout down one another in a free-for-all is not discouraged in the way it is on evening programming. The evening viewer is assumed to have come home from work and is seated in his armchair before the television, wants his nerves soothed more than excited.

All Russian political talk shows on the main channels are produced in the afternoon, Moscow time, and all feature on screen the caption "Live On Air." However, where and when these shows are broadcast live versus rebroadcast from video tapes is another matter.

For example, the Rossiya 1/Vesti programs are broadcast live to the Russian Far East, where they appear at the end of prime-time evening broadcasts. Then they are re-broadcast at local evening prime time in each of the eight other time zones of the Russian Federation lying to the west, showing last in Moscow.

In this regard, two years ago when it launched "Time Will Tell," Pervy Kanal took a second unparalleled risk by broadcasting live to Moscow in the afternoon. From a political standpoint, this was like a high-flying trapeze act without the benefit of a safety net.

In fact all of these programs are also video-taped, and all the major channels make the tapes available for internet viewing on their websites in full or shortened versions.

Similar Formats

Just as Russian television has often copied studio design and presentation formats from American television (I think in particular of the way the "Tonight Show" has been replicated on major Russian channels), so they copy from one another. In fact, if you turn on any of the political talk shows I cited above, you will find rather similar studios with live audiences.

Indeed, at Pervy Kanal, the producers remark jokingly that when NTV decided to launch its own afternoon talk show, "The Meeting Place," that network picked up not only the production format and studio design but also some of the production staff. The format of having male-female pairs of talk show hosts also has spread widely in the industry.

But there appears to be a significant difference between these shows on the degree to which they are "scripted" by management upstairs, the degree to which they are free discussion. Perhaps the most scripted is this season's new entry at Rossiya 1, "Sixty Minutes," in which presenters Yevgeni Popov and Olga Skabeyeva are reading off teleprompters and the audience applause is

aggressively prompted. On the other hand, the lead presenter on Pervy Kanal's "Time Will Tell," Artyom Sheinin proudly says that he has no script handed to him, that what he says on air is what he himself prepared or is thinking at the time.

One ubiquitous fact is that the panelists are not scripted and if anyone is cut off in mid-sentence it is by other panelists vying for the microphone, not by the presenter keeping the political line of discourse in check. Except in the case of senior politicians, who are given the respect their rank demands, no panelist is safe from interruptions and the audience encourages a culture of gladiators in the arena, with applause punctuating the debates.

On NTV there is the additional expression of audience disapproval, but that is rare. The benefits of these ground rules go to the quick-witted as well as to the loudest voices, whatever their political complexion.

The culture of these talk shows is permeated by a newsroom mentality. Some of the presenters, especially on Rossiya 1/Vesti 24, come from television journalism and have gotten their appointments as a reward for successful work in the field, especially in hazardous areas. Such was the background of talk show host Yevgeni Popov, who for years reported from Ukraine, initially during the Orange Revolution days and later during the Maidan protests.

The content of each program on all channels is subject to change at the last minute as are the list of invited panelists in case of breaking news. This favors inviting panelists who are living in the Moscow area. They can be invited and disinvited at short notice. In fact, all the major political shows on the three channels I observed from inside use many of the same Russian and foreign panelists chosen from among political scientists at universities or think tanks, journalists and Duma or Federation Council members.

Western Voices

To be sure, not all panelists come down to the studio. A very few lucky experts are given air time from remote locations, their close-up image projected onto a wall-sized screen.

One such "regular" on the Rossiya 1/Vesti 24 channel is Dimitri Simes, president of The Center for the National Interest in Washington, D.C. These vignette appearances get special treatment, without any interruption from other panelists and only respectful questioning from the host.

Panelists in greatest demand can be seen leaving one show early so as to be able to get over to another studio on a different channel when there is the rotation of panelists between advertising breaks. None is in greater demand than the

American Michael Bohm, who in the dark days of worsening relations with the West provided all channels with highly fluent statements in Russian of the latest policy position of the Washington Consensus, often accompanied by Russian folk expressions.

This has been especially appreciated by television producers representing the more hardline supporters of the Kremlin for whom Bohm is the kind of American the audience loves to hate, his every remark justifying demands for greater military expenditures by the Kremlin. Nonetheless, it remains true that through Bohm and a few other Westerners on these shows, the full blast of Western critiques of Kremlin policy gets prime broadcasting time in Russia.

The senior politicians brought in as panelists come from all the Duma parties, not just the ruling United Russia. In the past half year, I noted in particular the frequent presence of the leader of the nationalist LDPR party, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, while Gennady Zyuganov of the Communists or Sergey Mironov, leader of Just Russia, have been rare birds.

On the other hand, there have been frequent appearances by the Liberals of the Yabloko party, which never made it past 1 percent of votes cast in the latest parliamentary elections, not to mention the minimum 5 percent threshold for Duma representation.

The talk show programs are prepared with great professionalism. Behind each there is extensive research to find appropriate archival and/or latest visuals. The administrative chores involved in arranging logistics for the panelists chosen are also considerable. The team members I have encountered were uniformly dedicated, working crazy hours to get their job done.

Encouraging Strong Opinions

I also noted a peculiar complicity between the staff “handlers” and us panelists. Clearly, production staff is rewarded for finding “fresh blood” panelists who play out well, and they make sure that their dogs in the race are well tended with coffee, tea, and, if needed, a shot of brandy during breaks to keep their spirits high.

On the Rossiya 1/Vesti 24 talk shows presenters and the panelists all are wired with headset microphones. However, on both Pervy Kanal and NTV, only the presenters are wired, while panelists are seated next to production assistants holding microphones, which they make available upon request. Indeed, the assistants act as coaches to newcomers like myself, whom they urge to speak louder, speak faster, etc. to get the greatest debate effect out of us.

In conclusion, my firsthand experience with the Russian political talk show

phenomenon left me with no doubt that this is bona fide journalism serving the public interest, exposing the broad Russian television audience, from everyone's parents and grandparents to business leaders and university dons, to a great many different competing and well-presented views on the major issues of the day, both domestic and international.

This reality is sharply at variance with what U.S. and Western European mainstream media would have us believe about Putin's Russia.

Gilbert Doctorow is the European Coordinator of The American Committee for East West Accord Ltd. His most recent book, *Does Russia Have a Future?* was published in August 2015.

Trump's Tulsi Gabbard Factor

Exclusive: By inviting in Rep. Tulsi Gabbard, a Democrat hostile to "regime change" wars, President-elect Trump may be signaling a major break with Republican neocon orthodoxy and a big shake-up of the U.S. foreign policy establishment, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Two weeks after Donald Trump's shocking upset of Hillary Clinton, the imperious and imperial neoconservatives and their liberal-interventionist understudies may finally be losing their tight grip on U.S. foreign policy.

The latest sign was Trump's invitation for a meeting with Rep. Tulsi Gabbard, D-Hawaii, on Monday. The mainstream media commentary has almost completely missed the potential significance of this start-of-the-work-week meeting by suggesting that Trump is attracted to Gabbard's tough words on "radical Islamic terrorism."

Far more important is that Gabbard, a 35-year-old Iraq War veteran, endorsed Sen. Bernie Sanders in the Democratic primaries because of his opposition to neocon/liberal-hawk military adventures. She starred in one of the strongest political ads of the campaign, a message to Hawaiians, called "The Cost of War."

"Bernie Sanders voted against the Iraq War," Gabbard says. "He understands the cost of war, that that cost is continued when our veterans come home. Bernie Sanders will defend our country and take the trillions of dollars that are spent on these interventionist, regime change, unnecessary wars and invest it here at home."

In the ad, Gabbard threw down the gauntlet to the neocons and their liberal-hawk sidekicks, by accusing them of wasting trillions of dollars “on these interventionist, regime change, unnecessary wars.” Her comments mesh closely with Trump’s own perspective.

After the meeting on Monday, Gabbard released a statement confirming that the focus of the discussion had been her opposition to escalating the war in Syria by following neocon/liberal-hawk suggestions for a “no-fly zone” that would require widespread U.S. military destruction of Syrian government installations and the killing of a large number of Syrians.

“President-elect Trump asked me to meet with him about our current policies regarding Syria, our fight against terrorist groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS, as well as other foreign policy challenges we face,” Gabbard said. “I felt it important to take the opportunity to meet with the President-elect now before the drumbeat of war that neocons have been beating drag us into an escalation of the war to overthrow the Syrian government – a war which has already cost hundreds of thousands of lives and forced millions of refugees to flee their homes in search of safety for themselves and their families. ...

“While the rules of political expediency would say I should have refused to meet with President-elect Trump, I never have and never will play politics with American and Syrian lives. ...

“I shared with [President-elect Trump] my grave concerns that escalating the war in Syria by implementing a so-called no fly/safe zone would be disastrous for the Syrian people, our country, and the world. It would lead to more death and suffering, exacerbate the refugee crisis, strengthen ISIS and al-Qaeda, and bring us into a direct conflict with Russia which could result in a nuclear war.”

Trading Places

So, the surprise election results on Nov. 8 may have represented a “trading places” moment for the neocons and liberal hawks who were eagerly counting the days before the “weak” President Barack Obama would turn over the Commander-in-Chief job to former Secretary of State Clinton who had made clear that she shared their hawkish agenda of escalating the war in Syria with a “no-fly/safe zone,” and ratcheting up the New Cold War with Russia.

There was even speculation that one of Clinton’s neocon favorites within the State Department, Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland, might be rewarded with State’s top job for her “regime change” in Ukraine that sparked the start of the New Cold War in 2014.

Nuland, the wife of arch-neocon Robert Kagan, sabotaged President Obama's emerging strategy of collaborating with Russian President Vladimir Putin on sensitive global issues. In 2013-14, Putin helped orchestrate two of Obama's brightest foreign policy successes: Syria's surrender of its chemical weapons arsenal and Iran's guarantee that it would not develop nuclear weapons.

But those agreements infuriated the neocons who favored escalating both crises into direct U.S. bombing campaigns aimed at Syria and Iran – in accordance with the desires of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the Saudi monarchy. Yet, there was perhaps even greater alarm at what the next move of the Obama-Putin tag team might be: demanding that Israel finally get serious about a peace deal with the Palestinians.

So, the neocons took aim at Ukraine, which neocon National Endowment for Democracy President Carl Gershman identified as “the biggest prize” and an important stepping stone to an even bigger prize, a “regime change” in Moscow removing Putin.

While Gershman's NED funded (with U.S. taxpayers' money) scores of projects inside Ukraine, training anti-government activists and journalists, Nuland took the point as the key organizer of a putsch that removed elected President Viktor Yanukovich on Feb. 22, 2014, and replaced him with a fiercely anti-Russian regime.

Given the geopolitical sensitivity of Ukraine to Russia, including its naval base on the Crimean peninsula, Putin had little choice but to react, supporting a referendum in Crimea in which 96 percent of the voters favored leaving Ukraine and rejoining Russia – and assisting ethnic Russian rebels in the east who resisted the violent ouster of their president.

Of course, the mainstream Western news media presented these developments as simply a case of “Russian aggression” and a “Russian invasion.” And, faced with this new “group think,” Obama quickly abandoned his partner, Putin, and joined in the chorus of condemnations.

Nuland emerged as a new star inside the State Department, a hero of the New Cold War which was expected to funnel trillions of tax dollars into the Military-Industrial Complex.

Trump's Heresy

But Trump surprisingly adopted the position that Obama shied away from, a recognition that Putin could be an important asset in resolving major international crises. The real-estate-mogul-turned-politician stuck to that “outside-the-mainstream” position despite fierce attacks from rival Republicans

and Democratic presidential nominee Clinton, who even mocked him as Putin's "puppet."

After Trump's upset victory on Nov. 8, many pundits assumed that Trump would fall back in line with Washington's hawkish foreign-policy establishment by giving top jobs to neocons, such as former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations John Bolton and ex-CIA Director James Woolsey, or Netanyahu favorites, such as former Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney or ex-New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani.

So far, however, Trump has followed a different course, more in line with the libertarian thinking of the Koch brothers – not only the more famous ones, Charles and David, but also their long-estranged brother William, who I'm told have become behind-the-scenes advisers to the President-elect.

Though Trump did offer high-profile meetings to the likes of Romney and Giuliani, he has yet to hand over any key foreign-policy job to the Republican neocon wing. His one major announcement in that area has been naming as National Security Advisor retired Gen. Michael Flynn, who led the Defense Intelligence Agency when it produced a prescient warning that U.S. policy in Syria would lead to the creation of an "Islamic State."

Though Flynn is regarded as a hardliner in the fight against Islamic jihadist terror, he is seen as an independent thinker regarding how best to wage that war. For instance, Flynn has objected to the notion that drone strikes, i.e., killing off individual jihadists, is a route to success.

"We've tended to say, drop another bomb via a drone and put out a headline that 'we killed Abu Bag of Doughnuts' and it makes us all feel good for 24 hours," Flynn said. "And you know what? It doesn't matter. It just made them a martyr, it just created a new reason to fight us even harder."

That leaves open the possibility that a President Trump might eschew the "whack-a-mole" approach that has bedeviled the "war on terror" and instead go after the "mole nest" – if you will – the Saudi monarchy that has long financed Islamic extremists both through the fundamentalist Wahhabi brand of Sunni Islam and by supplying money and weapons to jihadists dating back at least to the Afghan mujahedeen in the 1980s, the origin of modern Islamic terrorism.

Traditional U.S. politicians have recoiled from facing up to the hard reality that the Saudi monarchy is the real "terror central" because of Saudi Arabia's enormous riches and influence, which is now enhanced by its quiet alliance with Israel in their joint campaign against the so-called "Shiite crescent," from Iran through Syria to Lebanon's Hezbollah.

Taking on this Saudi-Israel nexus has long been regarded as political suicide, given Israel's extraordinary lobbying power and Saudi Arabia's exceptional wealth. But Trump may be assembling a team that is "crazy" enough to take on that mission.

So, while the fight over the future of U.S. foreign policy is far from over – the neocons will surely flex their muscles at the major think tanks, on the op-ed pages and inside the halls of Congress – the Trump transition is showing some creativity in assembling a national security team that may go in a very different direction.

Much will become apparent in Trump's choice of Secretary of State. If it's someone like Sen. Rand Paul, R-Kentucky, or Rep. Gabbard or a libertarian from the Kochs' world, that would be bad news for the neocons. If it's someone like Romney, Giuliani, Bolton or Woolsey, then that will mean that President-elect Trump has blinked and the neocons can breathe a sigh of relief.

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](#)).

NYT Advocates Internet Censorship

Exclusive: The New York Times wants a system of censorship for the Internet to block what it calls "fake news," but the Times ignores its own record of publishing "fake news," reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

In its [lead editorial](#) on Sunday, The New York Times decried what it deemed "The Digital Virus Called Fake News" and called for Internet censorship to counter this alleged problem, taking particular aim at Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg for letting "liars and con artists hijack his platform."

As this mainstream campaign against "fake news" quickly has gained momentum in the past week, two false items get cited repeatedly, a claim that Pope Francis endorsed Donald Trump and an assertion that Trump was prevailing in the popular vote over Hillary Clinton. I could add another election-related falsehood, a hoax spread by Trump supporters that liberal documentarian Michael Moore was endorsing Trump when he actually was backing Clinton.

But I also know that Clinton supporters were privately pushing some salacious and unsubstantiated charges about Trump's sex life, and Clinton personally charged that Trump was under the control of Russian President Vladimir Putin although there was no evidence presented to support that McCarthyistic accusation.

The simple reality is that lots of dubious accusations get flung around during the heat of a campaign – nothing new there – and it is always a challenge for professional journalists to swat them down the best we can. What's different now is that the Times envisions some structure (or algorithm) for eliminating what it calls "fake news."

But, with a stunning lack of self-awareness, the Times fails to acknowledge the many times that it has published "fake news," such as reporting in 2002 that Iraq's purchase of aluminum tubes meant that it was reconstituting its nuclear weapons program; its bogus analysis tracing the firing location of a Syrian sarin-laden rocket in 2013 back to a Syrian military base that turned out to be four times outside the rocket's range; or its publication of photos supposedly showing Russian soldiers inside Russia and then inside Ukraine in 2014 when it turned out that the "inside-Russia" photo was also taken inside Ukraine, destroying the premise of the story.

These are just three examples among many of the Times publishing "fake news" – and all three appeared on Page One before being grudgingly or partially retracted, usually far inside the newspaper under opaque headlines so most readers wouldn't notice. Much of the Times' "fake news" continued to reverberate in support of U.S. government propaganda even after the partial retractions.

Who Is the Judge?

So, should Zuckerberg prevent Facebook users from circulating New York Times stories? Obviously, the Times would not favor that solution to the problem of "fake news." Instead, the Times expects to be one of the arbiters deciding which Internet outlets get banned and which ones get gold seals of approval.

The Times lead editorial, following a front-page article on the same topic on Friday, leaves little doubt what the newspaper would like to see. It wants major Internet platforms and search engines, such as Facebook and Google, to close off access to sites accused of disseminating "fake news."

The editorial said, "a big part of the responsibility for this scourge rests with internet companies like Facebook and Google, which have made it possible for fake news to be shared nearly instantly with millions of users and have been slow to block it from their sites. ...

“Facebook says it is working on weeding out such fabrications. It said last Monday that it would no longer place Facebook-powered ads on fake news websites, a move that could cost Facebook and those fake news sites a lucrative source of revenue. Earlier on the same day, Google said it would stop letting those sites use its ad placement network. These steps would help, but Facebook, in particular, owes its users, and democracy itself, far more.

“Facebook has demonstrated that it can effectively block content like click-bait articles and spam from its platform by tweaking its algorithms, which determine what links, photos and ads users see in their news feeds. ... Facebook managers are constantly changing and refining the algorithms, which means the system is malleable and subject to human judgment.”

The Times editorial continued: “This summer, Facebook decided to show more posts from friends and family members in users’ news feeds and reduce stories from news organizations, because that’s what it said users wanted. If it can do that, surely its programmers can train the software to spot bogus stories and outwit the people producing this garbage. ...

“Mr. Zuckerberg himself has spoken at length about how social media can help improve society. ... None of that will happen if he continues to let liars and con artists hijack his platform.”

Gray Areas

But the problem is that while some falsehoods may be obvious and clear-cut, much information exists in a gray area in which two or more sides may disagree on what the facts are. And the U.S. government doesn’t always tell the truth although you would be hard-pressed to find recent examples of the Times recognizing that reality. Especially over the past several decades, the Times has usually embraced the Official Version of a disputed event and has deemed serious skepticism out of bounds.

That was the way the Times treated denials from the Iraqi government and some outside experts who disputed the “aluminum tube” story in 2002 – and how the Times has brushed off disagreements regarding the U.S. government’s portrayal of events in Syria, Ukraine and Russia. Increasingly, the Times has come across as a propaganda conduit for Official Washington rather than a professional journalistic entity.

But the Times and other mainstream news outlets – along with some favored Internet sites – now sit on a Google-financed entity called the First Draft Coalition, which presents itself as a kind of Ministry of Truth that will decide which stories are true and which are “fake.”

If the Times' editorial recommendations are followed, the disfavored stories and the sites publishing them would no longer be accessible through popular search engines and platforms, essentially blocking the public's access to them. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[What to Do About 'Fake News.'](#)"]

The Times asserts that such censorship would be good for democracy – and it surely is true that hoaxes and baseless conspiracy theories are no help to democracy – but regulation of information in the manner that the Times suggests has more than a whiff of Orwellian totalitarianism to it.

And the proposal is especially troubling coming from the Times, with its checkered recent record of disseminating dangerous disinformation.

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](#)).
