

A 'Silent Coup' for Brazil?

Brazil and other Latin American progressive governments are on the defensive as U.S.-backed political movements employ "silent coup" tactics to discredit and remove troublesome leaders, writes Ted Snider.

By Ted Snider

Brazil keeps its coups quiet (or at least quieter than many other Latin American countries). During the Cold War, there was much more attention to overt military regime changes often backed by the CIA, such as the overthrow of Guatemala's Jacobo Arbenz in 1954, the ouster of Chile's Salvador Allende in 1973 and even Argentina's "dirty war" coup in 1976, than to Brazil's 1964 coup that removed President João Goulart from power.

Noam Chomsky has called Goulart's government "mildly social democratic." Its replacement was a brutal military dictatorship.

In more modern times, Latin American coups have shed their image of overt military takeovers or covert CIA actions. Rather than tanks in the streets and grim-looking generals rounding up political opponents – today's coups are more like the "color revolutions" used in Eastern Europe and the Mideast in which leftist, socialist or perceived anti-American governments were targeted with "soft power" tactics, such as economic dislocation, sophisticated propaganda, and political disorder often financed by "pro-democracy" non-governmental organizations (or NGOs).

This strategy began to take shape in the latter days of the Cold War as the CIA program of arming Nicaraguan Contra rebels gave way to a U.S. economic strategy of driving Sandinista-led Nicaragua into abject poverty, combined with a political strategy of spending on election-related NGOs by the U.S.-funded National Endowment for Democracy, setting the stage for the Sandinistas' political defeat in 1990.

During the Obama administration, this strategy of non-violent "regime change" in Latin America has gained increasing favor, as with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's decisive support for the 2009 ouster of Honduran President Manuel Zelaya who had pursued a moderately progressive domestic policy that threatened the interests of the Central American nation's traditional oligarchy and foreign investors.

Unlike the earlier military-style coups, the "silent coups" never take off their masks and reveal themselves as coups. They are coups disguised as domestic popular uprisings which are blamed on the misrule of the targeted government.

Indeed, the U.S. mainstream media will go to great lengths to deny that these coups are even coups.

The new coups are cloaked in one of two disguises. In the first, a rightist minority that lost at the polls will allege “fraud” and move its message to the streets as an expression of “democracy”; in the second type, the minority cloaks its power grab behind the legal or constitutional workings of the legislature or the courts, such as was the case in ousting President Zelaya in Honduras in 2009.

Both strategies usually deploy accusations of corruption or dictatorial intent against the sitting government, charges that are trumpeted by rightist-owned news outlets and U.S.-funded NGOs that portray themselves as “promoting democracy,” seeking “good government” or defending “human rights.” Brazil today is showing signs of both strategies.

Brazil’s Boom

First, some background: In 2002, the Workers’ Party’s (PT) Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva came to power with 61.3 percent of the vote. Four years later, he was returned to power with a still overwhelming 60.83 percent. Lula da Silva’s presidency was marked by extraordinary growth in Brazil’s economy and by landmark social reforms and domestic infrastructure investments.

In 2010, at the end of Lula da Silva’s presidency, the BBC provided a typical account of his successes: “Number-crunchers say rising incomes have catapulted more than 29 million Brazilians into the middle class during the eight-year presidency of Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, a former trade unionist elected in 2002. Some of these people are beneficiaries of government handouts and others of a steadily improving education system. Brazilians are staying in school longer, which secures them higher wages, which drives consumption, which in turn fuels a booming domestic economy.”

However, in Brazil, a two-term president must sit out a full term before running again. So, in 2010, Dilma Rousseff ran as Lula da Silva’s chosen successor. She won a majority 56.05 percent of the vote. When, in 2014, Rousseff won re-election with 52 percent of the vote, the right-wing opposition Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB) went into a panic.

This panic was not just because democracy was failing as a method for advancing right-wing goals, nor was the panic just over the fourth consecutive victory by the more left-wing PT. The panic became desperation when it became clear that, after the PT had succeeded in holding onto power while Lula da Silva was constitutionally sidelined, he was likely returning as the PT’s presidential

candidate in 2018.

After all, Lula da Silva left office with an 80 percent approval rating. Democracy, it seemed, might never work for the PSDB. So, the “silent coup” playbook was opened. As the prescribed first play, the opposition refused to accept the 2014 electoral results despite never proffering a credible complaint. The second move was taking to the streets.

A well-organized and well-funded minority whose numbers were too small to prevail at the polls can still create lots of noise and disruption in the streets, manufacturing the appearance of a powerful democratic movement. Plus, these protests received sympathetic coverage from the corporate media of both Brazil and the United States.

The next step was to cite corruption and begin the process for a constitutional coup in the form of impeachment proceedings against President Rousseff. Corruption, of course, is a reliable weapon in this arsenal because there is always some corruption in government which can be exaggerated or ignored as political interests dictate.

Allegations of corruption also can be useful in dirtying up popular politicians by making them appear to be only interested in lining their pockets, a particularly effective line of attack against leaders who appear to be working to benefit the people. Meanwhile, the corruption of U.S.-favored politicians who are lining their own pockets much more egregiously is often ignored by the same media and NGOs.

Removing Leaders

In recent years, this type of “constitutional” coup was used in Honduras to get rid of democratically elected President Zelaya. He was whisked out of Honduras through a kidnapping at gunpoint that was dressed up as a constitutional obligation mandated by a court after Zelaya announced a plebiscite to determine whether Hondurans wanted to draft a new constitution.

The hostile political establishment in Honduras falsely translated his announcement into an unconstitutional intention to seek reelection, i.e., the abuse-of-power ruse. The ability to stand for a second term would be considered in the constitutional discussions, but was never announced as an intention by Zelaya.

Nevertheless, the Supreme Court declared the President’s plebiscite unconstitutional and the military kidnapped Zelaya. The Supreme Court charged Zelaya with treason and declared a new president: a coup in constitutional disguise, one that was condemned by many Latin American nations but was embraced

by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

This coup pattern reoccurred in Paraguay when right-wing Frederico Franco took the presidency from democratically elected, left-leaning Fernando Lugo in what has been called a parliamentary coup. As in Honduras, the coup was made to look like a constitutional transition. In the Paraguay case, the right-wing opposition opportunistically capitalized on a skirmish over disputed land that left at least 11 people dead to unfairly blame the deaths on President Lugo. It then impeached him after giving him only 24 hours to prepare his defense and only two hours to deliver it.

Brazil is manifesting what could be the third example of this sort of coup in Latin America during the Obama administration.

Operation *Lava Jato* began in Brazil in March of 2014 as a judicial and police investigation into government corruption. *Lava Jato* is usually translated as “Car Wash” but, apparently, is better captured as “speed laundering” with the connotation of corruption and money laundering.

Operation *Lava Jato* began as the uncovering of political bribery and misuse of money, revolving around Brazil’s massive oil company Petrobras. The dirt – or political influence-buying – that needed washing stuck to all major political parties in a corrupt system, according to Alfredo Saad Filho, Professor of Political Economy at the SAOS University of London.

But Brazil’s political Right hijacked the investigation and turned a legitimate judicial investigation into a political coup attempt.

According to Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Professor of Sociology at the University of Coimbra in Portugal and Distinguished Legal Scholar at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, although Operation *Lava Jato* “involves the leaders of various parties, the fact is that Operation *Lava Jato* – and its media accomplices – have shown to be majorly inclined towards implicating the leaders of PT (the Workers’ Party), with the by now unmistakable purpose of bringing about the political assassination of President Dilma Rousseff and former President Lula da Silva.”

De Sousa Santos called the political repurposing of the judicial investigation “glaringly” and “crassly selective,” and he indicts the entire operation in its refitted form as “blatantly illegal and unconstitutional.” Alfredo Saad Filho said the goal is to “inflict maximum damage” on the PT “while shielding other parties.”

Neutralizing Lula

The ultimate goal of the coup in democratic disguise is to neutralize Lula da Silva. Criminal charges – which Filho describes as “stretched” – have been brought against Lula da Silva. On March 4, he was detained for questioning. President Rousseff then appointed Lula da Silva as her Chief of Staff, a move which the opposition represented as an attempt to use ministerial status to protect him from prosecution by any body other than the Supreme Court.

But Filho says this representation is based on an illegally recorded and illegally released conversation between Rousseff and Lula da Silva. The conversation, Filho says, was then “misinterpreted” to allow it to be “presented as ‘proof’ of a conspiracy to protect Lula.” De Sousa Santos added that “President Dilma Rousseff’s cabinet has decided to include Lula da Silva among its ministers. It is its right to do so and no institution, least of all the judiciary, has the power to prevent it.”

No “presidential crime warranting an impeachment has emerged,” according to Filho.

As in Honduras and Paraguay, an opposition that despairs of its ability to remove the elected government through democratic instruments has turned to undemocratic means that it hopes to disguise as judicial and constitutional. In the case of Brazil, Professor de Sousa Santos calls this coup in democratic disguise a “political-judicial coup.”

In both Honduras and Paraguay, the U.S. government, though publicly insisting that it wasn’t involved, privately knew the machinations were coups. Less than a month after the Honduran coup, the White House, State Department and many others were in receipt of a frank cable from the U.S. embassy in Honduras calling the coup a coup.

Entitled “Open and Shut: the Case of the Honduran Coup,” the embassy said, “There is no doubt that the military, Supreme Court and National Congress conspired on June 28 in what constituted an illegal and unconstitutional coup.” The cable added, “none of the . . . arguments [of the coup defenders] has any substantive validity under the Honduran constitution.”

As for Paraguay, U.S. embassy cables said Lugo’s political opposition had as its goal to “Capitalize on any Lugo missteps” and “impeach Lugo and assure their own political supremacy.” The cable noted that to achieve their goal, they are willing to “legally” impeach Lugo “even if on spurious grounds.”

Professor de Sousa Santos said U.S. imperialism has returned to its Latin American “backyard” in the form of NGO development projects, “organizations whose gestures in defense of democracy are just a front for covert, aggressive

attacks and provocations directed at progressive governments.”

He said the U.S. goal is “replacing progressive governments with conservative governments while maintaining the democratic façade.” He claimed that Brazil is awash in financing from American sources, including “CIA-related organizations.” (The National Endowment for Democracy was created in 1983, in part to do somewhat openly what the CIA had previously done covertly, i.e., finance political movements that bent to Washington’s will.)

History will tell whether Brazil’s silent coup will succeed. History may also reveal what the U.S. government’s knowledge and involvement may be.

Ted Snider writes on analyzing patterns in US foreign policy and history.

The Trump-Clinton Dilemma

As buffoonish billionaire Donald Trump undergoes full-scale demonization, the political/media establishment is making Hillary Clinton the heroine of the stop-Trump drama, but who is really more dangerous, asks John Pilger.

By John Pilger

A virulent if familiar censorship is about to descend on the U.S. election campaign. As the cartoon brute, Donald Trump, seems likely to win the Republican Party’s nomination, Hillary Clinton is being ordained both as the “women’s candidate” and the champion of American liberalism in its heroic struggle with the Evil One.

This is drivel, of course; Hillary Clinton leaves a trail of blood and suffering around the world and a clear record of exploitation and greed in her own country. To say so, however, is becoming intolerable in the land of free speech.

The 2008 presidential campaign of Barack Obama should have alerted even the most dewy-eyed. Obama based his “hope” campaign almost entirely on the fact of an African-American aspiring to lead the land of slavery. He was also “antiwar.”

But Obama was never antiwar. On the contrary, like all American presidents, he was pro-war. He had voted for George W. Bush’s funding of the slaughter in Iraq and he was planning to escalate the invasion of Afghanistan. In the weeks before he took the presidential oath, he secretly approved an Israeli assault on Gaza, the massacre known as Operation Cast Lead. He promised to close the concentration camp at Guantanamo and did not. He pledged to help make the world

“free from nuclear weapons” and did the opposite.

As a new kind of marketing manager for the status quo, the unctuous Obama was an inspired choice. Even at the end of his blood-spattered presidency, with his signature drones spreading infinitely more terror and death around the world than that ignited by jihadists in Paris and Brussels, Obama is fawned on as “cool” (the *Guardian*).

On March 22 and later, my article, “Start of a New Cold War,” was published across the Web (including at Consortiumnews.com).

As has been my practice for years, I syndicated it to an international network, which included Truthout.com, the liberal American website. Truthout publishes some important journalism, not least Dahr Jamail’s outstanding corporate exposes. But Truthout rejected the piece because, said an editor, it had appeared on Counterpunch and had broken “guidelines.” I replied that this had never been a problem over many years and I knew of no guidelines.

My recalcitrance was then given another meaning. The article was reprieved provided I submitted to a “review” and agreed to changes and deletions made by Truthout’s “editorial committee.” The result was the softening and censoring of my criticism of Hillary Clinton, and the distancing of her from Trump. The following was cut:

“Trump is a media hate figure. That alone should arouse our skepticism. Trump’s views on migration are grotesque, but no more grotesque than David Cameron. It is not Trump who is the Great Deporter from the United States, but the Nobel Peace Prize winner Barack Obama ... The danger to the rest of us is not Trump, but Hillary Clinton. She is no maverick. She embodies the resilience and violence of a system ... As presidential Election Day draws near, Clinton will be hailed as the first female president, regardless of her crimes and lies – just as Barack Obama was lauded as the first black president and liberals swallowed his nonsense about ‘hope.’”

The “editorial committee” clearly wanted me to water down my argument that Clinton represented a *proven* extreme danger to the world. Like all censorship, this was unacceptable.

Maya Schenwar, who runs Truthout, wrote to me that my unwillingness to submit my work to a “process of revision” meant she had to take it off her “publication docket.” Such is the gatekeeper’s way with words.

The Obama/Clinton Facade

At the root of this episode is an enduring unsayable. This is the need, the

compulsion, of many liberals in the United States to embrace a leader from within a system that is demonstrably imperial and violent. Like Obama's "hope," Clinton's gender is no more than a suitable facade.

This is a historical urge. In his 1859 essay *On Liberty*, to which modern liberals seem to pay unflagging homage, John Stuart Mill described the power of empire. "Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians," he wrote, "provided the end be their improvement, and the means justified by actually effecting that end." The "barbarians" were large sections of humanity of whom "implicit obedience" was required.

"It's a nice and convenient myth that liberals are the peacemakers and conservatives the warmongers," wrote the British historian Hywel Williams in 2001, "but the imperialism of the liberal way may be more dangerous because of its open ended nature – its conviction that it represents a superior form of life [while denying its] self righteous fanaticism."

He had in mind a speech by Tony Blair in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, in which Blair promised to "reorder this world around us" according to his "moral values." The carnage of a million dead in Iraq was the result.

Blair's crimes are not unusual. Since 1945, some 69 countries – more than a third of the membership of the United Nations – have suffered some or all of the following. They have been invaded, their governments overthrown, their popular movements suppressed, their elections subverted and their people bombed. The historian Mark Curtis estimates the death toll in the millions.

With the demise of the European empires, this has been the project of the liberal flame carrier, the "exceptional" United States, whose celebrated "progressive" president, John F. Kennedy, according to new research, authorized the bombing of Moscow during the Cuban crisis in 1962. (As events unfolded, of course, the bombing didn't happen.)

Indispensable Nation

"If we have to use force," said Madeleine Albright, U.S. Secretary of State in the liberal administration of Bill Clinton and today a passionate campaigner for his wife, "it is because we are America. We are the indispensable nation. We stand tall. We see further into the future."

One of Hillary Clinton's most searing crimes was the destruction of Libya in 2011. At her urging, and with American logistical support, NATO launched 9,700 "strike sorties" against Libya, according to its own records, of which more than a third were aimed at civilian targets. They included missiles with uranium warheads. See the photographs of the rubble of Misurata and Sirte, and the mass

graves identified by the Red Cross. Read the UNICEF report on the children killed, “most [of them] under the age of ten.”

In Anglo-American scholarship, followed slavishly by the liberal media on both sides of the Atlantic, influential theorists known as “liberal realists” have long taught that liberal imperialists – a term they never use – are the world’s peace brokers and crisis managers, rather than the cause of a crisis. They have taken the humanity out of the study of nations and congealed it with a jargon that serves warmongering power. Laying out whole nations for autopsy, they have identified “failed states” (nations difficult to exploit) and “rogue states” (nations resistant to Western dominance).

Whether or not the targeted regime is a democracy or dictatorship is irrelevant. In the Middle East, Western liberalism’s collaborators have long been extremist Islamists, lately Al Qaeda, while cynical notions of democracy and human rights serve as rhetorical cover for conquest and mayhem – as in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Haiti, Honduras. See the public record of those good liberals Bill and Hillary Clinton. Theirs is a standard to which Trump can only aspire.

John Pilger is an Australian-British journalist based in London. Pilger’s Web site is: www.johnpilger.com

Kerry Balks at Supplying MH-17 Data

Exclusive: The father of a young American killed aboard Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 in 2014 says Secretary of State Kerry balks at turning over U.S. data that Kerry cited three days after the tragedy in eastern Ukraine, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Secretary of State John Kerry has rebuffed a request from the father of the only American citizen killed aboard Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 for Kerry to disclose the radar and other data that he cited in 2014 in claiming to know the precise location of the missile launch that allegedly downed the airliner over eastern Ukraine killing 298 people.

In [a letter](#) to Kerry dated Jan. 5, 2016, Thomas Schansman, the father of American-Dutch citizen Quinn Schansman, asked Kerry to turn over that data to aid the investigation seeking to identify who was responsible for shooting down

the plane on July 17, 2014. In a letter dated March 7, 2016, but just delivered to Thomas Schansman on Thursday, Kerry expressed his condolences and repeated his claim to know where the missile launch originated, but did not provide new details.

Kerry wrote, "The assessment I provided to the media three days following the shoot down remains unchanged, and is corroborated by the findings of the Dutch Safety Board [DSB]. Flight 17 was shot down by a BUK surface-to-air missile fired from separatist-controlled territory in eastern Ukraine."

But Kerry's assertion is not entirely correct. Despite Kerry's claim on July 20, 2014 – three days after the shoot-down – to know the location of the missile launch, the Dutch Safety Board reported last October that it could only place the likely launch site within a 320-square-kilometer area that included territory under both government and rebel control. (The safety board did not seek to identify which side fired the fateful missile.)

Why the U.S. government has dragged its heels about supplying the evidence that Kerry claimed to possess just days after the tragedy has become a secondary mystery to the allegations and counter-allegations about whodunit. That Kerry would not even elaborate on that information in response to the father of the lone American victim is even more striking.

In an email to me with Kerry's letter attached, Thomas Schansman wrote, "the message is clear: no answer on my request to hand over satellite and/or radar data to DSB or public."

Plus, Kerry's credibility has come under a darkening cloud because of recent disclosures undermining his repeated claims on Aug. 30, 2013, that "we know" that Syrian government forces were responsible for the Aug. 21, 2013 sarin gas attack outside Damascus. Despite Kerry's assertions of certainty in that case, he presented no verifiable evidence and it has since been confirmed that the U.S. intelligence community lacked "slam dunk" proof.

Nearly a year after his "we know" performance regarding the Syria-sarin case, Kerry staged a reprise expressing similar certainty about the MH-17 case – again dumping the blame on the target of an intensive U.S. propaganda campaign, this time Russia, which was backing the rebels in eastern Ukraine. Kerry again failed to supply supporting evidence (beyond some dubious references to "social media").

Cracks in the Story

Also, some of Kerry's MH-17 assertions have shown cracks as more information has become available. For instance, despite Kerry's putting the blame on the ethnic

Russian rebels and their supporters in Moscow, Western intelligence now says the only functioning Buk anti-aircraft missiles in the area were under the control of the Ukrainian military.

According to Dutch intelligence – and implicitly corroborated by U.S. intelligence – Ukraine’s Buk batteries were the only anti-aircraft missiles in the area capable of hitting a commercial airliner flying at 33,000 feet. That information was contained in a little-noticed Dutch intelligence report last October citing information from the Netherlands’ Military Intelligence and Security Service (MIVD).

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

MIVD added that the rebels lacked that capacity, having only short-range anti-aircraft missiles and a few inoperable Buk missiles that had been captured from a Ukrainian military base. “During the course of July, several reliable sources indicated that the systems that were at the military base were not operational,” MIVD said. “Therefore, they could not be used by the Separatists.”

U.S. intelligence, which had eastern Ukraine under intensive overhead surveillance in summer 2014, implicitly corroborated MIVD’s conclusion in a U.S. “Government Assessment” released by the Director of National Intelligence on July 22, 2014. It listed weapons systems that Russia had provided the rebels but made no mention of a Buk missile battery.

In other words, based on satellite imagery and other intelligence reviewed both before and after the shoot-down, U.S. and other Western intelligence services could find no proof that Russia had ever given a Buk system to the rebels or introduced one into the area. If Russia had provided a Buk battery – four 16-foot-long missiles hauled around by trucks – it would have been hard to miss.

There was also logic to support the notion that a Ukrainian team may have been responsible for the MH-17 shoot-down. At the time, the Ukrainian military was mounting an offensive against the rebels, who had resisted a U.S.-backed coup on Feb. 22, 2014, which ousted elected President Viktor Yanukovich, who had strong support among Ukraine’s ethnic Russian minority in the east.

As the Ukrainian offensive claimed territory that the rebels had held, the Ukrainian military moved several Buk anti-aircraft missile batteries toward the front, presumably out of concern that Russia might directly intervene to save

the rebels from annihilation.

Plus, on July 16, 2014, a Ukrainian warplane was shot down apparently by an air-to-air missile believed fired by a Russian jet, giving reason for the Ukrainian anti-aircraft batteries to be on edge the next day, looking for Russian aircraft intruding into Ukraine's airspace.

(Another possible scenario, reportedly examined by U.S. intelligence analysts, was that a rogue Ukrainian team working with a hardline oligarch hoped to shoot down Russian President Vladimir Putin's plane returning from a South American trip at about the same time and with similar markings as MH-17.)

But the evidence – that the only operational Buk batteries were under control of the Ukrainian military – did not fit the U.S. propaganda needs of blaming Russia and the rebels. Any indication that the post-coup Ukrainian government was responsible would instead put the U.S.-backed Kiev regime in a negative light.

So, it makes sense in a "strategic communications" kind of way for Kerry and other U.S. officials to leave the conventional wisdom – blaming Putin and Russia for the 298 deaths – in place for as long as possible. Kerry told Thomas Schansman that he and the other families of victims should expect a long wait before the perpetrators are brought to justice.

Expressing Condolences

In the letter to Thomas Schansman, Secretary Kerry wrote, "As a father myself, I can only begin to imagine the pain and loss you have endured with your son's tragic passing. My heart goes out to you and your family."

Kerry then added, "This investigative work is not easy, and bringing those responsible to justice will not be a quick process. However, Quinn, your family, and the families of all the others who died that day deserve such justice, and we will continue to do everything possible to achieve it."

But the "everything" doesn't apparently include releasing the data that Kerry claimed to have just days after the crash.

On July 20, 2014, Kerry appeared on NBC's "Meet the Press" and declared, "we picked up the imagery of this launch. We know the trajectory. We know where it came from. We know the timing. And it was exactly at the time that this aircraft disappeared from the radar."

In the letter asking Kerry to release that data, Thomas Schansman noted Kerry's similar comments to a news conference on Aug. 12, 2014, when the Secretary of State said about the Buk anti-aircraft missile suspected of downing the plane:

“We saw the take-off. We saw the trajectory. We saw the hit. We saw this aeroplane disappear from the radar screens. So there is really no mystery about where it came from and where these weapons have come from.”

Yet where the missile launch occurred has remained a point of mystery to the Dutch-led investigation. Last October, the Dutch Safety Board put the missile launch in a 320-square-kilometer area. Almaz-Antey, the Russian arms manufacturer of the Buk systems, conducted its own experiments to determine the likely firing location and placed it in a much smaller area near the village of Zaroshchenskoye, about 20 kilometers west of the DSB’s zone and in an area under Ukrainian government control.

Earlier this month, Fred Westerbeke, the head of the Dutch-led Joint Investigation Team, told the families of the victims that the inquiry had yet to pin down the missile launch site, saying “In the second half of the year we expect exact results.” In other words, on the second anniversary of the shoot-down, the investigators looking into the MH-17 tragedy still might not know what Kerry claimed to know three days afterwards.

[For more on this topic, see Consortiumnews.com’s “[Flight 17 Shoot-Down Scenario Shifts](#)”; “[The Danger of an MH-17 Cold Case](#)”; and “[The Ever-Curiouser MH-17 Case.](#)”]

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](#)).

Obama’s Foreign-Policy Self-Enslavement

Exclusive: President Obama may have seen his refusal to bomb Syria in 2013 as his “liberation day” from Official Washington’s expectations, but he promptly put himself back into captivity, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

In late August 2013, with Barack Obama on the verge of launching retaliatory airstrikes against the Syrian military for its alleged role in a lethal sarin gas attack, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper informed the President that U.S. intelligence doubted that Bashar al-Assad’s government was actually responsible, causing Obama to pull back from the attack.

That new detail was disclosed in Jeffrey Goldberg's opus for The Atlantic on Obama's foreign policy, but Goldberg – in an extraordinary display of cognitive dissonance – then wrote the rest of his lengthy article as if he had forgotten his own reporting. He made his story conform to the powerful Washington “group think” that Assad had carried out the attack and thus had crossed Obama's “red line” against using chemical weapons.

But the disclosure of Clapper's warning that U.S. intelligence lacked “slam dunk” evidence implicating Assad's forces confirmed reporting at Consortiumnews and a few other independent news outlets in 2013 – and also underscored how President Obama then joined in lying to maintain the anti-Assad propaganda themes.

Not only did the White House issue a “Government Assessment” on Aug. 30, 2013, trying to pin the blame for the attack on Assad's regime – and not only did Obama dispatch Secretary of State John Kerry to make the dubious anti-Assad case to the country – but Obama himself asserted Assad's guilt in his Sept. 24, 2013 address to the United Nations General Assembly.

“It's an insult to human reason and to the legitimacy of this institution to suggest that anyone other than the regime carried out this attack,” Obama said. Yet, the President knew that many of his own intelligence analysts doubted that the Assad regime carried out the attack.

In other words, if Obama's statement is taken literally, he was asserting that much of the U.S. intelligence community was either dishonest or crazy. But, more likely, Obama was just reading the words of a speech prepared by State Department propagandists who understood the need to knock down the growing suspicion that the attack was a provocation committed by Islamist extremists trying to trick the United States to join the war on their side.

Obama must have recognized that his words were deceptive but he didn't have the integrity or the courage to strike them from the speech. He just went along like a willing puppet of the foreign-policy establishment mouthing falsehoods prepared for him rather than acting decisively as America's Commander in Chief to protect his own and his nation's credibility.

Obama's U.N. speech puts into a different context the narrative that Goldberg presented in The Atlantic article. There, Obama seems to relish his refusal to go along with what he “calls, derisively, ‘the Washington playbook,’” which dictates a military response to foreign challenges like the Syria sarin case.

Goldberg wrote that Aug. 31, 2013, when Obama backed away from the widely anticipated Syrian bombing campaign, “was his liberation day.” But several weeks

later, Obama went before the United Nations and denounced as irrational anyone who raised exactly the doubts that had been central to his decision not to bomb.

So, what is one to make of Obama's passive-aggressive resistance to the military imperative mandated by the "Washington playbook" while succumbing to its propagandistic tactics to justify war? Even as he resisted the demands to bomb, he could not challenge the Washington establishment enough to explain to the American people that U.S. intelligence analysts were uncertain about Assad's guilt.

Instead, Obama allowed his subordinates to pile on the calumnies against Assad – with Secretary of State John Kerry doing so in belligerent speeches and the White House releasing a "Government Assessment" fingering Assad's forces – while Obama let those distortions go unchallenged and, indeed, reinforced them in his U.N. speech.

Telling the American People

By contrast, Obama could have taken his case to the American people. He could have given a speech saying that war is too serious and solemn an act for a president to go off half-cocked. He could have said he would not launch military strikes if the U.S. intelligence community wasn't sure who was guilty.

The American people would have surely understood that point of view – and they would have been empowered by being brought in on what the U.S. government knew and didn't know. Yes, it would have undermined the propaganda campaign then underway to demonize Assad, but if you believe in democracy and the concept of an informed electorate, wouldn't that have been a good thing?

What I was told at the time – and what the Clapper disclosure in *The Atlantic* confirms – is that in the days after the Aug. 21, 2013 sarin attack, Obama knew quite well that there were serious questions about who had fired the one home-made, sarin-laden rocket that U.N. inspectors recovered in the Zamalka neighborhood outside Damascus.

However, in the weeks and months after the sarin attack, those of us who criticized the flimsiness of the U.S. "Government Assessment" – I called it a "dodgy dossier" on the day it was released – were derided as "Assad apologists." Meanwhile, the mainstream media and leading "human rights" groups sought to enforce a "group think" justifying the launching of an American-led "humanitarian" war in Syria.

In that behavior, the mainstream American news media revealed that it had learned nothing from the Iraq War disaster when virtually all the leading publications and nearly all the esteemed commentators agreed en masse that

Saddam Hussein was hiding WMD stockpiles and that a U.S. invasion was justified. A decade later, these “journalists” showed no more skepticism when the neocons were pushing another “regime change” in Syria.

Yet, there were plenty of reasons to have doubts. There was the Obama administration’s refusal to release any of its supposed proof to support its conclusions and the curious absence of Director of National Intelligence Clapper from the public presentation of the administration’s *casus belli*.

I reported at the time that the reason for keeping the DNI on the sidelines was that he otherwise might have been asked if there was a consensus in the intelligence community supporting the administration’s certitude that Assad’s regime was responsible. At that point, Clapper would have had to acknowledge the disagreement from rank-and-file analysts (or face the likelihood that they would speak out).

All of that should have been obvious to any professional journalist if he or she had asked a few probing questions or noted how odd it was that Clapper would not play the role that CIA Director George Tenet did in 2003 when Tenet sat behind Secretary of State Colin Powell to lend credibility to Powell’s mendacious U.N. speech regarding Iraq’s WMD.

It also made no sense for Assad’s forces to use sarin outside Damascus just as U.N. inspectors were arriving to investigate cases of chemical weapons that Assad was blaming on the rebels. Obviously, the attention of the inspectors would be diverted to this sarin attack and American hardliners would use the incident to press Obama to launch a military strike on Assad.

Overseas Skepticism

To get any such skepticism from mainstream publications, you had to look abroad. For instance, Robert Fisk, a veteran reporter for London’s Independent newspaper, found a lack of consensus about whodunit among U.N. officials and other international observers in Damascus despite the career risks that they faced by deviating from the conventional wisdom regarding Assad’s guilt.

“In a country indeed a world where propaganda is more influential than truth, discovering the origin of the chemicals that suffocated so many Syrians a month ago is an investigation fraught with journalistic perils,” Fisk wrote. “Nevertheless, it also has to be said that grave doubts are being expressed by the UN and other international organisations in Damascus that the sarin gas missiles were fired by Assad’s army.

“While these international employees cannot be identified, some of them were in Damascus on 21 August and asked a series of questions to which no one has yet

supplied an answer. Why, for example, would Syria wait until the UN inspectors were ensconced in Damascus on 18 August before using sarin gas little more than two days later and only four miles from the hotel in which the UN had just checked in?

“Having thus presented the UN with evidence of the use of sarin which the inspectors quickly acquired at the scene, the Assad regime, if guilty, would surely have realised that a military attack would be staged by Western nations. ... As one Western NGO put it ‘if Assad really wanted to use sarin gas, why for God’s sake, did he wait for two years and then when the UN was actually on the ground to investigate?’”

Later, American aeronautical experts calculated that the one U.N.-recovered sarin-laden rocket could only travel about two kilometers, not the nine kilometers that the Assad-did-it crowd was claiming would trace the flight path back to a Syrian military base.

And, then, in 2014, legendary investigative reporter Seymour Hersh cited intelligence sources blaming the attack on jihadist rebels possibly collaborating with Turkish intelligence. But Hersh published his article in the London Review of Books because American mainstream publications wouldn’t deviate from the Assad-did-it “group think.”

We also now know that if Obama had been baited into another war, the U.S. onslaught might have collapsed Assad’s military and led to a victory by the Islamic State and/or Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front, creating an even worse humanitarian catastrophe in Syria and across the region.

Yet, despite knowing what he knew and understanding many of the risks, Obama went before the United Nations on Sept. 24, 2013, and declared that no reasonable person could doubt Assad’s guilt – a lie that has now been confirmed by The Atlantic article’s recounting of Clapper’s doubt.

Obama’s falsehood – expressed to the world community on such a weighty issue of war or peace – fits with the pattern of deceptions of President George W. Bush’s administration on Iraq and his own administration’s obsessive use of propaganda (or “strategic communications”) on a wide range of topics, including Libya, Ukraine and Russia.

However, in this pathetic narrative, Obama comes across less as a willful liar than a weak executive who won’t assert control over his own foreign policy or even cross out words in a prepared speech that he knows are false. Instead of taking command, he drags his heels on going to war in Syria, gets badgered by his own subordinates and by the neocon-dominated foreign-policy establishment,

before finally saying no. Then, Obama doesn't even dare let the American people in on why he made the decision that he did.

The Sullen Teen

I sometimes picture Obama's conduct of foreign policy by envisioning the President as a sullen teen-ager on a family vacation, sitting in the back seat of the car complaining that he'd rather be hanging out with his friends. This unhappy teen lets others do the driving but occasionally throws enough of a temper tantrum to make continuation of the trip impossible.

But Obama's passive-aggressive behavior didn't even change after his "liberation day" on Aug. 31, 2013. He continued to let his subordinates set the direction of his foreign policy. For instance, he agreed to covert weapons deliveries to Syrian rebels, who were operating in tandem with Islamist extremists, including Al Qaeda's Nusra Front, to appease the neocons and the liberal hawks, though that strategy worsened the Syrian bloodshed and drove millions of refugees into Turkey and Europe.

When neocon Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland helped orchestrate the overthrow of Ukraine's elected president in February 2014 and sparked a new and costly Cold War with Russia, Obama again went along.

Obama even joined in demonizing Russian President Vladimir Putin though Putin played key roles in two of Obama's most important foreign policy successes, getting Assad to surrender his chemical weapons arsenal (as a way to defuse that crisis) and persuading Iran to accept tight limits on its nuclear program (arguably Obama's signature diplomatic accomplishment).

Yet, rather than hold back Nuland and her cohorts as they pulled off a "regime change" on Russia's border, Obama let this dangerous policy go forward, amid propagandistic charges of "Russian aggression" and personal insults directed at Putin. A White House spokesman even mocked Putin's tendency to sit with his legs spread.

Last year, when Islamic State terrorists blew up a Russian charter plane over the Sinai killing 224 people, mostly Russian citizens, Obama couldn't resist citing the deaths to chide Putin for having intervened militarily in Syria in support of the government.

At a Dec. 1, 2015 news conference in Paris, Obama expressed his lack of sympathy as part of a bizarre comment in which he faulted Putin for somehow not turning around the Syrian conflict during the previous month while Obama and his allies have been floundering in their "war" against the Islamic State and its parent, Al Qaeda, for years, if not decades.

“The Russians now have been there for several weeks, over a month, and I think fair-minded reporters who looked at the situation would say that the situation hasn’t changed significantly,” Obama said. “In the interim, Russia has lost a commercial passenger jet. You’ve seen another jet shot down. There have been losses in terms of Russian personnel. And I think Mr. Putin understands that, with Afghanistan fresh in the memory, for him to simply get bogged down in a inconclusive and paralyzing civil conflict is not the outcome that he’s looking for.”

It is hard to imagine any other time when a Western leader behaved so callously in the face of a terrorist atrocity. But mocking Putin is always good politics in Official Washington, no matter what the circumstances.

However, Obama’s prognosticating skills about a costly Russian failure left a lot to be desired. In early 2016, with Russian air support, the Syrian army notched victory after victory against the Syrian rebels, including Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front and the Islamic State. The successes led to a fragile cease-fire and a delicate reopening of peace talks as well as to Putin’s surprise announcement that he was withdrawing the bulk of the Russian military force.

Rather than the pointless “quagmire” that Obama smugly foresaw, Putin seemed to have achieved a successful strategic maneuver at relatively modest cost, a marked contrast to Obama’s meandering approach to the Syrian crisis in which he has fed the violence by having the CIA deliver weapons while also blocking his advisers’ more extreme war plans.

Yet, by failing to level with the American people about the relevant facts and his strategic reasoning, Obama continues to come across as a confused and conflicted chief executive. Though he may have seen his refusal to bomb Syria on Aug. 31, 2013, as his “liberation day,” Obama put himself back into captivity over the past two-plus years, shackled at the feet of the neocons and liberal hawks who still dominate Washington’s foreign-policy establishment.

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](#)).

Obama’s Curious Interview

Exclusive: President Obama’s out-of-school interview with The Atlantic has

provided more questions than answers, including why Obama publicly unloaded on erstwhile U.S. allies – and why to a clueless neocon, asks Daniel Lazare.

By Daniel Lazare

Jeffrey Goldberg's 20,000-word [interview-cum-profile of Barack Obama](#) in *The Atlantic* has been out for more than a week, yet the controversy continues to build and build. With half of Official Washington wondering how Obama could be so frank, the big questions now seem to be:

–Why did he choose to unload now about America's nearest and dearest allies instead of saving it for his memoirs?

–Why did he choose Goldberg to unload it to?

With regard to the first, there's always the possibility that it's all a big mistake, that the President forgot what he had said to Goldberg over the course of numerous interviews, and that he therefore failed to anticipate the impact his statements would have. But that's hard to believe in the case of someone so savvy.

More likely is that he knew exactly what the impact would be and, with less than ten months to go in office, figured that now was the time to let it rip. His aim was not only to defend himself against right-wing charges that he choked at a crucial moment by failing to bomb Syria following the August 2013 Ghouta poison gas attack, but to hit back at any number of people who have gotten under his skin over the years.

Here he is, for example, on Washington's legions of foreign-policy experts:

“There's a playbook in Washington that presidents are supposed to follow. It's a playbook that comes out of the foreign-policy establishment. And the playbook prescribes responses to different events, and these responses tend to be militarized responses. Where America is directly threatened, the playbook works. But the playbook can also be a trap that can lead to bad decisions. In the midst of an international challenge like Syria, you get judged harshly if you don't follow the playbook, even if there are good reasons why it does not apply.”

The foreign-policy establishment, in other words, is like a stopped clock – occasionally right but mostly dead wrong.

Obama regards Pakistan as “disastrously dysfunctional” – Goldberg's paraphrase rather than the President's actual words – and wonders why it “should be considered an ally of the U.S. at all.” He views Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan as

“a failure and an authoritarian” and regards Israel’s Benjamin Netanyahu as both “condescending” and “too fearful and politically paralyzed” to move toward a two-state solution.

His comments about Saudi Arabia and the other Persian Gulf oil autocracies are no less cutting. Goldberg recounts a conversation that Obama had with Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull at an Asian-Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting in which the President expressed dismay at seeing Indonesia, where he had spent part of his childhood, “gradually move from a relaxed, syncretistic Islam to a more fundamentalist, unforgiving interpretation.”

The reason, he went on, is the Gulf States, which have used their oil wealth to flood the country with imams, teachers, and madrasas promoting the harsh Wahhabist line favored by the Saudi elite.

“Aren’t the Saudis your friends?” Turnbull asked. To which Obama replied sarcastically: “It’s complicated.”

Goldberg says that Obama “rails against Saudi Arabia’s state-sanctioned misogyny, arguing in private that ‘a country cannot function in the modern world when it is repressing half of its population.’”

But Goldberg adds that the President is now engaged in a delicate balancing act between Iran, which Obama says “has been an enemy of the United States, and has engaged in state-sponsored terrorism, is a genuine threat to Israel and many of our allies, and engages in all kinds of destructive behavior,” and the Saudis who have a penchant for entering into sectarian conflicts that they cannot “decisively win on their own.”

So while not wishing to “throw our traditional allies overboard in favor of Iran,” his goal is to persuade them “to share the neighborhood and institute some sort of cold peace.”

Incendiary Comments

What makes these comments so incendiary is the suggestion that, rather than America’s oldest ally in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia has been demoted to a regional power on par with its arch-enemy across the gulf. In response, Turki al-Faisal, Saudi Arabia’s longtime chief of intelligence and former ambassador to the U.S., fired off an open letter in the Saudi daily *Arab News* that was so fiery one could all but smell the smoke. Why, he wondered, has Obama changed his tune?

“Is it because you have pivoted to Iran so much that you equate the kingdom’s eighty years of constant friendship with America to an Iranian leadership that

continues to describe America as the biggest enemy, that continues to arm, fund and support sectarian militias in the Arab and Muslim world, that continues to harbor and host Al-Qaeda leaders, that continues to prevent the election of a Lebanese president through Hezbollah, which is identified by your government as a terrorist organization, that continues to kill the Syrian Arab people in league with Bashar Assad?"

Al-Faisal's letter was a farrago of misstatements and falsehoods. The complaint that Iran funds sectarian militias, for instance, is ridiculous since the sectarian militias that the Saudis fund are far more powerful and vicious. Ditto the charge that Iran is in cahoots with Al Qaeda since Saudi Arabia's own relations with the group are the subject of a massive cover-up in both Washington and Riyadh. As for Hezbollah killing Syrian Arabs, all one can say is that the Sunni fundamentalist hordes benefitting from billions of dollars in Saudi aid have killed far more.

Not that that makes Al-Faisal's feelings of betrayal any less genuine. Obama may not think he's throwing old allies overboard, but the Saudis see it differently.

Nonetheless, after seven-plus years in office, it looks like Obama has had enough. After putting up with the likes of Netanyahu, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and the Al Saud, not to mention Nicolas Sarkozy (who Obama says bragged about France's role in the air war against Muammar Gaddafi's Libya without mentioning that "we had wiped out all the air defenses and essentially set up the entire infrastructure") or David Cameron (who he says lost interest in Libya because he was "distracted by a range of other things"), Obama has decided to push back.

Apparently, he thinks it's time for the empire to strike a better bargain with its clients and that a good tongue-lashing is the best way to begin. But Obama is also out to burnish his reputation as he heads into the home stretch, which brings us to the second question: why Goldberg?

The answer is simple. Goldberg is a dunderhead even by neocon standards. As a *New Yorker* staff writer during the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, his reporting was so over the top that it made Judith Miller seem like a model of restraint.

After laboring to establish a link between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda, Goldberg then accused Hezbollah of attempting to set up a terror cell in Paraguay of all strange places. In an article in *Slate* in October 2002, he wrote off opponents of the impending invasion as innocent souls whose "limited experience in the Middle East ... causes them to reach the naive conclusion that an invasion of Iraq will cause America to be loathed in the Middle East, rather than respected."

Goldberg concluded with a resounding prediction: “In five years ... I believe that the coming invasion of Iraq will be remembered as an act of profound morality.”

Those words should be tattooed on Goldberg’s forehead like the mark of Cain. Since then, he has “failed steadily upward,” to quote the journalist Ken Silverstein, moving from *The New Yorker* to *The Atlantic* where he has used his skills to interview Hillary Clinton, John Kerry, Marco Rubio, Chris Christie and others of that ilk.

This is undoubtedly what drew the President’s notice. Obama, who is very smart, knows that Goldberg is not and that he therefore can be trusted to overlook the glaring contradictions in whatever he has to say. As a result, any number of self-serving statements fly by unchallenged.

Obama, for instance, told Goldberg that America should avoid entering into sectarian conflicts on the side of “our gulf partners, our traditional friends.” But Goldberg apparently didn’t think to ask about Yemen, where the administration is now backing the Saudis and other Sunni states in a year-long air war against Shi’ite Houthis for precisely the same sectarian reasons.

Ignoring US Interference

Neither did Goldberg think to mention Syria where the U.S. is a full partner in a Sunni fundamentalist campaign aimed at toppling Bashar al-Assad – not because he is a dictator, as the White House likes to claim, but because he also falls on the wrong side of the Sunni-Shi’ite divide.

Goldberg remained mum when Obama blamed “a tiny faction” for steering Islam in a “violent, radical, fanatical, nihilistic” direction while lambasting Saudi Arabia for spreading Wahhabist bigotry. How the average reader might wonder can Obama blame a small faction and an entire country at the same time, Goldberg is oblivious – which suits Obama just fine.

So Goldberg’s general obtuseness makes him a good choice. But his hawkishness makes him even better. He’s agog that Obama dares defend his decision not to bomb Syrian military forces in August 2013, which makes the President look all the nobler as he sounds off against the foreign-policy experts.

At one point, Goldberg confesses: “The president’s unwillingness to counter the baiting by American adversaries can feel emotionally unsatisfying, I said, and I told him that every so often, I’d like to see him give Vladimir Putin the finger. It’s atavistic, I said, understanding my audience. ‘It is,’ the president responded coolly.”

This makes Obama look civilized as well, which, as far as he is concerned, is

undoubtedly another point in favor of choosing Goldberg.

But if Obama had chosen a different journalist, one who is not beholden to the Washington consensus, he might have had to deal with questions that were more difficult. In Syria, Goldberg says, Obama “resisted demands to act in part because he assumed, based on the analysis of U.S. intelligence, that Assad would fall without his help.”

But “as Assad clung to power,” Goldberg adds, “Obama’s resistance to direct intervention only grew.” But what does this mean other than that Obama thought Assad would go easily but then dithered when he put up a fight?

“After several months of deliberation,” Goldberg continues, “he authorized the CIA to train and fund Syrian rebels, but he also shared the outlook of his former defense secretary, Robert Gates, who had routinely asked in meetings, ‘Shouldn’t we finish up the two wars we have before we look for another?’”

But what does this mean other than the fact that, instead of putting American lives on the line, Obama preferred the usual imperialist gambit of hiring one set of semi-colonial subjects to slit the throats of another? As pressure grew for a military assault, Obama may indeed have “come to believe that he was walking into a trap,” as Goldberg puts it, “one laid both by allies and by adversaries, and by conventional expectations of what an American president is supposed to do.”

Obama, in fact, is proud of himself for escaping before the trap was sprung. But that still begs the question why he has surrounded himself with hawks from the earliest, people like Hillary Clinton, Samantha Power, and John Kerry, all of whom pushed for direct military intervention. Could it be that he feels he needs such people to give him credibility with the same foreign-policy establishment he pretends to criticize?

Goldberg portrays Obama as a skeptic determined to avoid the slippery slope in Syria. “The notion that we could have – in a clean way that didn’t commit U.S. military forces – changed the equation on the ground there was never true,” he quotes Obama as saying. But if that’s the case, why send the CIA to train Syrian rebels at all?

Finally, he lets Obama get away with a misleading account of how the Russian leadership was able to step in during the Ghouta crisis and avert the threat of military intervention. According to Goldberg:

“Amid the confusion [of whether the U.S. government should bomb or not], a deus ex machina appeared in the form of the Russian president, Vladimir Putin. At the G20 summit in St. Petersburg, which was held the week after the Syria reversal,

Obama pulled Putin aside, he recalled to me, and told the Russian president ‘that if he forced Assad to get rid of the chemical weapons, that that would eliminate the need for us taking a military strike.’ Within weeks, Kerry, working with his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, would engineer the removal of most of Syria’s chemical-weapons arsenal – a program whose existence Assad until then had refused to even acknowledge.”

Not Making Sense

This is not the first time Obama has said something along these lines. But it doesn’t make sense. When, shortly after the G20 meeting, a reporter asked Kerry if there was anything the Assad government could do to avert an attack, he seemed taken aback.

“Sure,” he said, “he could turn over every single bit of his chemical weapons to the international community in the next week – turn it over, all of it without delay and allow the full and total accounting [of it]. But he isn’t about to do it and it can’t be done.”

This doesn’t sound like someone whose boss thought up just such a scheme three or four days earlier. It’s possible, of course, that Obama mentioned the idea to Putin but forgot to tell his Secretary of State (an indication that Obama doesn’t trust his hawkish underlings). But if that’s the case, it suggests a remarkable breakdown in high-level communications.

In fact, Kerry gave every appearance of being caught flat-footed when Lavrov seized on his words to propose a deal to remove Syria’s chemical-weapons arsenal *in toto*. The administration, consequently, had no choice but to go along. Indeed, this is what infuriated the foreign-policy establishment most of all, i.e. the fact that the administration had allowed an opportunity for another round of “shock and awe” to slip from its grasp, all because of interference by those perfidious Russians.

None of this intrigue and confusion shows up in *The Atlantic’s* account. Instead, what we get is a version designed to make Obama look good and, in the process, make Goldberg seem like a serious and weighty journalist.

Obama may think of himself as a critic of the foreign-policy establishment. But his role has really been to shore it up.

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

US Intel Vets Warn Against Torture

Exclusive: Experienced intelligence professionals reaffirm that torture – while popular with “tough” politicians – doesn’t work in getting accurate and actionable information, says ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

To those living “outside the Beltway” it may seem counterintuitive that those of us whose analysis has been correct on key issues that the U.S. government got criminally wrong – like the invasion of Iraq in 2003 – would be blacklisted from “mainstream” media and ostracized by the Smart People of the Establishment. But, alas, that’s the way it is.

Forget the continuing carnage in which hundreds of thousands have been killed and millions made refugees. Within the mainstream U.S. media and around Washington’s major policy circles, there is little serious dialogue, much less debate about what went so hideously wrong; and Americans still innocently wonder – regarding the people on the receiving end of the blunderbuss violence – “why they hate us.”

After more than 13 years of presenting thoughtful critiques to senior officials – and having little discernible impact – we Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity are strongly tempted to take some solace in having made a good-faith effort to spread some truth around – and, now, go play golf. But the stakes are too high. We can’t in good conscience approach the first tee without having tried one more time.

Accordingly, we repeat the offer we extended on Feb. 26 – this time to the winnowed candidate roster of Hillary Clinton, Ted Cruz, John Kasich, Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump – to make our deep experience and proven expertise available to those of you interested in the tell-it-like-it-is analysis that has been our niche for so many years.

Given our 13-year record for accuracy and insight, we had hoped that at least one or two of you would take us up on the offer, especially since a few of you have faced criticism for a paucity of foreign policy and national security experts.

Of more immediate importance to the nation and the world, statements by some of you in reaction to the Monday bombings in Brussels, seem to betray:

A) Gross naiveté about how to counter terrorism;

B) Demagogic disregard for the civil liberty protections embodied in the U.S. Constitution; or

C) Both of the above.

We can help round out your understanding of terrorism, its causes and its possible cures – but with respect to “A” above, you may wish to begin by reading [VIPS memorandum #15](#) (of June 18, 2007), *How **Not** to Counter Terrorism*, drafted by our VIPS colleague, former Special Agent Coleen Rowley, who was FBI Division Counsel, Minneapolis, during 9/11. (Rowley later blew the whistle about the ineptitude at FBI headquarters that thwarted the simple steps that would have prevented those terrorist attacks.)

On Torture, Polls & Polls

Based on our lengthy experience in intelligence, we know that torture doesn’t “work.” So we confess to a certain disgust with the “new normal,” fostered not only by some presidential candidates but also by the media, that torture techniques like waterboarding yield useful intelligence. **They don’t.**

This issue has come to the fore again in the immediate aftermath of the Brussels bombings. We continue to be concerned that presidential candidates may be unaware, not only that harsh interrogation techniques don’t “work,” but also that they are a great fillip to the recruitment of more terrorists.

There are, of course, polls purporting to show that a majority of Americans still think that torturing “bad guys” can be justified. That simply means that many citizens have been seduced by artificially stoked fear into believing what **all** independent investigations – including the detailed Senate study relying on original CIA documents – have proven: that despite all the TV and Hollywood propaganda “showing” that torture “works,” it doesn’t.

The sole exception is if your purpose is to obtain unreliable or false “intelligence.” For instance, if you wish to coerce an Al Qaeda operative into “confessing” that there were close ties between Iraq’s Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda, well, then torture can work like a charm. A detainee will happily confirm a lie to stop the pain.

As for those responsible for implementing torture – like former CIA directors George Tenet, Porter Goss and Michael Hayden – is it not clear that they have strong incentive to “justify” their criminal behavior? Some other complicit CIA officials and operatives, eager to protect themselves from the opprobrium that comes from torturing, also continue to pretend that torture helps “keep us safe.”

The opposite is the case, but these torture practitioners and their accomplices continue to promote the lie that useful intelligence can be gotten via abusive interrogation techniques (never mind that most such “enhanced” techniques are clearly illegal, not to mention immoral and ineffective).

VIPS has spoken out strongly – most recently in a Sept. 14, 2015 [memo](#) – against these crass attempts by former intelligence officials to exculpate themselves and other perpetrators.

What the commanding general of U.S. Army intelligence has said about torture bears repeating: On Sept. 6, 2006, the very day President George W. Bush announced and applauded the effectiveness of “enhanced interrogation techniques,” Gen. John Kimmons told a Pentagon press conference: “I am absolutely convinced [that] no good intelligence is going to come from abusive practices. I think history tells us that. I think the empirical evidence of the last five years, hard years, tell us that.”

Wise Advisers Needed

Some of today’s presidential candidates are brimming with what we’re told are sage foreign policy advisers, even though many have been implicated in the disastrous policies of recent decades; other candidates have relatively few advisers – some of them unknown entities about whom little can be found even via Goggle. As a collective, VIPS stands ready to help any and all candidates who might be interested. It may now be time to insert some names into our offer.

The listing below contains only those members of VIPS who signed onto our [Memorandum](#) of Sept. 14, 2015, addressing our former bosses’ transparent attempts to cover up their role in torture:

VIPS Steering Group, Sept. 14, 2015

Fulton Armstrong, National Intelligence Officer for Latin America (ret.)

William Binney, former Technical Director, World Geopolitical & Military Analysis, NSA; co-founder, SIGINT Automation Research Center (ret.)

Tony Camerino, former Air Force and Air Force Reserves, senior interrogator in Iraq and author of *How to Break a Terrorist* under pseudonym Matthew Alexander

Glenn L. Carle, Deputy National Intelligence Officer for Transnational Threats, CIA (ret.)

Thomas Drake, former Senior Executive, NSA

Daniel Ellsberg, former State Department and Defense Department Official (VIPS

Associate)

Philip Giraldi, CIA, Operations Officer (ret.)

Matthew Hoh, former Capt., USMC, Iraq & Foreign Service Officer, Afghanistan (associate VIPS)

Larry C Johnson, CIA & State Department (ret.)

Michael S. Kearns, Captain, USAF Intelligence Agency (Retired), ex Master SERE Instructor

John Kiriakou, Former CIA Counterterrorism Officer

Karen Kwiatkowski, Lt. Col., US Air Force (ret.)

Edward Loomis, NSA, Cryptologic Computer Scientist (ret.)

David MacMichael, National Intelligence Council (ret.)

James Marcinkowski, Attorney, former CIA Operations Officer

Ray McGovern, former US Army infantry/intelligence officer & CIA analyst (ret.)

Elizabeth Murray, Deputy National Intelligence Officer for Middle East, CIA (ret.)

Todd Pierce, MAJ, US Army Judge Advocate (ret.)

Scott Ritter, former Maj., USMC, former UN Weapon Inspector, Iraq

Diane Roark, former professional staff, House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence

Coleen Rowley, Division Counsel & Special Agent, FBI (ret.)

Ali Soufan, former FBI Special Agent

Robert David Steele, former CIA Operations Officer

Greg Thielmann, U.S. Foreign Service Officer (ret.) and former Senate Intelligence Committee

Peter Van Buren, U.S. Department of State, Foreign Service Officer (ret.) (associate VIPS)

Lawrence Wilkerson, Colonel (USA, ret.), Distinguished Visiting Professor, College of William and Mary

Valerie Plame Wilson, CIA Operations Officer (ret.)

Ann Wright, U.S. Army Reserve Colonel (ret) and former U.S. Diplomat

Ray McGovern served for 30 years as an Army infantry/intelligence officer and then a CIA analyst. He is co-founder of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS).

Sanders Tip-toes in Criticizing Israel

Exclusive: Sen. Sanders ventured hesitantly down the scary path of criticizing Israel, but even his timid approach looked heroic compared to the pro-Israel pandering from Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, says Joe Lauria.

By Joe Lauria

Bernie Sanders supporters appeared thrilled when they learned he'd turned down an invitation to address the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) conference on Monday. By contrast, Donald Trump passed up a debate appearance and Hillary Clinton, Ted Cruz and John Kasich cleared their schedules to speak to 18,000 people inside Washington's Verizon Center.

Snubbing AIPAC requires a degree of courage in American presidential politics and almost no one dares do anything but pander to the hardest-line Israeli partisans. But Sanders, who is fighting for his political life in the campaign, hasn't taken money from the kind of large donors that AIPAC coordinates. Plus, he could never match the other candidates' fervor for Israel.

So perhaps Sanders felt he could afford not to go to AIPAC's gathering, which sent a symbolic message to Americans who feel the U.S. government goes overboard in its favoritism toward Israel. Sanders delivered his views (in a speech in Salt Lake City, Utah) after the conference organizers wouldn't allow a video hook-up.

A Sanders supporter who is also critical of Israel's occupation of Palestine might have been disappointed in what the Vermont senator said. He wouldn't even bluntly call Israel's presence on Palestinian land an occupation, instead describing it as "what amounts to the occupation of Palestinian territory."

What amounts to? In other words, Israel really doesn't mean to occupy this land. This just happened on its way to building ever-increasing settlements. Sanders also takes the very safe line of calling for both an Israeli and a Palestinian

state, the so-called “two-state solution.”

Sanders castigated Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas for threatening to leave the Oslo Accords, which prescribes the two-state idea. Abbas made this threat last September at the U.N. General Assembly, but no serious analyst thinks Abbas meant it.

But the reality is that Oslo is already dead, as dead as the two-state solution. It died in May 1999, when its five-year interim period ended, after which Israel should have withdrawn and a Palestinian state should have been created.

The continuation of this interim period, having now lasted another 17 years, has led to charges by Palestinians and others that Abbas and his Palestinian Authority are mere collaborators with Israel’s continuing occupation.

Pulling out of Oslo now would blow up the Palestinian Authority, cost Abbas his job and throw security fully into Israel’s hands. But such a move would be the necessary first step toward creating a single, democratic state, which is the only solution left. Everything else at this point, including defending Oslo and the “two-state solution,” is hot air that supports the status quo allowing Israel to continue the piecemeal conquest of the West Bank.

Sanders did call for an end to Israeli “disproportionate responses to being attacked.” But he didn’t condemn the two massacres in Gaza in the past seven years as he condemned Hamas rocket fire into Israel.

Syria and the Gulf

On Syria, Sanders appears to accept the Western claim that Russia wasn’t really hitting the Islamic State, but only anti-Assad groups. (It should be noted that Russian leaders never promised to strike only at ISIS, as the U.S. press corps widely reported, but rather the Russians vowed to attack ISIS and other terrorist groups, such as Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front.)

Yes, Russia did hit other rebel groups, including some that fight alongside Nusra, but did so to bolster the Syrian army as the major ground force (with the Kurds) to defeat ISIS and Nusra.

Sanders repeated his refrain that the Gulf Arabs need to do more to defeat the Islamic State. But somebody must have gotten to him because he added the line that he’s not asking Saudi Arabia to “invade” Syria, which is exactly what Sanders seemed to be advocating.

The reality is that Saudi Arabia has already been too involved in Syria, sending in well-armed jihadists to overthrow the government which the Saudis view as

dominated by the Shiite and Alawite faiths whereas Saudi Arabia favors the fanatical Wahhabi version of Sunni Islam. But military reversals by the Saudi-backed rebels over the past several months prompted Saudi Arabia last month to threaten an outright invasion of Syria, along with Turkey.

President Barack Obama reportedly tamped down the heated war threats from Saudi Arabia and Turkey, heading off what would have threatened a much wider war.

But Sanders – for mildly supporting Palestinian rights and offering muted criticism of Israel – would have been savaged by the feisty AIPAC crowd which expects to hear only encouraging words and reciprocated with love toward Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump as they avoided any criticism of Israel and showed no sympathy for the Palestinians.

The packed arena in downtown Washington had a circular stage set up in the middle that appeared to purposely mimic the major parties' nominating conventions. It was as if AIPAC was saying that it was doing the real nominating.

Pumping Up the Crowd

Both Trump and Clinton mounted the stage to express fierce loyalty to an Israel that they essentially said could do no wrong. Their talking points could have been written by Israel's right-wing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Clinton lashed out at critics of Israel who promote boycotting Israeli goods as a peaceful way to pressure Israel to make concessions. Instead, she promised to increase military aid to Israel, which already stands at \$3 billion a year and more than \$100 billion since 1962. She vowed to stop a U.N. Security Council resolution that would set a deadline for the end of Israel's West Bank occupation – something the Oslo Accords already did.

In a half-hour speech, Clinton only uttered the word "Palestinian" ten times, and mostly in connection with "terrorism." She briefly called for a resumption of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

Clinton mentioned "settlements" only once, in a passing reference, saying, "Everyone has to do their part by avoiding damaging actions, including with respect to settlements." Nothing more was said.

With his typical bombast, Trump said no one had studied the Iran nuclear deal as he had, and that his "number one priority" would be to dismantle it. He also said he would not allow the Security Council to impose a settlement in Palestine.

“An agreement imposed by the United Nations would be a total and complete disaster,” he said. “The United States must oppose this resolution and use the power of our veto, which I will use as president 100 percent.”

Trump only used bellicose language toward Palestinians. He cited the killing last week of an American in Israel by “a knife-wielding Palestinian.”

“You don’t reward behavior like that. You cannot do it,” he said. “There’s only one way you treat that kind of behavior. You have to confront it.”

That sounds like a recipe for more bloodshed. Compared to this rhetoric, Sanders’ speech was reasonable. He called on Israel, for instance, to stop stealing Palestinian water. Perhaps Sanders is holding back his real views on Israel and Palestine, fearful that he could not withstand the attacks of the Israel Lobby and a pro-Israel corporate media.

But, in the meantime, his prescription for peace did go not far enough. Once again AIPAC’s apparent stranglehold on U.S.-Middle East policy and on its political candidates seems to snuff out any realistic dream for a resolution of the conflict.

Joe Lauria is a veteran foreign-affairs journalist based at the U.N. since 1990. He has written for the Boston Globe, the London Daily Telegraph, the Johannesburg Star, the Montreal Gazette, the Wall Street Journal and other newspapers. He can be reached at joelauria@gmail.com and followed on Twitter at [@unjoe](https://twitter.com/unjoe).

US Media Hid Al Qaeda’s Syria Role

When Russian airstrikes began in Syria, the U.S. media falsely claimed President Putin had promised to hit only ISIS and instead attacked “moderate” rebels, but the dirty secret was that those rebels were working with Al Qaeda, writes Gareth Porter.

By Gareth Porter

A crucial problem in news media coverage of the Syrian civil war has been how to characterize the relationship between the so-called “moderate” opposition forces armed by the CIA, on one hand, and the Al Qaeda franchise Al Nusra Front (and its close ally Ahrar al Sham), on the other.

But it is a politically sensitive issue for U.S. policy, which seeks to

overthrow Syria's government without seeming to make common cause with the movement responsible for 9/11, and the system of news production has worked effectively to prevent the news media from reporting it fully and accurately.

The Obama administration has long portrayed the opposition groups it has been arming with anti-tank weapons as independent of Nusra Front. In reality, the administration has been relying on the close cooperation of these "moderate" groups with Nusra Front to put pressure on the Syrian government.

The United States and its allies – especially Saudi Arabia and Turkey – want the civil war to end with the dissolution of the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, who is backed by U.S. rivals like Russia and Iran.

Reflecting the fact that Nusra Front was created by Al Qaeda and has confirmed its loyalty to it, the administration designated Nusra as a terrorist organization in 2013. But the U.S. has carried out very few airstrikes against it since then, in contrast to the other offspring of Al Qaeda, the Islamic State or ISIS (Daesh), which has been the subject of intense air attacks from the U.S. and its European allies.

The U.S. has remained silent about Nusra Front's leading role in the military effort against Assad, concealing the fact that Nusra's success in northwest Syria has been a key element in Secretary of State John Kerry's diplomatic strategy for Syria.

When Russian intervention in support of the Syrian government began last September, targeting not only ISIS but also the Nusra Front and U.S.-supported groups allied with them against the Assad regime, the Obama administration immediately argued that Russian airstrikes were targeting "moderate" groups rather than ISIS, and insisted that those strikes had to stop.

The willingness of the news media to go beyond the official line and report the truth on the ground in Syria was thus put to the test. It had been well-documented that those "moderate" groups had been thoroughly integrated into the military campaigns directed by Nusra Front and Ahrar al Sham in the main battlefield of the war in northwestern Syria's Idlib and Aleppo provinces.

For example, a dispatch from Aleppo last May in Al Araby Al-Jadeed (The New Arab), a daily newspaper financed by the Qatari royal family, revealed that every one of at least ten "moderate" factions in the province supported by the CIA had joined the Nusra-run province command Fateh Halab (Conquest of Aleppo). Formally the command was run by Ahrar al Sham, and Nusra Front was excluded from it.

But as Al Araby's reporter explained, that exclusion "means that the operation

has a better chance of receiving regional and international support.” That was an indirect way of saying that Nusra’s supposed exclusion was a device aimed at facilitating the Obama administration’s approval of sending more TOW missiles to the “moderates” in the province, because the White House could not support groups working directly with a terrorist organization.

A further implication was that Nusra Front was allowing “moderate” groups to obtain those weapons from the United States and its Saudi and Turkish allies, because those groups were viewed as too weak to operate independently of the Salafist-jihadist forces – and because some of those arms would be shared with Nusra Front and Ahrar.

After Nusra Front was formally identified as a terrorist organization for the purposes of a Syrian ceasefire and negotiations, it virtually went underground in areas close to the Turkish border.

A journalist who lives in northern Aleppo province told AL Monitor that Nusra Front had stopped flying its own flag and was concealing its troops under those of Ahrar al Sham, which had been accepted by the United States as a participant in the talks. That maneuver was aimed at supporting the argument that “moderate” groups and not Al Qaeda were being targeted by Russian airstrikes.

But a review of the coverage of the targeting of Russian airstrikes and the role of U.S.-supported armed groups in the war during the first few weeks in the three most influential U.S. newspapers with the most resources for reporting accurately on the issue—the New York Times, Washington Post and Wall Street Journal – reveals a pattern of stories that tilted strongly in the direction desired by the Obama administration, either ignoring the subordination of the “moderate” groups to Nusra Front entirely or giving it only the slightest mention.

In an Oct. 1, 2015 article, Washington Post Beirut correspondent Liz Sly wrote that the Russian airstrikes were being “conducted against one of the few areas in the country where moderate rebels still have a foothold and from which the Islamic State was ejected more than a year and a half ago.”

To her credit, Sly did report, “Some of the towns struck are strongholds of recently formed coalition Jaish al Fateh,” which she said included Nusra Front and “an assortment of Islamist and moderate factions.” What was missing, however, was the fact that Jaish al Fateh was not merely a “coalition” but a military command structure, meaning that a much tighter relationship existed between the U.S.-supported “moderates” and the Al Qaeda franchise.

Sly referred specifically to one strike that hit a training camp in the

outskirts of a town in Idlib province belonging to Suqor al-Jabal, which had been armed by the CIA.

But readers could not evaluate that statement without the crucial fact, reported in the regional press, that Suqor al-Jabal was one of the many CIA-supported organizations that had joined the Fateh Halab (“Conquest of Aleppo”), the military command center in Aleppo ostensibly run by Ahrar al Sham, Nusra Front’s closest ally, but in fact under firm Nusra control. The report thus conveyed the false impression that the CIA-supported rebel group was still independent of Nusra Front.

An article by New York Times Beirut correspondent Anne Barnard (co-authored by the Times stringer in Syria Karam Shoumali – Oct. 13, 2015) appeared to veer off in the direction of treating the U.S.-supported opposition groups as part of a new U.S./Russian proxy war, thus drawing attention away from the issue of whether the Obama administration support for “moderate” groups was actually contributing to the political-military power of Al Qaeda in Syria.

Under the headline “US Weaponry Is Turning Syria Into Proxy War With Russia,” it reported that armed opposition groups had just received large shipments of TOW anti-tank missiles that had to be approved by the United States. Quoting the confident statements of rebel commanders about the effectiveness of the missiles and the high morale of rebel troops, the story suggested that arming the “moderates” was a way for the United States to make them the primary force on one side of a war pitting the United States against Russia in Syria.

Near the end of the story, however, Barnard effectively undermined that “proxy war” theme by citing the admission by commanders of U.S.-supported brigades of their “uncomfortable marriage of necessity” with the Al Qaeda franchise, “because they cannot operate without the consent of the larger and stronger Nusra Front.”

Referring to the capture of Idlib the previous spring by the opposition coalition, Barnard recalled that the TOW missiles had “played a major role in the insurgent advances that eventually endangered Mr. Assad’s rule.” But, she added:

“While that would seem like a welcome development for United States policy makers, in practice it presented another quandary, given that the Nusra Front was among the groups benefiting from the enhanced firepower.”

Unfortunately, Barnard’s point that U.S.-supported groups were deeply embedded in an Al Qaeda-controlled military structure was buried at the end of a long piece, and thus easily missed. The headline and lead ensured that, for the vast

majority of readers, that point would be lost in the larger thrust of the article.

The Wall Street Journal's Adam Entous approached the problem from a different angle but with the same result. He wrote a story on Oct. 5 reflecting what he said was anger on the part of U.S. officials that the Russians were deliberately targeting opposition groups that the CIA had supported.

Entous reported that U.S. officials believed the Syrian government wanted those groups targeted because of their possession of TOW missiles, which had been the key factor in the opposition's capture of Idlib earlier in the year. But nowhere in the article was the role of CIA-supported groups within military command structures dominated by Nusra Front even acknowledged.

Still another angle on the problem was adopted in an Oct. 12 article by Journal Beirut correspondent Raja Abdulrahim, who described the Russian air offensive as having spurred U.S.-backed rebels and the Nusra Front to form a "more united front against the Assad regime and its Russian and Iranian allies." Abdulrahim thus acknowledged the close military collaboration with Nusra Front, but blamed it all on the Russian offensive.

And the story ignored the fact that those same opposition groups had already joined military command arrangements in Idlib and Aleppo earlier in 2015, in anticipation of victories across northeast Syria.

The image in the media of the U.S.-supported armed opposition as operating independently from Nusra Front, and as victims of Russian attacks, persisted into early 2016. But in February, the first cracks in that image appeared in the Washington Post and New York Times.

Reporting on the negotiations between Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on a partial ceasefire that began on Feb. 12, Washington Post associate editor and senior national security correspondent Karen DeYoung wrote on Feb. 19 that an unresolved problem was how to decide which organizations were to be considered "terrorist groups" in the ceasefire agreement.

In that context, DeYoung wrote, "Jabhat al-Nusra, whose forces are intermingled with moderate rebel groups in the northwest near the Turkish border, is particularly problematic."

It was the first time any major news outlet had reported that U.S.-supported armed opposition and Nusra Front front troops were "intermingled" on the ground. And in the very next sentence DeYoung dropped what should have been a political bombshell: She reported that Kerry had proposed in the Munich negotiations to

“leave Jabhat al Nusra off limits to bombing, as part of a ceasefire, at least temporarily, until the groups can be sorted out.”

At the same time, Kerry was publicly demanding in a speech at the Munich conference that Russia halt its attacks on “legitimate opposition groups” as a condition for a ceasefire. Kerry’s negotiating position reflected the fact that CIA groups were certain to be hit in strikes on areas controlled by Nusra Front, as well as the reality that Al Qaeda-linked Nusra Front and Ahrar al Sham were central to the success of the U.S.-backed military effort against Assad.

In the end, however, Lavrov rejected the proposal to protect Nusra Front targets from Russian airstrikes, and Kerry dropped that demand, allowing the joint U.S./Russian announcement of the partial ceasefire on Feb. 22.

Up to that point, maps of the Syrian war in the Post and Times had identified zones of control only for “rebels” without showing where Nusra Front forces were in control. But on the same day as the announcement, the New York Times published an “updated” map, accompanied by text stating that Nusra Front “is embedded in the area of Aleppo and northwest toward the Turkish border.”

At the State Department briefing the next day, reporters grilled spokesman Mark Toner on whether U.S.-supported rebel forces were “commingled” with Nusra Front forces in Aleppo and northward. After a very long exchange on the subject, Toner said, “Yes, I believe there is some commingling of these groups.”

And he went on to say, speaking on behalf of the International Syria Support Group, which comprises all the countries involved in the Syrian peace negotiations, including the U.S. and Russia:

“We, the ISSG, have been very clear in saying that Al Nusra and Daesh [ISIS] are not part of any kind of cease-fire or any kind of negotiated cessation of hostilities. So if you hang out with the wrong folks, then you make that decision. ... You choose who hang out with, and that sends a signal.”

Although I pointed out the significance of the statement (Truthout, Feb. 24, 2016), no major news outlet saw fit to report that remarkable acknowledgement by the State Department spokesperson. Nevertheless, the State Department had clearly alerted the Washington Post and the New York Times to the fact that the relationships between the CIA-supported groups and Nusra Front were much closer than it had ever admitted in the past.

Kerry evidently calculated that the pretense that the “moderate” armed groups were independent of Al Nusra front would open him to a political attack from Republicans and the media if they were hit by Russian airstrikes. So it was no longer useful politically to try to obscure that reality from the media.

In fact, the State Department now seemed interested in inducing as many of those armed groups as possible to separate themselves more clearly from the Nusra Front.

The twists and turns in the three major newspapers' coverage of the issue of relations between U.S.-supported opposition groups and Al Qaeda's franchise in Syria thus show how major news sources slighted or steered clear of the fact that U.S.-client armed groups were closely intertwined with a branch of Al Qaeda – until they were prompted by signals from U.S. officials to revise their line and provide a more honest portrayal of Syria's armed opposition.

Gareth Porter, an independent investigative journalist and historian on US national security policy, is the winner of the 2012 Gellhorn Prize for Journalism. His latest book is *Manufactured Crisis: The Untold Story of the Iran Nuclear Scare*, published in 2014. [This story originally appeared at *Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting*.]

Start of a New World War

Propaganda about Russian and Chinese “aggression” has cloaked the reality of the U.S. and the West moving aggressively to encircle both countries, the start of a new world war, says John Pilger.

By John Pilger

I have been filming in the Marshall Islands, which lie north of Australia, in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Whenever I tell people where I have been, they ask, “Where is that?” If I offer a clue by referring to “Bikini,” they say, “You mean the swimsuit.”

Few seem aware that the bikini swimsuit was named to celebrate the nuclear explosions that destroyed Bikini island. Sixty-six nuclear devices were exploded by the United States in the Marshall Islands between 1946 and 1958 – the equivalent of 1.6 Hiroshima bombs every day for 12 years.

Bikini is silent today, mutated and contaminated. Palm trees grow in a strange grid formation. Nothing moves. There are no birds. The headstones in the old cemetery are alive with radiation. My shoes registered “unsafe” on a Geiger counter.

Standing on the beach, I watched the emerald green of the Pacific fall away into a vast black hole. This was the crater left by the hydrogen bomb they called

“Bravo.” The explosion poisoned people and their environment for hundreds of miles, perhaps forever.

On my return journey, I stopped at Honolulu airport and noticed an American magazine called *Women’s Health*. On the cover was a smiling woman in a bikini swimsuit, and the headline: “You, too, can have a bikini body.” A few days earlier, in the Marshall Islands, I had interviewed women who had very different “bikini bodies”; each had suffered thyroid cancer and other life-threatening cancers.

Unlike the smiling woman in the magazine, all of them were impoverished: the victims and guinea pigs of a rapacious superpower that is today more dangerous than ever.

I relate this experience as a warning and to interrupt a distraction that has consumed so many of us. The founder of modern propaganda, Edward Bernays, described this phenomenon as “the conscious and intelligent manipulation of the habits and opinions” of democratic societies. He called it an “invisible government”.

How many people are aware that a world war has begun? At present, it is a war of propaganda, of lies and distraction, but this can change instantaneously with the first mistaken order, the first missile.

In 2009, President Obama stood before an adoring crowd in the centre of Prague, in the heart of Europe. He pledged himself to make “the world free from nuclear weapons.” People cheered and some cried. A torrent of platitudes flowed from the media. Obama was subsequently awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. It was all fake. He was lying.

The Obama administration has built more nuclear weapons, more nuclear warheads, more nuclear delivery systems, more nuclear factories. Nuclear warhead spending alone rose higher under Obama than under any American president. The cost over 30 years is more than \$1 trillion.

A mini nuclear bomb is planned. It is known as the B61 Model 12. There has never been anything like it. General James Cartwright, a former Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has said, “Going smaller [makes using this nuclear] weapon more thinkable.”

In the last 18 months, the greatest build-up of military forces since World War Two – led by the United States – is taking place along Russia’s western frontier. Not since Hitler invaded the Soviet Union have foreign troops presented such a demonstrable threat to Russia.

Ukraine – once part of the Soviet Union – has become a CIA theme park. Having orchestrated a coup in Kiev, Washington effectively controls a regime that is next door and hostile to Russia: a regime rotten with Nazis, literally. Prominent parliamentary figures in Ukraine are the political descendants of the notorious OUN and UPA fascists. They openly praise Hitler and call for the persecution and expulsion of the Russian-speaking minority.

This is seldom news in the West, or it is inverted to suppress the truth.

In Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia – next door to Russia – the U.S. military is deploying combat troops, tanks, heavy weapons. This extreme provocation of the world's second nuclear power is met with silence in the West.

What makes the prospect of nuclear war even *more* dangerous is a parallel campaign against China. Seldom a day passes when China is not elevated to the status of a "threat." According to Admiral Harry Harris, the U.S. Pacific commander, China is "building a great wall of sand in the South China Sea."

What he is referring to is China building airstrips in the Spratly Islands, which are the subject of a dispute with the Philippines – a dispute without priority until Washington pressured and bribed the government in Manila and the Pentagon launched a propaganda campaign called "freedom of navigation."

What does this really mean? It means freedom for American warships to patrol and dominate the coastal waters of China. Try to imagine the American reaction if Chinese warships did the same off the coast of California.

I made a film called *The War You Don't See*, in which I interviewed distinguished journalists in America and Britain: reporters such as Dan Rather of CBS, Rageh Omar of the BBC, David Rose of the *Observer*.

All of them said that had journalists and broadcasters done their job and questioned the propaganda that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction; had the lies of George W. Bush and Tony Blair not been amplified and echoed by journalists, the 2003 invasion of Iraq might not have happened, and hundreds of thousands of men, women and children would be alive today.

The propaganda laying the ground for a war against Russia and/or China is no different in principle. To my knowledge, no journalist in the Western "mainstream" – a Dan Rather equivalent, say – asks *why* China is building airstrips in the South China Sea.

The answer ought to be glaringly obvious. The United States is encircling China with a network of bases, with ballistic missiles, battle groups, nuclear-armed bombers.

This lethal arc extends from Australia to the islands of the Pacific, the Marianas and the Marshalls and Guam, to the Philippines, Thailand, Okinawa, Korea and across Eurasia to Afghanistan and India. America has hung a noose around the neck of China. This is not news. Silence by media; war by media.

In 2015, in high secrecy, the U.S. and Australia staged the biggest single air-sea military exercise in recent history, known as Talisman Sabre. Its aim was to rehearse an Air-Sea Battle Plan, blocking sea lanes, such as the Straits of Malacca and the Lombok Straits, that cut off China's access to oil, gas and other vital raw materials from the Middle East and Africa.

In the circus known as the American presidential campaign, Donald Trump is being presented as a lunatic, a fascist. He is certainly odious; but he is also a media-hate figure. That alone should arouse our skepticism. Trump's views on migration are grotesque, but no more grotesque than those of British Prime Minister David Cameron. It is not Trump who is the Great Deporter from the United States, but the Nobel Peace Prize winner, Barack Obama.

According to one prodigious liberal commentator, Trump is "unleashing the dark forces of violence" in the United States. *Unleashing* them?

This is the country where toddlers shoot their mothers and the police wage a murderous war against black Americans. This is the country that has attacked and sought to overthrow more than 50 governments, many of them democracies, and bombed from Asia to the Middle East, causing the deaths and dispossession of millions of people.

No country can equal this systemic record of violence. Most of America's wars (almost all of them against defenseless countries) have been launched not by Republican presidents but by liberal Democrats: Truman, Kennedy, Johnson, Carter, Clinton, Obama.

In 1947, a series of National Security Council directives described the paramount aim of American foreign policy as "a world substantially made over in [America's] own image." The ideology was messianic Americanism. We were all Americans. Or else. Heretics would be converted, subverted, bribed, smeared or crushed.

Donald Trump is a symptom of this, but he is also a maverick. He says the invasion of Iraq was a crime; he doesn't want to go to war with Russia and China. The danger to the rest of us is not Trump, but Hillary Clinton. She is no maverick. She embodies the resilience and violence of a *system* whose vaunted "exceptionalism" is totalitarian with an occasional liberal face.

As presidential Election Day draws near, Clinton will be hailed as the first

female president, regardless of her crimes and lies – just as Barack Obama was lauded as the first black president and liberals swallowed his nonsense about “hope.” And the drool goes on.

Described by the *Guardian* columnist Owen Jones as “funny, charming, with a coolness that eludes practically every other politician,” Obama the other day sent drones to slaughter 150 people in Somalia. He kills people usually on Tuesdays, according to the *New York Times*, when he is handed a list of candidates for death by drone. So cool.

In the 2008 presidential campaign, Hillary Clinton threatened to “totally obliterate” Iran with nuclear weapons. As Secretary of State under Obama, she participated in the overthrow of the democratic government of Honduras. Her contribution to the destruction of Libya in 2011 was almost gleeful. When the Libyan leader, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, was publicly sodomized with a knife – a murder made possible by American logistics – Clinton gloated over his death: “We came, we saw, he died.”

One of Clinton’s closest allies is Madeleine Albright, the former Secretary of State, who has attacked young women for not supporting “Hillary.” This is the same Madeleine Albright who infamously celebrated on TV the death of half a million Iraqi children as “worth it”.

Among Clinton’s biggest backers are the Israel lobby and the arms companies that fuel the violence in the Middle East. She and her husband have received a fortune from Wall Street. And yet, she is about to be ordained the women’s candidate, to see off the evil Trump, the official demon. Her supporters include distinguished feminists: the likes of Gloria Steinem in the U.S. and Anne Summers in Australia.

A generation ago, a post-modern cult now known as “identity politics” stopped many intelligent, liberal-minded people examining the causes and individuals they supported – such as the fakery of Obama and Clinton; such as bogus progressive movements like Syriza in Greece, which betrayed the people of that country and allied with their enemies.

Self-absorption, a kind of “me-ism,” became the new Zeitgeist in privileged Western societies and signaled the demise of great collective movements against war, social injustice, inequality, racism and sexism.

Today, the long sleep may be over. The young are stirring again. Gradually. The thousands in Britain who supported Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader are part of this awakening – as are those who rallied to support Sen. Bernie Sanders.

In Britain last week, Jeremy Corbyn’s closest ally, his shadow treasurer John

McDonnell, committed a Labour government to pay off the debts of piratical banks and, in effect, to continue so-called austerity.

In the U.S., Bernie Sanders has promised to support Clinton if or when she's nominated. He, too, has voted for America's use of violence against countries when he thinks it's "right." He says Obama has done "a great job."

In Australia, there is a kind of mortuary politics, in which tedious parliamentary games are played out in the media while refugees and Indigenous people are persecuted and inequality grows, along with the danger of war. The government of Malcolm Turnbull has just announced a so-called defense budget of \$195 billion that is a drive to war. There was no debate. Silence.

What has happened to the great tradition of popular direct action, unfettered to parties? Where is the courage, the imagination and the commitment required to begin the long journey to a better, just and peaceful world? Where are the dissidents in art, film, the theatre, literature?

Where are those who will shatter the silence? Or do we wait until the first nuclear missile is fired?

This is an edited version of an address by John Pilger at the University of Sydney, entitled "A World War Has Begun." JohnPilger.com – [the films and journalism of John Pilger](#).

Obama's Break with the Establishment

Exclusive: President Obama, with his characteristic diffidence, has announced his "liberation" from the Washington foreign-policy "playbook," but the national security elite is already striking back, writes Gareth Porter.

By Gareth Porter

The biggest story in Jeffrey Goldberg's 20,000-word [report](#) on "The Obama Doctrine" is President Barack Obama's open break with the foreign policy establishment.

The critique of orthodox national security policy thinking that Obama outlined in interviews with Goldberg goes farther than anything delivered on the record by a sitting president. It showed that Obama's view on how to define and advance U.S. "national security" diverges sharply from those of the orthodox views of national security bureaucracy and Washington foreign policy think tanks on U.S.

“credibility,” the real interests the United States in the Middle East and how the United States should respond to terrorism.

It was the controversy surrounding his decision in the 2013 Syrian crisis not to authorize airstrikes against government forces that provoked Obama to go public with his position in that broader struggle. The foreign policy elite in Washington has issued a steady drumbeat of opinion pieces portraying Obama’s failure to launch a cruise missile attack against the Syrian air force and its air defense system in 2013 as a major blow to the U.S. role in the world because it forfeited U.S. “credibility.”

Richard Haass, who is president of the Council on Foreign Relations and the closest thing to a spokesman for the foreign policy establishment, summed up the elite’s attitude toward Obama’s decision in Syria in a Feb. 23 tweet. Haass suggested that Obama’s decision not to bomb Assad regime targets was on par with the Bush administration’s U.S. invasion of Iraq. In his tweet, Haass linked to another attack on Obama’s decision by Laurent Fabius, the recently retired former French Foreign Minister. On Twitter, Haass wrote: “2003 #Iraq war error of commission; not enforcing #Syria red line error of omission. fair debate which more costly. <http://nyti.ms/1oE0fjm> “

But the more important struggle over that decision was played out within the administration between Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry, who led the charge in pressing the President to carry out cruise missile strikes against Assad regime military targets over the its alleged responsibility for the Aug. 21, 2013 Sarin attack.

“There’s a playbook that presidents are supposed to follow,” Obama told Goldberg. “[T]he playbook prescribes responses to different events and those responses tend to be militarized responses.”

Such a “playbook” can be “a trap that can lead to bad decisions,” Obama continued. “In the midst of an international challenge like Syria, you can get judged harshly if you don’t follow the playbook, even if there are good reasons why it does not apply.”

Goldberg writes that Obama “had come to believe that he was walking into a trap – one laid both by allies and adversaries, and by conventional expectations of what an American president is supposed to do.” Obama was implying that he was being pushed into committing U.S. military force to the Syrian conflict less to eliminate the threat of chemical weapons than to tilt the military balance in favor of the opposition and to support “regime change” – something Obama did not want to do.

John Kerry made no bones about his commitment to striking government military targets. In Senate testimony on Sept. 3, 2013, he referred 28 times to the idea that such strikes would “deter” Assad from further chemical weapon attacks but also “degrade” the government’s military capabilities.

A big reason Obama had begun to doubt the wisdom of a military response to the Aug. 21 attack, Goldberg reports, was that Director of National Intelligence James Clapper came to see Obama on the morning of Aug. 30 and told him that he could not say that the intelligence on Assad having carried out the attack was a “slam dunk.”

Clapper’s reference was to the misguided assurance that CIA Director George Tenet reportedly gave President George W. Bush in 2002 that the intelligence community could back up Bush’s WMD claims about Iraq and that to do so would be a “slam dunk.” Clapper was saying that U.S. intelligence was not at all certain that the Assad regime was at fault for the attack. [For more on that topic, see Consortiumnews.com’s “Neocons Red-Faced over ‘Red Line.’”]

Over the past week, in the mainstream media’s denunciations of Obama’s comments in The Atlantic, this passage about Clapper’s uncertainty about who had launched the Sarin attack is ignored, although it would seem to be a key point. (See, for instance, Washington Post deputy editorial page editor Jackson Diehl’s op-ed on Monday or last Friday’s New York Times op-ed by columnist Roger Cohen.)

Furthermore, Obama did have an alternative to going to war in Syria that would eliminate any future threat of chemical weapons attacks by Assad’s government. In early September 2013, Obama reached an agreement with Russian President Vladimir Putin that Assad would give up his entire chemical weapons arsenal, while the United States would not go to war against Damascus and while Assad continued to deny a role in the Sarin attack.

Questions about ‘Credibility’

In The Atlantic interviews, Obama’s harshest criticism is reserved for the cardinal rule of U.S. national security policy orthodoxy: that U.S. “credibility” for using military force must not be eroded by a failure to follow through on a threat to use it.

Of course, Obama’s so-called “red line” over chemical weapons was never explicitly defined as a threat to go to war over the issue, so it was a red herring argument for cruise missile strikes in Syria. But there was even substantial doubt inside the U.S. intelligence community that Assad had crossed the “red line.”

Obama responded to the “credibility” argument by Kerry and Ambassador to the

U.N. Samantha Power at a White House meeting by pointing out that “dropping bombs on someone to prove that you’re willing to drop bombs on someone is just about the worst reason to use force.”

Obama recalled how difficult it was to reject the “credibility” argument at that moment, because, “to press the pause button at that moment ... would cost me politically.”

The political threat to which Obama was referring was not merely a figment of his imagination. During his first year in office, his national security advisers had pressured him to accept a smaller and slower withdrawal from Iraq and a much larger military escalation in Afghanistan than Obama had believed justified by the facts. They had tightened the pressure by giving the mainstream news media anonymous accounts of the issue calculated to make Obama appear naive and irresolute.

Obama has also riled the foreign policy elite by renouncing its tenet of faith that the United States has vital interests in the Middle East because of its de facto – but not formal – alliances with Israel and Saudi Arabia. Obama clearly resents the pressure on him to treat both of those “allies” with kid gloves.

Goldberg writes that a “widely-held sentiment inside the White House is that many of the most prominent foreign policy think tanks in Washington are doing the bidding of their Arab and pro-Israeli funders.” Although Goldberg, the most openly pro-Israel big-name journalist in Washington, is obviously disapproving of that observation, it reflects the well-known reality of the funding of the leading think tanks focusing on the Middle East.

Obama rejected the idea of giving unconditional support to the Saudis in their sectarian conflicts, because “[O]ur Gulf partners, our traditional friends, do not have the ability to put out the flames on their own or decisively win on their own,” so such unconditional support “would mean that we have to start coming in and using our military power to settle scores. And that would be in the interest neither of the United States nor of the Middle East.”

Yet Obama has continued to give de facto support to those very sectarian Saudi policies in Syria and Yemen, which have destabilized those countries but which key U.S. national security officials have championed. Just last week, the New York Times revealed that John Kerry had had been the a “forceful advocate” last year of the view in that the United States should support the war the Saudis were planning to launch against Yemen, because the Saudi had questioned American “priorities” in the region in light of Obama’s negotiating a nuclear agreement with Iran.

Views on Terrorism

Obama has also sharply dissented from orthodox thinking about terrorism, although not on the record. Goldberg writes that Obama “frequently reminds his staff that terrorism takes far fewer lives in America than hand guns, car accidents and falls in bathtubs.” That view has scandalized his national security advisers, who have been “fighting a constant rear-guard action,” according to Goldberg, “to keep Obama from placing terrorism in what he considers its ‘proper’ perspective, out of concern that he will seem insensitive to the fears of the American people.”

Those reported remarks by Obama to his staff are consistent with his statement in a May 2013 speech on terrorism policy that “[a]ny U.S. military action in foreign land risks creating more enemies...” He also said, “a perpetual war – through drones or Special Forces or troop deployments – will prove self-defeating and alter our country in troubling ways”.

Nevertheless, Obama has continued to preside over a vast increase in drone strikes in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen and Somalia. The fact that he has voiced a perspective that directly contradicts his own administration’s actual policies on wars in Yemen and Syria as well as on counter-terrorism policy suggests that he has consistently compromised with senior national security officials, despite his misgivings, for political reasons.

That same pattern of behavior was evident in his response to the U.S. military’s request for a steep increase in U.S. combat forces in Afghanistan in 2009. He had privately disagreed sharply with his national security team over the issue, even arguing that Afghanistan was far less important to U.S. national security than the future of Pakistan, as revealed by Bob Woodward’s *Obama’s Wars*.

But in the end Obama reached a compromise between his own view of what should be done and the demands pressed on him by his national security team. The fact that Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton were both supporting the military was central to his calculation of the political cost he anticipated if he rejected the escalation.

Obama’s readiness to go along with policies about which he had serious misgivings – with one signal exception (bombing Syria in 2013) – bears similarity to the political dynamic that propelled the United States into the Vietnam War. Both John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson said privately that South Vietnam was not worth a war, but both agreed to major steps toward war under pressure from the senior advisers, including their Secretaries of State and Defense.

The new revelations of Obama's disenchantment with foreign policy orthodoxy on the use of force illuminate an enduring structural problem of presidents perceiving their national security officials as having the power to impose high political costs on them if their demands for war were rejected. On the other hand, Obama's public break-up with the national security elite appears to represent a new stage in the politics of national security in which broader resistance to those powerful interests may possibly be feasible.

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