

Hillary Clinton Seeks Neocon Shelter

Special Report: Stunned by falling poll numbers, Hillary Clinton is hoping that Democrats will rally to her neocon-oriented foreign policy and break with Bernie Sanders as insufficiently devoted to Israel. But will that hawkish strategy work this time, asks Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

In seeking to put Sen. Bernie Sanders on the defensive over his foreign policy positions, ex-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is embracing a neoconservative stance on the Middle East and gambling that her more hawkish approach will win over Democratic voters.

Losing ground in Iowa and New Hampshire in recent polls, the Clinton campaign has counterattacked against Sanders, targeting his sometimes muddled comments on the Mideast crisis, but Clinton's attack line suggests that Sanders isn't adequately committed to the positions of Israel's right-wing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his American neocon acolytes.

Clinton's strategy is to hit Sanders for seeking a gradual normalization of relations with Iran, while Clinton has opted for the neocon position of demonizing Iran and siding with Israel and its quiet alliance with Saudi Arabia and other Sunni states that share Israel's animosity toward Shiite-ruled Iran.

By attaching herself to this neocon approach of hyping every conceivable offense by Iran while largely excusing the human rights crimes of Israel, Saudi Arabia and the Sunni-run states, Clinton is betting that most Democratic voters share the neocon-dominated "group think" of Official Washington: "Iran-our-enemy, Israel/Saudi Arabia-our-friends."

She made similar calculations when she voted for and supported President George W. Bush's invasion and occupation of Iraq; when she sided with the neocons in pushing President Barack Obama to escalate the war in Afghanistan; and when she instigated "regime change" in Libya all policies that had dubious and dangerous outcomes. But she seems to still believe that she will benefit politically if she continues siding with the neocons and their "liberal interventionist" side-kicks.

On Thursday, the Clinton campaign put Sanders's suggestion of eventual diplomatic relations with Iran in the context of his lack of ardor toward defending Israel.

"Normal relations with Iran right now?" said Jake Sullivan, the campaign's

senior policy adviser. "President Obama doesn't support that idea. And it's not at all clear why it is that Senator Sanders is suggesting it. Many of you know Iran has pledged the destruction of Israel."

Actually, the Clinton campaign is mischaracterizing Sanders's position as expressed in last Sunday's debate. Sanders opposed immediate diplomatic relations with Tehran.

"Understanding that Iran's behavior in so many ways is something that we disagree with; their support of terrorism, the anti-American rhetoric that we're hearing from their leadership is something that is not acceptable," Sanders said. "Can I tell you that we should open an embassy in Tehran tomorrow? No, I don't think we should."

Standing with the Establishment

But the Clinton campaign's distortions aside, there is the question of whether or not the Democratic base has begun to reject Official Washington's whatever-Israel-wants orthodoxy.

Hillary Clinton seems to be betting that rank-and-file Democrats remain enthralled to Israel and afraid to challenge the powerful neocon propaganda machine that controls the U.S. establishment's foreign policy by dominating major op-ed pages, TV political chat shows and leading think tanks. The neocons also maintain close ties to the "liberal interventionists" who hold down key jobs in the Obama administration.

Clinton's gamble assumes that progressives and foreign-policy "realists" have failed to develop their own infrastructure for examining and debunking many of the neocon/liberal-hawk propaganda themes and thus any politician who deviates too far from those "group thinks" risks getting marginalized.

In other words, Clinton is counting on the establishment structure holding through Election 2016 despite the populist anger that is evident from the surge of support for democratic socialist Bernie Sanders on the left and for billionaire nativist Donald Trump on the right.

In effect, this election is asking American voters if they want incremental changes to the current system represented by establishment candidates such as Hillary Clinton and Jeb Bush or if they want to shake the system up with insurgent candidates like Sanders and Trump.

Though most neocons are supporting Republican establishment candidates who have sworn allegiance to the Israeli/neocon cause, the likes of Sen. Marco Rubio, some prominent neocons have made clear that they would be happy with Hillary

Clinton as president.

For instance, neocon superstar Robert Kagan told The New York Times in 2014 that he hoped that his neocon views which he now prefers to call “liberal interventionist” would prevail in a possible Hillary Clinton administration. After all, Secretary of State Clinton named Kagan to one of her State Department advisory boards and promoted his wife, neocon Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland, who oversaw the provocative “regime change” in Ukraine in 2014.

According to the Times’ article, Clinton “remains the vessel into which many interventionists are pouring their hopes.”

Kagan is quoted as saying: “I feel comfortable with her on foreign policy. If she pursues a policy which we think she will pursue it’s something that might have been called neocon, but clearly her supporters are not going to call it that; they are going to call it something else.”

Though Clinton recently has sought to portray herself as an Obama loyalist especially in South Carolina where she is counting on strong African-American support she actually has adopted far more hawkish positions than the President, both when she was a senator and as Obama’s first secretary of state.

‘Team of Rivals’ Debacle

Arguably, Obama’s most fateful decision of his presidency occurred shortly after the 2008 election when he opted for the trendy idea of a “team of rivals” to run his foreign policy. He left Bush family loyalist Robert Gates as Secretary of Defense, retained a neocon-dominated senior officer corps led by the likes of Gen. David Petraeus, and picked hawkish Sen. Hillary Clinton to be Secretary of State. Thus, Obama never took control of his own foreign policy.

The troika of Clinton-Gates-Petraeus challenged Obama over his desire to wind down the Afghan War, bureaucratically mouse-trapping him into an ill-advised “surge” that accomplished little other than getting another 1,750 U.S. soldiers killed along with many more Afghans. Nearly three-quarters of the 2,380 U.S. soldiers who died in Afghanistan were killed on Obama’s watch.

Ironically, it was Gates who shed the most light on Clinton’s neocon-oriented positions in his memoir, *Duty*, written after he left the Pentagon in 2011. While generally flattering Clinton for her like-minded positions, Gates also portrays Clinton as a pedestrian foreign policy thinker who is easily duped and leans toward military solutions.

Indeed, for thoughtful and/or progressive Democrats, the prospect of a President

Hillary Clinton could represent a step back from some of President Barack Obama's more innovative foreign policy strategies, particularly his readiness to cooperate with the Russians and Iranians to defuse Middle East tensions and his willingness to face down the Israel Lobby when it is pushing for heightened confrontations and war.

Based on her public record and Gates's insider account, Clinton could be expected to favor a neoconservative approach to the Mideast, one more in line with the dominant thinking of Official Washington and the belligerent dictates of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu.

Standing with Israeli Bigots

As a U.S. senator and as Secretary of State, Clinton rarely challenged the conventional wisdom on the Mideast or resisted the use of military force to solve problems. She famously voted for the Iraq War in 2002 falling for President George W. Bush's bogus WMD case and remained a war supporter until her position became politically untenable during Campaign 2008.

Representing New York, Clinton avoided criticizing Israeli actions. In summer 2006, as Israeli warplanes pounded southern Lebanon, killing more than 1,000 Lebanese, Sen. Clinton shared a stage with Israel's bigoted Ambassador to the United Nations Dan Gillerman who had said, "While it may be true and probably is that not all Muslims are terrorists, it also happens to be true that nearly all terrorists are Muslim."

At a pro-Israel rally with Clinton in New York on July 17, 2006, Gillerman proudly defended Israel's massive violence against targets in Lebanon. "Let us finish the job," Gillerman told the crowd. "We will excise the cancer in Lebanon" and "cut off the fingers" of Hezbollah.

Responding to international concerns that Israel was using "disproportionate" force in bombing Lebanon and killing hundreds of civilians, Gillerman said, "You're damn right we are." [NYT, July 18, 2006]

Sen. Clinton did not protest Gillerman's remarks, since doing so would presumably have offended an important pro-Israel constituency, which she has continued to cultivate.

In November 2006, when President Bush nominated Gates to be Defense Secretary, Clinton gullibly misread the significance of the move. She interpreted it as a signal that the Iraq War was being wound down when it actually presaged the opposite, that an escalation or "surge" was coming.

From her seat on the Senate Armed Services Committee, Clinton failed to

penetrate the smokescreen around Gates's selection. The reality was that Bush had ousted Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, in part, because he had sided with Generals John Abizaid and George Casey who favored shrinking the U.S. military footprint in Iraq. Gates was privately onboard for replacing those generals and expanding the U.S. footprint.

On with the Surge

After getting blindsided by Gates over what became a "surge" of 30,000 additional U.S. troops, Sen. Clinton sided with Democrats who objected to the escalation, but Gates quotes her in his memoir as later telling President Obama that she did so only for political reasons.

Gates recalled a meeting on Oct. 26, 2009, to discuss whether to authorize a similar "surge" in Afghanistan, a position favored by both Defense Secretary Gates and Secretary of State Clinton, who supported an even higher number of troops than Gates did. But the Afghan "surge" faced skepticism from Vice President Joe Biden and other White House staffers.

Gates wrote that he and Clinton "were the only outsiders in the session, considerably outnumbered by White House insiders. Obama said at the outset to Hillary and me, 'It's time to lay our cards on the table, Bob, what do you think?' I repeated a number of the main points I had made in my memo to him [urging three brigades].

"Hillary agreed with my overall proposal but urged the president to consider approving the fourth brigade combat team if the allies wouldn't come up with the troops."

In *Duty*, Gates cited his collaboration with Clinton as crucial to his success in getting Obama to agree to the Afghan troop escalation and the expanded goal of counterinsurgency. Referring to Clinton, Gates wrote, "we would develop a very strong partnership, in part because it turned out we agreed on almost every important issue."

The hawkish Gates-Clinton tandem helped counter the more dovish team including Vice President Biden, several members of the National Security Council staff and U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Karl Eikenberry, who tried to steer President Obama away from this deeper involvement.

Gates wrote, "I was confident that Hillary and I would be able to work closely together. Indeed, before too long, commentators were observing that in an administration where all power and decision making were gravitating to the White House, Clinton and I represented the only independent 'power center,' not least because, for very different reasons, we were both seen as 'un-fireable.'"

Political Expediency

Gates also reported on what he regarded as a stunning admission by Clinton, writing: "The exchange that followed was remarkable. In strongly supporting the surge in Afghanistan, Hillary told the president that her opposition to the surge in Iraq had been political because she was facing him in the Iowa primary [in 2008]. She went on to say, 'The Iraq surge worked.'

"The president conceded vaguely that opposition to the Iraq surge had been political. To hear the two of them making these admissions, and in front of me, was as surprising as it was dismaying." (Obama's aides disputed Gates's suggestion that the President indicated that his opposition to the Iraq "surge" was political, noting that he had always opposed the Iraq War. The Clinton team did not challenge Gates's account.)

But the exchange, as recounted by Gates, indicates that Clinton not only let her political needs dictate her position on an important national security issue, but that she accepts as true the superficial conventional wisdom about the "successful surge" in Iraq.

While that is indeed Official Washington's beloved interpretation in part because influential neocons believe the "surge" rehabilitated their standing after the WMD fiasco and the disastrous Iraq War the reality is that the Iraq "surge" never achieved its stated goal of buying time to reconcile the country's sectarian divides, which remain bloody to this day and helped create the conditions for the emergence of the Islamic State, which began as "Al Qaeda in Iraq."

The truth that Hillary Clinton apparently doesn't recognize is that the "surge" was only "successful" in that it delayed the ultimate American defeat until President Bush and his neocon cohorts had vacated the White House and the blame for the failure could be shifted, at least partly, to President Obama.

Other than sparing "war president" Bush the humiliation of having to admit defeat, the dispatching of 30,000 additional U.S. troops in early 2007 did little more than get nearly 1,000 additional Americans killed almost one-quarter of the war's total U.S. deaths along with what certainly was a much higher number of Iraqis.

For example, WikiLeaks's "Collateral Murder." video depicted one 2007 scene during the "surge" in which U.S. firepower mowed down a group of Iraqi men, including two Reuters news staffers, walking down a street in Baghdad. The attack helicopters then killed a Good Samaritan, when he stopped his van to take survivors to a hospital, and severely wounded two children in the van.

The Unsuccessful Surge

A more rigorous analysis of what happened in Iraq in 2007-08 apparently beyond Hillary Clinton's abilities or inclination would trace the decline in Iraqi sectarian violence mostly to strategies that predated the "surge" and were implemented in 2006 by Generals Casey and Abizaid.

Among their initiatives, Casey and Abizaid deployed a highly classified operation to eliminate key Al Qaeda leaders, most notably the killing of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in June 2006. Casey and Abizaid also exploited growing Sunni animosities toward Al Qaeda extremists by paying off Sunni militants to join the so-called "Awakening" in Anbar Province.

And, as the Sunni-Shiite sectarian killings reached horrendous levels in 2006, the U.S. military assisted in the *de facto* ethnic cleansing of mixed neighborhoods by helping Sunnis and Shiites move into separate enclaves, thus making the targeting of ethnic enemies more difficult. In other words, the flames of violence were likely to have abated whether Bush ordered the "surge" or not.

Radical Shiite leader Moktada al-Sadr also helped by issuing a unilateral cease-fire, reportedly at the urging of his patrons in Iran who were interested in cooling down regional tensions and speeding up the U.S. withdrawal. By 2008, another factor in the declining violence was the growing awareness among Iraqis that the U.S. military's occupation indeed was coming to an end. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki insisted on and got a firm timetable for American withdrawal from Bush.

Even author Bob Woodward, who had published best-sellers that praised Bush's early war judgments, concluded that the "surge" was only one factor and possibly not even a major one in the declining violence.

In his book, *The War Within*, Woodward wrote, "In Washington, conventional wisdom translated these events into a simple view: The surge had worked. But the full story was more complicated. At least three other factors were as important as, or even more important than, the surge."

Woodward, whose book drew heavily from Pentagon insiders, listed the Sunni rejection of Al Qaeda extremists in Anbar province and the surprise decision of al-Sadr to order a cease-fire as two important factors. A third factor, which Woodward argued may have been the most significant, was the use of new highly classified U.S. intelligence tactics that allowed for rapid targeting and killing of insurgent leaders.

However, in Washington, where the neocons remained very influential, the myth

grew that Bush's "surge" had brought the violence under control. Gen. Petraeus, who took command of Iraq after Bush yanked Casey and Abizaid, was elevated into hero status as the military genius who achieved "victory at last" in Iraq (as Newsweek declared).

Buying Fallacies

Even the inconvenient truths that the United States was unceremoniously ushered out of Iraq in 2011 and that Iraq's Shiite-Sunni divide widened into a chasm that has since spread divisions into Syria and even into Europe did not dent the cherished conventional wisdom about the "successful surge."

Yet, it is one thing for neocon pundits to promote such fallacies; it is another thing for the alleged Democratic front-runner for President in 2016 to believe this nonsense. And to say that she only opposed the "surge" out of a political calculation could border on disqualifying.

But the pattern fits with Clinton's previous decisions. She belatedly broke with the Iraq War during Campaign 2008 only when she realized that her hawkish stance was damaging her political chances against Obama, who had opposed the U.S. invasion in 2003.

Yet, as Secretary of State, Clinton sought to purge officials seen as insufficiently hawkish. After Obama hesitantly approved the Afghan "surge" and reportedly immediately regretted his decision Clinton took aim at Eikenberry, a retired general who had served in Afghanistan before being named ambassador.

Pressing for his removal, "Hillary had come to the meeting loaded for bear," Gates wrote. "She gave a number of specific examples of Eikenberry's insubordination to herself and her deputy. She said, 'He's a huge problem.'

"She went after the NSS [national security staff] and the White House staff, expressing anger at their direct dealings with Eikenberry and offering a number of examples of what she termed their arrogance, their efforts to control the civilian side of the war effort, their refusal to accommodate requests for meetings.

"As she talked, she became more forceful. 'I've had it,' she said, 'You want it [control of the civilian side of the war], I'll turn it all over to you and wash my hands of it. I'll not be held accountable for something I cannot manage because of White House and NSS interference.'"

However, when the protests failed to get Eikenberry and General Douglas Lute, a deputy national security adviser, fired, Gates concluded that they had the protection of President Obama and reflected his doubts about the Afghan War

policy:

“It had become clear that Eikenberry and Lute, whatever their shortcomings, were under an umbrella of protection at the White House. With Hillary and me so adamant that the two should leave, that protection could come only from the president.”

The Libya Fiasco

In 2011, Secretary of State Clinton also was a hawk on military intervention in Libya to oust (and ultimately kill) Muammar Gaddafi. However, on Libya, Defense Secretary Gates sided with the doves, feeling that the U.S. military was already overextended in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and another intervention risked further alienating the Muslim world.

This time, Gates found himself lined up with Biden “urging caution,” while Clinton joined with U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice and NSC aides Ben Rhodes and Samantha Power in “urging aggressive U.S. action to prevent an anticipated massacre of the rebels as Qaddafi fought to remain in power,” Gates wrote. “In the final phase of the internal debate, Hillary threw her considerable clout behind Rice, Rhodes and Power.”

President Obama again ceded to Clinton’s advocacy for war and supported a Western bombing campaign that enabled the rebels, including Islamic extremists with ties to Al Qaeda, to seize control of Tripoli and hunt down Gaddafi, who was tortured and executed on Oct. 20, 2011.

Clinton expressed, delight when she received the news of Gaddafi’s murder. “We came. We saw. He died,” she chortled, paraphrasing Julius Caesar’s boast after a victory by Imperial Rome.

After Clinton’s “victory,” Libya became a major source for regional instability, including an assault on the U.S. mission in Benghazi on Sept. 11, 2012, that killed U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other U.S. personnel, an incident that Clinton has called the worst moment in her four years as Secretary of State. The Islamic State also gained a foothold inside Libya, chopping off the heads of Coptic Christians.

Gates retired from the Pentagon on July 1, 2011; Petraeus resigned as CIA director on Nov. 9, 2012, amid a sex-and-secrets scandal; and Clinton stepped down at the State Department on Feb. 1, 2013, after Obama’s reelection.

In 2013, with Clinton gone, Obama charted a more innovative foreign policy course, collaborating with Russian President Vladimir Putin to achieve diplomatic breakthroughs on Syria and Iran, rather than seeking military

solutions. In both cases, Obama had to face down hawkish sentiments in his own administration and in Congress, as well as Israeli and Saudi opposition.

But the neocon empire struck back in 2014, with Assistant Secretary Nuland orchestrating a “regime change” in Ukraine on Russia’s border and with the neocon-dominated opinion circles of Official Washington placing the blame for the Ukraine crisis on President Putin’s “aggression.”

Faced with this new “group think” and still influenced by liberal interventionist advisers such as Susan Rice and Samantha Power Obama joined the chorus of hate-talk against Putin, ratcheting up tensions with Russia and agreeing to escalate covert U.S. support for Syrian rebels seeking the long-held neocon goal of “regime change” in Syria.

However, Obama continued to collaborate behind the scenes with Russia to achieve an agreement to constrain Iran’s nuclear program – to the dismay of the neocons who wanted instead to bomb-bomb-bomb Iran on their way to seeking another “regime change.”

Bashing Iran

As Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton was a hawk on the Iranian nuclear issue. In 2009-2010, when Iran first indicated a willingness to compromise, she led the opposition to any negotiated settlement and pushed for punishing sanctions.

To clear the route for sanctions, Clinton helped sink agreements tentatively negotiated with Iran to ship most of its low-enriched uranium out of the country. In 2009, Iran was refining uranium only to the level of about 3-4 percent, as needed for energy production. Its negotiators offered to swap much of that for nuclear isotopes for medical research.

But the Obama administration and the West rebuffed the Iranian gesture because it would have left Iran with enough enriched uranium to theoretically refine much higher up to 90 percent for potential use in a single bomb, though Iran insisted it had no such intention and U.S. intelligence agencies agreed.

Then, in spring 2010, Iran accepted another version of the uranium swap proposed by the leaders of Brazil and Turkey, with the apparent backing of President Obama. But that arrangement came under fierce attack by Secretary Clinton and was derided by leading U.S. news outlets, including editorial writers at the New York Times who mocked Brazil and Turkey as being “played by Tehran.”

The ridicule of Brazil and Turkey as bumbling understudies on the world stage continued even after Brazil released Obama’s private letter to President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva encouraging Brazil and Turkey to work out the deal.

Despite the letter's release, Obama didn't publicly defend the swap and instead joined in scuttling the deal, another moment when Clinton and administration hardliners got their way.

That set the world on the course for tightened economic sanctions on Iran and heightened tensions that brought the region close to another war. As Israel threatened to attack, Iran expanded its nuclear capabilities by increasing enrichment to 20 percent to fill its research needs, moving closer to the level necessary for building a bomb.

Clinton's Course

Ironically, the nuclear deal reached in late 2013 and solidified in 2015 essentially accepts Iran's low-enrichment of uranium for peaceful purposes, pretty much where matters stood in 2009-2010. But the Israel Lobby quickly set to work, again, trying to torpedo the new Iran agreements by getting Congress to approve new sanctions on Iran.

Clinton remained noncommittal for several weeks as momentum for the sanctions bill grew, but she finally declared her support for President Obama's opposition to the new sanctions. In a Jan. 26, 2014 letter to Sen. Carl Levin, D-Michigan, she wrote:

"Now that serious negotiations are finally under way, we should do everything we can to test whether they can advance a permanent solution. As President Obama said, we must give diplomacy a chance to succeed, while keeping all options on the table. The U.S. intelligence community has assessed that imposing new unilateral sanctions now 'would undermine the prospects for a successful comprehensive nuclear agreement with Iran.' I share that view."

One key question for a Clinton presidential candidacy has been whether she would build on the diplomatic foundation that Obama has laid regarding Iran and Russia, or dismantle it and return to a neocon foreign policy focused on "regime change" and catering to the views of Israel and Saudi Arabia.

In her campaign's latest comments, Hillary Clinton has made clear that she has little interest in deviating further from the Israeli-neocon prescribed hostility toward Iran by letting her campaign accuse Sanders of softness on Tehran.

So, with her once-solid polls numbers softening, she has decided to appeal to hawkish Democrats and the muscular support of the Israel Lobby to help her fend off the Sanders surge.

Clinton is rolling the dice in the belief that most Democrats won't think

through the fallacious “group thinks” of Official Washington or will at least be scared and confused enough to steer away from Sanders. That way, Clinton believes she can still win the nomination.

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](#)).

Neocons Flack for Unsavory Saudis

Exclusive: Since Israel decided that Iran was its big enemy “[and made Saudi Arabia its quiet ally](#)” American neocons have fallen in line, demanding that the U.S. government punish Iran and coddle the Saudis whatever their unsavory behavior, notes Daniel Lazare.

By Daniel Lazare

Bret Stephens, the deputy editorial page editor who writes *The Wall Street Journal’s* weekly “Global View” column, is not really a bad prose stylist, and his logic is not always unsound. But his unexamined assumptions lead him astray.

His latest [installment](#) is typical. Entitled “Why the U.S. Should Stand by the Saudis Against Iran,” it begins with not one premise, but two. The first, as the title suggest, is that the U.S. should stand by Riyadh in its time of woes. The second is that if the kingdom stumbles, only one person is to blame, President Obama.

The article opens on a promising note: “There is so much to detest about Saudi Arabia,” Stephens writes. It bans women from driving, it shuts its doors to Syrian refugees, it promotes “a bigoted and brutal version of Sunni Islam,” and it has “increased tensions with Iran by executing a prominent radical Shiite cleric, i.e., Nimr al-Nimr.”

So why continue siding with a kingdom “that Israeli diplomat Dore Gold once called ‘Hatred’s Kingdom,’” Stephens asks, “especially when the administration is also trying to pursue further opening [sic] with Tehran?”

It’s a question that a lot of people are asking especially now that the collapse in oil prices means that the Saudis are less economically important than they once were. But Stephens says it would be wrong to abandon the kingdom

“especially when it is under increasing economic strain from falling oil prices.”□

Get that? It would be wrong to abandon the kingdom when oil is scarce and prices are high – because that’s when we need the Saudis the most – and it’s wrong to abandon the monarchy when oil is plentiful and prices are low when we need them the least. Oil, in other words, has nothing to do with it. It’s wrong because it’s wrong.

But Stephens thinks it’s wrong for another reason as well: because Saudi Arabia “feels acutely threatened by a resurgent Iran.” Why is Iran resurgent? Because the nuclear deal that it recently concluded with the U.S. has set it free from punishing economic sanctions.

He then goes on to list all the bad things Iran has done thanks to the power that the Obama administration has just handed it on a silver platter.”Despite fond White House hopes that the nuclear deal would moderate Iran’s behavior,” Stephens says, “Tehran hard-liners wasted no time this week disqualifying thousands of moderate candidates from running in next month’s parliamentary elections, and an Iranian-backed militia appears to be responsible for the recent kidnapping of three Americans in Iraq.”□

Loaded Dice

Scary, eh? Yes, until one considers how Stephens has loaded the dice. His statement about Iran’s hardliners is accurate as far as it goes. But he might have pointed out that while Iran’s theocratic rulers certainly hobble democracy, they at least allow some sort of parliamentary elections to take place whereas Saudi Arabia, the regime he is now leaping to defend, allows exactly none. (Sorry, but last month’s meaningless municipal-council elections don’t count.)

In the Saudi kingdom, political parties, protests, even seminars in which intellectuals get to sound off are all *verboten*. Since March 2014, Saudis have been expressly forbidden to do anything that might undermine the status quo, including advocating atheism, criticizing Islam, participating in any form of political protest, or even joining a political party.

Stephens’s statement about the three kidnapped Americans is equally misleading. While Iran does indeed back such militias, Reuters cited U.S. government sources saying that “Washington had no reason to believe Tehran was involved in the kidnapping and did not believe the trio were being held in Iran.”□

Plus, to follow Stephens’s logic, if Iran is responsible for specific actions like these, then Saudi Arabia is responsible for specific actions of the Sunni Salafist forces that it funds in Syria, which include lopping off the heads of

Shi'ites and committing many other such atrocities.

Stephens says that the U.S.-Iranian accord "guarantees Iran a \$100 billion sanctions windfall," a figure that the Council on Foreign Relations, no slouch when it comes to Iran bashing, describes as roughly double the true amount. He says Iran now enjoys "the protection of a major nuclear power" thanks to Russia's intervention in Syria and agreement to supply Tehran with high-tech weaponry.

As a result, "Iranian proxies are active in Lebanon, Syria and Yemen, and dominate much of southern Iraq. Restive Shiite populations in Saudi Arabia's oil-rich Eastern Province and neighboring Bahrain provide further openings for Iranian subversion on the Arabian peninsula."□

Possibly so, except that Stephens might have noted that Saudi proxies, up to and including Al Qaeda, are active in the same countries and that Shi'ites in Bahrain and the Eastern Province might be a little less restive if Saudi repression were a little less savage.

Obama's Fault

Then Stephens gets to his main point, which is the nefarious role of Obama:

"Add to this an American president who is ambivalent about the House of Saud the way Jimmy Carter was about the Shah of Iran, and no wonder Riyadh is acting the way it is. If the administration is now unhappy about the Saudi war in Yemen or its execution of Shiite radicals, it has only itself to blame.

"All this means that the right U.S. policy toward the Saudis is to hold them close and demonstrate serious support, lest they be tempted to continue freelancing their foreign policy in ways we might not like. It won't happen in this administration, but a serious commitment to overthrow the Assad regime would be the place to start."

In other words, if the Saudi monarchy chops off the heads of dissident Shi'ites and sentences liberal blogger Raif Badawi to a thousand lashes, it's because Obama doesn't show enough love. Ditto Yemen. If Saudi air raids have killed some 2,800 civilians according to the latest UN estimates, including more than 500 children, it's because Obama has allowed his affections to flag for the Saudi royals. If only he would hug the Saudi princes a little closer, they wouldn't feel so lonely and bereft and would therefore respond more gently to their neighbors in the south. No blame should be cast on the Saudi leaders. Their behavior can't be blamed on the contradictions between their playboy lifestyles and the ascetic extremes of Wahhabism or the baleful effects of raking in untold oil riches while doing no work in return. No, everything's the fault of Obama

and his yuppie ways.

What can one say about reasoning like this? Only that it makes Donald Trump and Ted Cruz seem like paragons of mental stability. But given that *The Wall Street Journal* has long filled its editorial pages with such swamp gas, why dwell on the feverish exhalations of just one right-wing columnist?

The answer is that Stephens speaks not just for himself, but for an entire neocon establishment that is beside itself over the mess in the Persian Gulf and desperate to avoid blame for the chaos (which is now spreading into Europe). So, talking points must be developed to shift responsibility.

The Lost Saudi Cause

But the Saudis may be beyond saving. With Iran preparing to put a million more barrels on the world oil market per day, prices, down better than 75 percent since mid-2014, can only go lower. The Saudis, hemorrhaging money at the rate of \$100 billion a year, know that when the foreign currency runs out, their power runs out too. Hence, they fear winding up as yet another failed Middle Eastern state like Syria.

“Islamic State and other jihadist groups would flourish,” Stephens observes, this time correctly. “Iran would seek to extend its reach in the Arabian peninsula. The kingdom’s plentiful stores of advanced Western military equipment would also fall into dangerous hands.”

It’s not a pretty picture, which is why the neocons are pointing the fingers at others, Obama first and foremost. As Jim Lobe recently observed, all the usual suspects are pitching in in behalf of their Saudi friends, Elliott Abrams, Bill Kristol, Charles Krauthammer, and so on. All are furious at what Obama administration has done to their beloved petro-sheiks.

As neocon theorist Max Book put it at the *Commentary Magazine* website: “The American policy should be clear: We should stand with the Saudis, and the Egyptians, and the Jordanians, and the Emiratis, and the Turks, and the Israelis [sic], and all of our other allies, to stop the new Persian Empire. But the Obama administration, morally and strategically confused, is instead coddling Iran in the vain hope that it will somehow turn Tehran from enemy into friend.”

Something else is also at work, however, the I-word. As Lobe notes, neocons have done an about-face with regard to the Saudis. Where Richard Perle once called on the Bush administration to include Riyadh on his post-9/11 hit list, the neocons are now firmly on the Saudis’ side.

Why? The reason is Israel, which has decided since tangling with Hezbollah in

the 2006 Lebanon War that the Shi'ites are its chief enemy and the Sunni petro-monarchies, comparatively speaking, its friend. Like Communists responding to the latest directive from Moscow, the neocons have turned on a dime as a consequence, churning out reams of propaganda in support of Arab countries they once loathed.

A Saudi Makeover

In the neocon domain, Saudi Arabia has undergone a wondrous makeover, transformed from a bastion of reaction and anti-Semitism to a country that is somehow peace-loving and progressive. Formerly an enemy of Washington, or at best a distasteful gang of business associates supplying lots of oil and buying lots of guns, Saudi Arabia has been re-invented as America's dearest friend in the Arab world.

People like Bret Stephens have done their bit in behalf of the cause, turning out article after article whose real purpose is hidden from view. Where neocons formerly scorned anyone who spoke well of the Saudis, they now denounce anyone who speaks ill.

The funny thing is that Obama *is* to blame for the disaster in the Middle East, not because he disregarded the latest *diktat* from the Washington neocon-dominated foreign-policy establishment, but because he has accepted its priorities all too dutifully. He stood by as Qatar steered hundreds of millions of dollars to Salafist jihadis in Libya and while the Saudis, Qataris, and other Gulf states did the same to Sunni fundamentalists in Syria.

Obama's response to Saudi Arabia's repression of Arab Spring protests in Bahrain was muted, he refused to condemn the beheading of al-Nimr – the best the State Department could come up with was a statement declaring that the execution risked “exacerbating sectarian tensions at a time when they urgently need to be reduced” – and Obama has even given military support to the kingdom's air assault on Yemen.

Yet now the neocons blame him for not doing enough to keep the Saudis happy.

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

Merkel's Power Shaken by Refugee Crisis

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Time magazine's “person of the year” in 2015,

is facing her biggest political crisis as her welcoming of Mideast refugees has troubled and angered many Europeans, raising the possibility that Merkel's days as the Continent's undisputed leader may be numbered, writes Gilbert Doctorow.

By Gilbert Doctorow

The online edition of Bloomberg News carried a lead story entitled "Merkel in Peril with Window to Tame EU's Refugee Crisis." It was a commendable effort to flag the possibility of political change at the top of Europe's leading country, a prospect that most mainstream U.S. and even European media still overlook.

In the article on Thursday, the writers took into account the direct challenge to Merkel's open borders' policy on refugees coming from the Christian Social Union (CSU), the Bavarian sister party of Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU). Bavarian Premier Horst Seehofer disparaged Merkel's failure to make the slightest concession to her detractors when she spoke to a CSU gathering in Wildbad Kreuth on Wednesday. He concluded, "We're looking at some difficult weeks and months ahead."

Bloomberg News also directed attention toward what it called "unprecedented pressure" from within Merkel's own faction, making reference to a letter signed by 50 CDU deputies calling for the government to tighten border security to counter the refugee influx. Previously, 56 deputies had made known their disapproval, bringing the number in her faction opposed to her refugee policy to one-third.

Yet, in the end, the article's authors do not believe Merkel's hold on power is genuinely imperiled, as the title tantalizingly suggests, because she has weathered other storms in her long tenure, because she has seen to it that there is no successor in line to take over should her colleagues in the party wish to dump her, and because the German economy is humming along, with enviably low unemployment and GDP continuing to grow.

The notion of Merkel facing a "closing window" of opportunity to solve the refugee crisis is presented by the authors as coming from the Dutch premier and other neighboring countries, and without reference to dynamics inside German politics.

Worse Than It Looks

While the argument in favor of the German Chancellor remaining in her post is credible, it is not persuasive and in what follows I intend to raise several factors that the Bloomberg News team ignored.

These suggest that Merkel has finally laid the groundwork for her own political demise by uncharacteristic impulsiveness, by the failure of her intuitive faculties, and by her trademark stubbornness and doubling down in the face of opposition.

My reading of the German press, by which I mean leading dailies *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Bild*, over the last week turns up what I would call a step-by-step preparation of the German public for regime change. This is seen firstly in the derogatory adjectives being attached to Merkel and her refugee policy, including “brainless” (*kopflös*) and “idealistic.”

To be sure, “idealistic” would normally ring positive, but when applied to the Iron Chancellor it takes on an unequivocally negative connotation given her reputation among professionals for cynically manipulating the political levers to gain and keep power and her reliance on polls rather than “grand ideas” or even principles to guide her policy-making. I call her decision to welcome and embrace the flood of Syrian, Iraqi and other Middle Eastern refugees impulsive given its immediate context.

The summer of 2015 was a public relations disaster for Merkel, as viewed from many European countries. She was widely seen as the European leader calling the shots on what was undeniably the *rape of Greece*, a power play in which the Troika of European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund steamrolled the will of the Greek people as expressed in a referendum seeking relief from austerity. Instead, the Troika forced continued austerity on the supine and helpless nation.

This action contradicted the European Union’s founding principle of solidarity and it went down badly in the streets, heightening public skepticism about the E.U. project as a whole and anger toward Germany as the perceived E.U. hegemon.

Last summer was also the time when Merkel was on television giving a condescending and cold-hearted response to the plea of a German-speaking Palestinian girl to spare her family deportation, described by a headline in *The Guardian* on July 16 as follows: “Angela Merkel comforts sobbing refugee but says Germany can’t help everyone.”

Considering that within two months, the Chancellor became the public champion of receiving all self-declared Middle Eastern asylum seekers, it would be safe to assume that the decision was taken on the basis of her seemingly unflinching political intuition, without adequate consultation of polls, without due consultations with her associates in the governing coalition, not to mention other Member States of the European Union.

And this one time when emotion won out over reason in her decision-making, Merkel turned out to be dead wrong in terms of the impact that the refugee crisis would have on the E.U.'s cohesion. Merkel's error was compounded by her mulishness.

A Destabilizing Flood

The mass movement of Syrian, Iraqi, Afghan and other refugees across E.U. borders on their way to Germany in late summer caused alarm initially in Greece, where they landed from Turkey in their overcrowded dinghies, and then caused alarm and desperate measures of control in the Balkan states as the refugees progressed on their journey.

Hungary was the first, most vociferous and quickest to act to seal its borders and reject the influx. Slovakia, Poland and the Czech Republic followed in succession. Austria remained open so long as the transit into Germany was effective. Meanwhile within Germany, in Bavaria, the country's main entry point, nerves were fraying. And neighboring E.U. countries to the north and west looked on with trepidation.

The shift from concern to outrage over the open-door policy was triggered by the shocking revelations of New Year's Eve chaos in Cologne, with robbery and sexual aggression perpetrated by a thousand or more North African and Middle Eastern youths grabbing world media attention after attempts by the local authorities to maintain a news blackout failed.

Both within Germany and in the neighboring states the mood began to turn against Merkel and against those elites who stood by her. Recent polls in The Netherlands, for example, showed that the refugee issue and its associated issue of Islam making claims in Christian Europe were wind to the sails of the far right, xenophobic movements. Geert Wilders and his Freedom Party, which had been in retreat a year ago, now could possibly win control of parliament on a platform of closing borders to refugees and exiting the European Union.

Though national elections in Holland are not scheduled before March 2017, there will be a referendum on ratification of the Ukraine Association Agreement with the E.U. on April 6. This is essentially an anti-immigrant referendum, since Ukraine is seen, with justification, as likely to send vast numbers of "visitors" to the E.U. if the association agreement goes through and is followed by waiver of visa requirements.

Poland already is host to over one million Ukrainians and its welcome mat has been taken indoors. The flat refusal of Poland to participate in the distribution of refugees that Merkel wanted to orchestrate through the E.U.

central institutions resonated in the German political class and precipitated the nasty German-Polish confrontation now being played out in the European Commission and the Parliament. This is one more serious crack in E.U. consensus brought on by Germany's egoistical policies.

Within Germany, initial polls right after New Year's showed a persistence of the humanitarian spirit and a slight uptick (2 percentage points) in Merkel's approval rating. But as the significance of the debacle before the *Hauptbahnhof* in Cologne and television reports of molestation of good German girls in parks by frisky Arabs circulated on television and in social media, popular support for the Chancellor's policies began to melt away.

The media conformism came unstuck. We have seen in the past week how rejection of anti-asylum-seekers comes not only from the far right, among the *Alternativ für Deutschland* (AfD) and *Pegida* parties, but also from the left. Indeed, the *FAZ* was quick to note the anti-refugee position recently taken by the standard-bearer of *Die Linke* in the Bundestag, Sahra Wagenknecht.

The loosening of minds and tongues in Germany by the vision of refugee waves on their shores will soon be measurable not only by public opinion polls but by the legislative elections in three of Germany's *Länder* in mid-March: Rhineland Westphalia, Baden Wurtemberg and Saxony.

The German newspapers speak of an erosion of Merkel's popular support. The latest poll conducted for *Bild* confirms a 2.5 percentage-point loss for the CDU-CSU in the last week, with a rating of 32.5 percent. Meanwhile the SPD (22.5 percent), AfD (12.5 percent) and Free Democrats (FDP 6.5 percent) are rising. I submit that the true "window of opportunity" for Merkel is to stem the flow of refugees or to appear to do that before the voters go to the ballot box.

All indications are that Merkel is counting on a deal with the Turks to pull her chestnuts out of the fire. That is the logic of her meeting on Friday with the Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu. And yet, it is totally unrealistic to expect to see a tangible cut-off of the refugee flows now when the Turks were unable to deliver on similar promises made several months ago.

Ultimatums issued by German politicians both within and outside Merkel's party speaking of mid-March as the deadline for results are nothing more than a fig leaf for calls for her ouster.

While it is true that Merkel has cleared the field of worthy successors within her party, it must be recalled that the CDU-CSU are governing in a coalition with the Socialists (SPD). If there is a serious setback for the CDU, if there is a marked advance of the non-coalition parties in mid-March, we may expect a

saive qui peut or run away if you can psychology to set in among all the political actors, in which case regime change in Berlin becomes a distinct possibility.

1. Doctorow is the European Coordinator, American Committee for East West Accord, Ltd. His latest book *Does Russia Have a Future?* (August 2015) is available in paperback and e-book from Amazon.com and affiliated websites. For donations to support the European activities of ACEWA, write to eastwestaccord@gmail.com. © Gilbert Doctorow, 2015
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Kerry Pressed for MH-17 Evidence

Exclusive: The father of a young American who died aboard Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 is pressing Secretary of State John Kerry to release evidence to support his early claims that the U.S. government possessed details about the launch of the missile that killed 298 people, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The father of Quinn Schansman, the only American citizen to die in the 2014 shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over eastern Ukraine, has asked Secretary of State John Kerry to release the U.S. data that Kerry cited in claiming precise knowledge of where the suspected anti-aircraft missile was fired.

One of the mysteries of the MH-17 case has become why the United States after asserting that it possessed information implicating ethnic Russian rebels and the Russian government has failed to make the data public or apparently even share it with Dutch investigators who are leading the inquiry into how the plane was shot down and who was responsible.

Quinn Schansman, who had dual U.S.-Dutch citizenship, boarded MH-17 along with 297 other people for a flight from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur on July 17, 2014. The 19-year-old was planning to join his family for a vacation in Indonesia.

In a [letter](#) to Kerry dated Jan. 5, 2016, Thomas J. Schansman, Quinn's father, noted Kerry's remarks at a press 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 mystery in the MH-17 investigation. Last October, when the Dutch Safety Board issued its final report on the crash, it could only place the launch site within a 320-square-kilometer area in eastern Ukraine, covering territory then controlled by both Ukrainian and rebel forces. (The safety board did not seek to identify which side fired the fateful missile).

Meanwhile, 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 Dutch Safety Board’s zone and in an area under Ukrainian government control.

In the days immediately after the shoot-down, Kerry and other senior U.S. officials pointed the finger of blame at ethnic Russian rebels who were resisting a military offensive by the U.S.-backed regime in Kiev. The Russian government was faulted for supposedly giving the rebels a powerful Buk anti-aircraft system capable of downing a civilian airliner flying at 33,000 feet.

But in more than 18 months since the tragedy the U.S. government has never made public its alleged evidence, while Russia has denied supplying the rebels a Buk system and the rebels have asserted that they did not possess functioning Buk missiles.

An Anguished Father

Thomas Schansman, who lives in The Netherlands, wrote to Kerry, noting that “celebrating Christmas and New Year without my son Quinn Schansman, was difficult for my family and myself” and then pressing the Secretary of State to release U.S. information about the case.

“It is my understanding, that neither the Dutch government nor the Dutch Safety Board [DSB] have officially received the radar information from the US that you referred to. It is not included in the [DSB] report and it is not in the public domain,” Schansman wrote.

“On behalf of the bereaved parents and to assist in the pursuit of justice, I would like to request that the United States provides the DSB with the radar data you referred to at the press conference and all other available and relevant information (like satellite data and infrared satellite data) that is in your government’s possession.

“I would be most grateful if the United States either directly or through NATO

would publicly hand over to the Dutch Safety Board radar and satellite data of the minutes before and after the crash. This would enable the DSB to reopen the investigation and include a chapter with this information, which is essential for a successful criminal prosecution. I count on the support of the government of the United States to find and prosecute those responsible for my son and your citizen's death."

Kerry has yet to reply although a U.S. consular official, Pamela J. Hack, sent Schansman [a letter](#) dated Jan. 14, expressing condolences for his son's death and saying "We expect that you will receive a separate response from Washington."

A Rush to Judgment

In the days after the shoot-down, Kerry took the lead in accusing the ethnic Russian rebels (and implicitly their supporters in Moscow) of shooting down MH-17. Just three days after the tragedy, Kerry made the rounds of the Sunday talk shows to leave little doubt that the rebels and Russians were at fault.

After mentioning information gleaned from "social media," Kerry said on NBC's ["Meet the Press"](#): "But even more importantly, 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."

Two days later, on July 22, 2014, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence released a "Government Assessment," also citing "social media" seeming to implicate the rebels. Then, this white paper listed military equipment allegedly supplied by Russia to the rebels. But the list did not include a Buk missile battery or other high-powered anti-aircraft missiles.

The DNI also had U.S. intelligence analysts brief a few select mainstream reporters, but the analysts conveyed much less conviction than their superiors may have wished, indicating that there was still great uncertainty about who was responsible.

The Los Angeles Times [article](#) said: "U.S. intelligence agencies have so far been unable to determine the nationalities or identities of the crew that launched the missile. U.S. officials said it was possible the SA-11 [the designation for a Russian-made anti-aircraft Buk missile] was launched by a defector from the Ukrainian military who was trained to use similar missile systems."

The analysts' uncertainty meshed somewhat with [what I had been told](#) by a source who had been briefed by U.S. intelligence analysts shortly after the shoot-down about what they had seen in high-resolution satellite photos, which they said showed what looked like Ukrainian military personnel manning the battery believed to have fired the missile.

The source who spoke to me several times after receiving additional briefings about advances in the investigation said that as the U.S. analysts gained more insights into the MH-17 shoot-down from technical and other sources, they came to believe the attack was carried out by a rogue element of the Ukrainian military with ties to a hard-line Ukrainian oligarch. [See, for instance, Consortiumnews.com's "[Flight 17 Shoot-Down Scenario Shifts](#)" and "[The Danger of an MH-17 Cold Case.](#)"]

Creating a Pariah

But, officially, the U.S. government never retracted or refined its initial claims. It simply went silent, leaving in place the widespread belief that the ethnic Russian rebels were responsible for the atrocity and that the Russian government had been highly irresponsible in supplying a powerful Buk system to the rebels.

That Western conventional wisdom convinced the European Union to join the U.S. government in imposing economic sanctions on Russia and treating President Vladimir Putin as an international pariah.

As the U.S. government clammed up and hid the evidence that it claimed to possess, it became clear that U.S. intelligence agencies lacked evidence to support Kerry's initial rush to judgment blaming the rebels and the Russians.

Despite intensive overhead surveillance of eastern Ukraine in summer 2014, 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. Satellite intelligence reviewed both before and after the shoot-down only detected Ukrainian military Buk missile systems in the conflict zone.

One could infer this finding from the fact that the DNI on July 22, 2014, did not allege that Buks were among the weapons systems that Russia had provided. If Russian-supplied Buks had been spotted and the batteries of four 16-foot-long missiles hauled around by trucks are hard to miss their presence surely would have been noted.

But one doesn't need to infer this lack of evidence. It was spelled out in a [little-noticed Dutch intelligence report](#) from last October citing information from the Netherlands' Military Intelligence and Security Service (MIVD). Dutch intelligence, which as part of NATO would have access to sensitive overhead surveillance and other relevant data, reported that the only anti-aircraft weapons in eastern Ukraine capable of bringing down MH-17 at 33,000 feet belonged to the Ukrainian government.

MIVD made that 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.”

But the intelligence agency 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.”

Ukrainian Motives

In other words, it is fair to say based on the affirmative comments from the Dutch MIVD and the omissions from the U.S. “Government Assessment” that the Western powers had no evidence that the ethnic Russian rebels or their Russian allies had operational Buk missiles in eastern Ukraine, but the Ukrainian government did have several batteries of such missiles.

It also would have made sense that Ukraine would be moving additional anti-aircraft systems close to the border because of a feared Russian invasion as the Ukrainian military pressed its “anti-terrorism operation” against ethnic Russians fighters, who were resisting the U.S.-backed coup of Feb. 22, 2014, which had ousted elected President Viktor Yanukovich, whose political base was in the east.

According to the Dutch Safety Board report, a Ukrainian warplane had been shot down by a suspected air-to-air missile (presumably from a Russian fighter) on July 16, 2014, meaning that Ukrainian defenses were probably on high alert. The Russian military also claimed that Ukraine had activated a radar system that is used to guide Buk missiles.

I was told by the intelligence source that U.S. analysts looked seriously at the possibility that the intended target was President Putin’s official plane returning from a state visit to South America. His aircraft and MH-17 had similar red-white-and-blue markings, but Putin took a more northerly route and arrived safely in Moscow.

Other possible scenarios were that a poorly trained and undisciplined Ukrainian squad mistook MH-17 for a Russian plane that had penetrated Ukrainian airspace or that the attack was willful provocation designed to be blamed on the Russians.

Whoever the culprits and whatever their motive, one point that should not have

remained in doubt was where the missile launch occurred. Kerry said repeatedly in the days after the tragedy that U.S. intelligence had detected the launch and knew where it came from.

So, why did the Dutch Safety Board have to scratch its head about the missile coming from somewhere in a 320-square-kilometer area, with the Russian manufacturer placing the launch site about 20 kilometers further west? With the firing location a key point in dispute, why would the U.S. government withhold from a NATO ally (and investigators into a major airline disaster) the launch point for the missile?

Presumably, if the Obama administration had solid evidence showing that the launch came from rebel territory, which was Kerry's insinuation, U.S. officials would have been only too happy to provide the data. That data also could be the only precise radar evidence available. Ukraine claimed that its principal radar systems were down at the time of the attack, and the Russians – while they asserted that their radar screens showed another plane closing on MH-17 – did not save the raw data.

Thomas Schansman noted in his letter to Kerry: “the DSB [Dutch Safety Board] stated that it did not receive the (raw) primary radar data from any State. ... The UN Security Council Resolution 2166 explicit[ly] requested Member States to provide any requested assistance and cooperate fully with the investigation. The (raw) primary radar data is crucial for determining cause, and for identifying and prosecuting those responsible for this heinous act.”

Conventional Wisdom

Despite the strange evidentiary gaps and the U.S. failure to present the proof that it claims to possess, the West's “conventional wisdom” remains that either the ethnic Russian rebels or the Russians themselves shot down MH-17 and have sought to cover up their guilt. Some of this certainty comes from the simpleminded game of repeating that Buk missiles are “Russian-made,” which is true but irrelevant to the issue of who fired the missiles, since the Ukrainian military possesses Russian-made Buks.

Despite the lack of U.S. cooperation in the investigation and the failure of Western intelligence to detect Russians or ethnic Russian rebels with a Buk battery in eastern Ukraine the Dutch criminal prosecutors who are working closely with the Ukrainian government say they are taking seriously allegations by bloggers at a British Web site called Bellingcat who have identified Russian soldiers assigned to a Buk missile battery as prime suspects in the shoot-down.

So, the possibility remains that this Dutch-led investigation in coordination

with the Ukrainian government will indict some Russian soldiers even as the U.S. government withholds its data that could resolve such key questions as where the fateful missile was fired.

An indictment of Russian soldiers would make for more useful anti-Putin propaganda and would be sure to produce another chorus of denunciations against Moscow from the mainstream Western media. But such a development might do little to resolve the mystery of who really shot down MH-17, killing Quinn Schansman and 297 other people aboard MH-17.

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](#)).

Democrats in 'Group Think' Land

Exclusive: When Sunday's Democratic presidential debate turned to world affairs, the NBC correspondents and both Sen. Sanders and ex-Secretary Clinton fell in line behind "group thinks" about Syria, Iran and Russia that lack evidentiary support, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

A curious reality about Official Washington is that to have "credibility" you must accept the dominant "group thinks" whether they have any truth to them or not, a rule that applies to both the mainstream news media and the political world, even to people who deviate from the pack on other topics.

For instance, Sen. Bernie Sanders may proudly declare himself a "democratic socialist" far outside the acceptable Washington norm but he will still echo the typical propaganda about Syria, Russia, Iran and other "designated villains." Like other progressives who spend years in Washington, he gets what you might call "Senate-ized," adopting that institution's conventional wisdom about "enemies" even if he may differ on whether to bomb them or not.

That pattern goes in spades for former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and other consciously "centrist" politicians as well as media stars, like NBC's Andrea Mitchell and Lester Holt, who were the moderators of Sunday's Democratic presidential [debate](#). They know what they know based on what "everybody who's important" says, regardless of the evidence or lack thereof.

So, you had Mitchell and Holt framing questions based on Official Washington's "group thinks" and Sanders and Clinton responding accordingly.

Regarding Iran, Sanders may have gone as far as would be considered safe in this political environment, welcoming the implementation of the agreement to restrain Iran's nuclear program but accepting the "group think" about Iran's "terrorism" and hesitant to call for resumption of diplomatic relations.

"Understanding that Iran's behavior in so many ways is something that we disagree with; their support of terrorism, the anti-American rhetoric that we're hearing from their leadership is something that is not acceptable," Sanders said. "Can I tell you that we should open an embassy in Tehran tomorrow? No, I don't think we should."

Blaming Iran

In her response, Clinton settled safely behind the Israeli-preferred position to lambaste Iran for supposedly fomenting the trouble in the Middle East, though more objective observers might say that the U.S. government and its "allies" including Israel, Saudi Arabia and Turkey have wreaked much more regional havoc than Iran has.

"We have to go after them [the Iranians] on a lot of their other bad behavior in the region which is causing enormous problems in Syria, Yemen, Iraq and elsewhere," Clinton said.

Yet, how exactly Iran is responsible for "enormous problems" across the region doesn't get explained. Everybody just "knows" it to be true, since the claim is asserted by Israel's right-wing government and repeated by U.S. pols and pundits endlessly.

Yet, in Iraq, the chaos was not caused by Iran, but by the U.S. government's invasion in 2003, which then-Sen. Clinton supported (while Sen. Sanders opposed it). In Yemen, it is the Saudis and their Sunni coalition that created a humanitarian disaster by bombing the impoverished country after wildly exaggerating Iran's support for Houthi rebels.

In Syria, the core reason for the bloodshed is not Iran, but decisions of the Bush-43 administration last decade and the Obama administration this decade to seek another "regime change," ousting President Bashar al-Assad.

Supported by Turkey, Saudi Arabia and other Sunni powers, this U.S.-backed "covert" intervention instigated both political unrest and terrorist violence inside Syria, including arming jihadist forces such as Al Qaeda's Nusra Front and its close ally, Ahrar al-Sham and to a lesser degree Al Qaeda's spinoff, the

Islamic State. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Hidden Origins of Syria's Civil War.](#)"]

The desire of these Sunni powers – along with Israel and America's neoconservatives – was to shatter the so-called "Shiite crescent" that they saw reaching from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon. Since Assad is an Alawite, a branch of Shiite Islam, he had to be removed even though he was regarded as the principal protector of Syria's Christian, Shiite and Alawite minorities. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Did Money Seal Saudi-Israeli Alliance?](#)']

However, while Israel and the Sunni powers get a pass for their role in the carnage, Iran is blamed for its assistance to the Syrian military in battling these jihadist groups. Official Washington's version of this tragedy is that the culprits are Assad, the Iranians and now the Russians, who also intervened to help the Syrian government resist the jihadists, both the Islamic State and Al Qaeda's various friends and associates. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Climbing into Bed with Al Qaeda.](#)"]

Blaming Assad

Official Washington also accepts as undeniably true that Assad is responsible for all 250,000 deaths in the Syrian civil war even those inflicted by the Sunni jihadists against the Syrian military and Syrian civilians a logic that would have accused President Abraham Lincoln of slaughtering all 750,000 or so people North and South who died in the U.S. Civil War.

The "group think" also holds that Assad was behind the sarin gas attack near Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013, despite growing evidence that it was a jihadist group, possibly with the help of Turkish intelligence, that staged the outrage as a provocation to draw the U.S. military into the conflict against Syria's military by creating the appearance that Assad had crossed Obama's "red line" on using chemical weapons.

Mitchell cited Assad's presumed guilt in the sarin attack in asking Clinton: "Should the President have stuck to his red line once he drew it?"

Trying to defend President Obama in South Carolina where he is popular especially with the black community, Clinton dodged the implicit criticism of Obama but accepted Mitchell's premise.

"I know from my own experience as Secretary of State that we were deeply worried about Assad's forces using chemical weapons because it would have had not only a horrific effect on people in Syria, but it could very well have affected the surrounding states, Jordan, Israel, Lebanon, Turkey.

"If there is any blame to be spread around, it starts with the prime minister of

Iraq, who sectarianized his military, setting Shia against Sunni. It is amplified by Assad, who has waged one of the bloodiest, most terrible attacks on his own people: 250,000-plus dead, millions fleeing. Causing this vacuum that has been filled unfortunately, by terrorist groups, including ISIS.”

Clinton’s account which ignores the central role that the U.S. invasion of Iraq and outside support for the jihadists in Syria played in creating ISIS represents a thoroughly twisted account of how the Mideast crisis evolved. But Sanders seconded Clinton’s recitation of the “group think” on Syria, saying:

“I agree with most of what she said. And we all know, no argument, the Secretary is absolutely right, Assad is a butcher of his own people, man using chemical weapons against his own people. This is beyond disgusting. But I think in terms of our priorities in the region, our first priority must be the destruction of ISIS. Our second priority must be getting rid of Assad, through some political settlement, working with Iran, working with Russia.” [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“A Blind Eye Toward Turkey’s Crimes.”](#)]

Sanders also repeated his talking point that Saudi Arabia and Qatar must “start putting some skin in the game” ignoring the fact that the Saudis and Qataris have been principal supporters of the Sunni jihadists inflicting much of the carnage in Syria. Those two rich countries have put plenty of “skin in the game” except it comes in the slaughter of Syrian Christians, Alawites, Shiites and other religious minorities.

Blaming Russia

NBC anchor Lester Holt then recited the “group think” about “Russian aggression” in Ukraine ignoring the U.S. role in instigating the Feb. 22, 2014 coup that overthrew elected President Viktor Yanukovich. Holt also asserted Moscow’s guilt in the July 17, 2014 shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 despite the lack of any solid evidence to support that claim.

Holt asked: “Secretary Clinton, you famously handed Russia’s foreign minister a reset button in 2009. Since then, Russia has annexed Crimea, fomented a war in Ukraine, provided weapons that downed an airliner and launched operations, as we just did discuss, to support Assad in Syria. As president, would you hand Vladimir Putin a reset button?”

While noting some positive achievements from the Russian “reset” such as a new nuclear weapons treaty, help resupplying U.S. troops in Afghanistan and assistance in the nuclear deal with Iran, Clinton quickly returned to Official Washington’s bash-Putin imperative:

“When Putin came back in the fall of 2011, it was very clear he came back with a

mission. And I began speaking out as soon as that happened because there were some fraudulent elections held, and Russians poured out into the streets to demand their freedom, and he cracked down. And in fact, accused me of fomenting it. So we now know that he has a mixed record to say the least and we have to figure out how to deal with him.

“And I know that he’s someone that you have to continually stand up to because, like many bullies, he is somebody who will take as much as he possibly can unless you do. And we need to get the Europeans to be more willing to stand up, I was pleased they put sanctions on after Crimea and eastern Ukraine and the downing of the airliner, but we’ve got to be more united in preventing Putin from taking a more aggressive stance in Europe and the Middle East.”

In such situations, with millions of Americans watching, no one in Official Washington would think to challenge the premises behind these “group thinks,” not even Bernie Sanders. No one would note that the U.S. government hasn’t provided a single verifiable fact to support its claims blaming Assad for the sarin attack or Putin for the plane shoot-down. No one would dare question the absurdity of blaming Assad for every death in Syria’s civil war or Putin for all the tensions in Ukraine. [See, for instance, Consortiumnews.com’s [“MH-17’s Unnecessary Mystery.”](#)]

Those dubious “group thinks” are simply accepted as true regardless of the absence of evidence or the presence of significant counter-evidence.

The two possibilities for such behavior are both scary: either these people, including prospective presidents, believe the propaganda or that they are so cynical and cowardly that they won’t demand proof of serious charges that could lead the United States and the world into more war and devastation.

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](#)).

Playing Games with War Deaths

There’s a double standard in how the U.S. mainstream media reports civilian deaths depending if the U.S. military is fighting the wars or not, accepting absurdly low numbers when the U.S. is at fault and hyping death tolls when “enemies” are involved, a manipulation of human tragedy, says Nicolas J S

Davies.

By Nicolas J S Davies

How many people have been killed in the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Somalia? On Nov. 18, a UN press briefing on the war in Yemen declared authoritatively that it had so far killed 5,700 people, including 830 women and children. But how precise are these figures, what are they based on, and what relation are they likely to bear to the true numbers of people killed?

Throughout the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan, the media has cited UN updates comparing numbers of Afghans killed by “coalition forces” and the “Taliban.” Following the U.S. escalation of the war in 2009 and 2010, a report by McClatchy in March 2011 was headlined, “UN: U.S.-led forces killed fewer Afghan civilians last year.” It reported a 26 percent drop in U.S.-led killing of Afghan civilians in 2010, offset by a 28 percent increase in civilians killed by the “Taliban” and “other insurgents.”

This was all illustrated in a neat pie-chart slicing up the extraordinarily low reported total of 2,777 Afghan civilians killed in 2010 at the peak of the U.S.-led escalation of the war.

Neither the UN nor the media made any effort to critically examine this reported decrease in civilians killed by U.S.-led forces, even as U.S. troop strength peaked at 100,000 in August 2010. Pentagon data showed a 22 percent increase in U.S. air strikes, from 4,163 in 2009 to 5,100 in 2010, and U.S. special forces “kill or capture” raids exploded from 90 in November 2009 to 600 per month by the summer of 2010, and eventually to over 1,000 raids in April 2011.

Senior U.S. military officers quoted in Dana Priest and William Arkin’s book, *Top Secret America*, told the authors that only half of such special forces raids target the right people or homes, making the reported drop in resulting civilian deaths even more implausible.

If *McClatchy* had investigated the striking anomaly of a reported decrease in civilian casualties in the midst of a savagely escalating war, it would have raised serious questions regarding the full scale of the slaughter taking place in occupied Afghanistan. And it would have revealed a disturbing pattern of under-reporting by the UN and the media in which a small number of deaths that happened to be reported to UN officials or foreign reporters in Kabul was deceptively relayed to the world as an estimate of total civilian war deaths.

The reasons for the media’s reluctance to delve into such questions lie buried in Iraq. During the U.S. military occupation of Iraq, controversy erupted over conflicting estimates of the numbers of Iraqis killed and details of who killed

them. If more UN officials and journalists had dug into those conflicting reports from Iraq and made the effort to really understand the differences between them, they would have been far better equipped to make sense of reports of numbers of people killed in other wars.

The critical thing to understand about reports on numbers of civilians killed in wars is the difference between “passive reporting” and scientific “mortality studies.”

When I was investigating the conflicting reports of civilian deaths in Iraq, I spoke with Les Roberts, an epidemiologist at Columbia University’s School of Public Health and one of the co-authors of two comprehensive mortality studies conducted in occupied Iraq in 2004 and 2006.

Les Roberts had conducted mortality studies in war zones for many years, including studies in Rwanda in 1994 and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in 2000 that are still widely cited by the media and Western politicians without the taint of controversy that was immediately attached to his and his colleagues’ work in Iraq.

In 2004, Roberts and his colleagues conducted a scientific epidemiological study of mortality in Iraq since the U.S. invasion. They concluded that “about 100,000 excess deaths, or more” had resulted from the first 18 months of U.S.-led invasion and occupation. They also found that, “Violent deaths were mainly attributed to coalition forces,” and, “Most individuals killed by coalition forces were women and children.”

Both Nancy Youssef of *McClatchy* (then *Knight Ridder*) and John Simpson of the BBC also reported that U.S.-led forces, not Iraqi resistance fighters, were probably responsible for most civilian deaths in Iraq, based on figures published by the Iraqi Health Ministry.

On Sept. 25, 2004, the *Miami Herald* carried a report by Youssef under the headline, “U.S. attacks, not insurgents, blamed for most Iraqi deaths.” A Health Ministry official told Youssef, “Everyone is afraid of the Americans, not the fighters. And they should be.”

But after John Simpson noted the same pattern in the next Health Ministry report on the BBC’s flagship *Panorama* news program, the BBC received a phone call from the occupation government’s Health Minister disavowing his own ministry’s published data on who was killing who in Iraq. The BBC retracted its story and subsequent Health Ministry reports no longer assigned responsibility for civilian deaths to either party in the conflict.

Les Roberts and his colleagues completed an even larger mortality study in Iraq in 2006, by which time they found that an estimated 650,000 Iraqis had died in the first three years of the war. Both their studies revealed much higher mortality rates than had been reported by Iraqi hospitals, the Health Ministry, the Western media or "Iraq Body Count", a much-cited Western compilation of data from such "passive" sources.

As each of their studies was released, Roberts and his colleagues became targets of blistering campaigns by U.S. and British officials to dispute and dismiss their findings. The critics didn't make educated critiques of their methodology, which was state-of-the-art in their field, but mostly just insisted that they were out of line with other reports and so must be wrong.

These campaigns were so successful in throwing mud in the water and confusing the media and the public that corporate media became very reluctant to attach any credibility to this otherwise solid evidence that the U.S.-led war in Iraq was far more deadly than most people in the West had realized. Corporate media took the easy way out and began referring to numbers of civilian deaths in Iraq only in vague, politically safe terms, if they mentioned them at all.

In reality, the huge discrepancy between the results of these mortality studies and "passive reporting" was exactly what epidemiologists expected to find in a conflict zone like occupied Iraq.

As Les Roberts and his colleagues have explained, epidemiologists working in war zones typically find that passive reporting only captures between 5 percent (in Guatemala, for example) and 20 percent of the total deaths revealed by comprehensive mortality studies. So their finding that passive reporting in Iraq had captured about one in 12 actual deaths was consistent with extensive research in other war-torn countries.

In the U.K., Prime Minister Tony Blair dismissed the "Lancet survey" out of hand, claiming that, "Figures from the Iraqi Ministry of Health, which are a survey from the hospitals there, are in our view the most accurate survey there is."

But in 2007, the BBC obtained a set of leaked documents that included a memo from Sir Roy Anderson, the chief scientific adviser to the U.K.'s Defense Ministry, in which he described the epidemiologists' methods as "close to best practice" and their study design as "robust."

The document trove included emails between worried British officials admitting that the study was "likely to be right" and that "the survey methodology used here cannot be rubbished, it is a tried and tested way of measuring mortality in

conflict zones.” But the very same official insisted that the government must “not accept the figures quoted in the *Lancet* survey as accurate.”

Other mortality surveys conducted in Iraq have produced lower figures, but there are legitimate reasons to regard the work of Les Roberts and his colleagues as the gold standard, based on their experience in other conflicts and the thoroughness of their methods.

Other surveys were conducted by the occupation government, not by independent researchers, inevitably making people reluctant to tell survey teams about family members killed by occupation forces. Some studies excluded the most war-torn parts of Iraq, while one was based only on a single question about deaths in the family as part of a lengthy “living conditions” survey.

The authors of the most recent study, published in the *PLOS* medical journal in 2013, a decade after the invasion, have acknowledged that it produced a low estimate, because so much time had elapsed and because they did not interview any of the more than 3 million people who had fled their homes in the most devastated areas. They made adjustments to compensate for such factors, but those adjustments themselves were deliberately conservative. However, their estimate of 500,000 violent civilian deaths is still four times the highest numbers passively reported.

Gilbert Burnham, a co-author of both the *Lancet* studies and the *PLOS* study, does not find the results of the three epidemiological studies incompatible, emphasizing that, “These represent estimates, and that’s what we’ve always said.”

In 2015, Physicians for Social Responsibility co-published a report titled *Body Count: Casualty Figures After 10 Years of the “War on Terror,”* with a new estimate of 1.3 million total war deaths in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan between 2001 and 2011.

This 97-page report meticulously examines and evaluates mortality studies and other evidence from all three countries, and the authors conclude that the studies published by the *Lancet* are still the most accurate and credible studies conducted in Iraq.

But what can all this tell us about the figures cited by the UN and the media for civilian deaths in other war-torn countries since 2006?

As noted in *Body Count*, the only reports on civilian mortality in Afghanistan, including those published by the UN, are based on passive reporting. To accept these figures as actual estimates of war deaths would be to believe that the most heavily bombed country in the recent history of warfare (over 60,000 air

strikes in 14 years) has been a safer place to live than most Western cities, with only 5.9 violent deaths per 100,000 inhabitants per year, compared to 6.9 in Frankfurt and 48 in Detroit.

As the authors explain, “The problem in determining the number of killed civilians is the ‘passive’ research method itself. It can capture only a fraction of all cases. In order to get more reliable approximations, on-site research and scientific polls would be necessary. In Afghanistan, these simply do not exist.”

The authors of Body Count very conservatively estimate the number of Afghan civilians killed at 5 to 8 times the number passively reported, giving an estimate between 106,000 and 170,000. At the same time, they acknowledge the conservative nature of this estimate, noting that, “compared to Iraq, where urbanization is more pronounced, and monitoring by local and foreign press is more pronounced than in Afghanistan, the registration of civilian deaths has been much more fragmentary.”

If the ratio of actual deaths to passively reported deaths in Afghanistan is in fact somewhere between those found in Iraq (12:1) and Guatemala (20:1), the true number of civilians killed in Afghanistan would be somewhere between 255,000 and 425,000.

As in Guatemala, the UN and Western reporters have little access to the remote resistance-held areas where most air strikes and special forces raids take place, so the true number of Afghan civilians killed could well be closer to the higher of these numbers.

Paradoxically, the Syrian government’s role as an “information victim” of U.S. information warfare may have led to more comprehensive reporting of civilian deaths in Syria than in Iraq or Afghanistan, by the UN, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and other human rights groups.

But even without Western political pressure to under-report civilian deaths (except in U.S.-led air strikes), passive reporting in Syria is still just passive reporting. The ratio of actual deaths to the numbers being reported may be lower than in Iraq or Afghanistan, but even the most thorough passive reporting is unlikely to capture more than 20 percent of actual deaths.

As in Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Guatemala and Iraq, only serious, scientific mortality studies can expose the full scale of the slaughter endured by the people of Afghanistan, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Somalia and other war-ravaged countries.

The politically contrived controversy surrounding mortality estimates in Iraq

has deterred the U.S. corporate media from making any attempt to gain a more accurate picture of the scale of the slaughter in these other wars.

This has left average Americans in almost complete ignorance of the human cost of modern war, and has served to shield our political and military leaders from accountability for appalling decisions and policies that have resulted in catastrophic losses of human life.

Deaths counted by “passive reporting” cannot be an estimate of total deaths in a war zone because they are fragmentary by nature. But serious researchers have developed scientific methods they can use to make realistic estimates of total war deaths.

As with climate change and other issues, UN officials and journalists must overcome political pressures, come to grips with the basic science involved, and stop sweeping the vast majority of the victims of our wars down this Orwellian “memory hole.”

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

How Neocons Banished Realism

The grip that neocons and liberal interventionists have on Official Washington’s opinion circles is now so strong that “realists” who once provided an important counterbalance have been almost banished from foreign policy debates, a dangerous dilemma that James W Carden explores.

By James W Carden

In a widely remarked upon article for the online version of *Foreign Policy* last week, Harvard’s Stephen Walt asked a very good question. Why, Walt asked, are elite outlets like the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times* “allergic to realist views, given that realists have been (mostly) right about some very important issues, and the columnists they publish have often been wrong?”

Walt then went on to do something pundits are generally loath to do: he admitted that he’d didn’t really know the answer. This is not to say that I do, but I think Walt’s question is worth exploring.

Why indeed? My own hunch is that we realists are a source of discomfit for the Beltway armchair warrior class not so much because we have been right about every major U.S. foreign policy question since the invasion of Iraq, but because we dare to question the premise which undergirds the twin orthodoxies of neoconservatism and liberal interventionism.

The premise, shared by heroes of the Left and Right, is this: America, a “shining city on a hill” (John Winthrop, later vulgarized by Ronald Reagan) “remains the one indispensable nation” (Barack Obama) and deprived of America’s “benevolent global hegemony” (Robert Kagan) the world will surely collapse into anarchy.

This strain of messianic thinking has deep roots in the psyche of the American establishment and so, in a sense, neoconservatism, which is really little more than a latter-day Trotskyist sect, is as American as apple pie.

Common though it is to trace, or conflate, the rise of American messianism to 1898 when the country first emerged as a global power, the cult of “American exceptionalism” has its roots in Puritan theology.

In his indispensable work, *The Irony of American History*, the Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr cites a tract from 1650 in which the colonial leader Edward Johnson wrote that New England was “where the Lord would create a new heaven and a new earth, new churches and a new commonwealth together.” Niebuhr wrote that the Puritans had a “sense of being a ‘separated’ nation which God was using to make a new beginning for mankind.”

This strain of American solipsism was also noted with distaste by that most perceptive chronicler of American democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville who, in 1840, wrote that it was “impossible to conceive of a more troublesome and garrulous patriotism.”

The historian John Lamberton Harper has observed that the strain of messianic thinking was evident throughout the Nineteenth Century, reminding us that Indiana Sen. Albert Beveridge once claimed that the good Lord had “marked the American people as His chosen nation to finally lead in the regeneration of the world.”

And so on and so on.

Throughout the Twentieth Century, the messianic way of thinking became ever more firmly entrenched – particular among the governing class – as America continued what many felt was its inexorable rise to global supremacy. At the turn of the century prominent men of politics and letters such as Brooks Adams, Theodore Roosevelt and the geopolitical theorist Alfred MacKinder enthusiastically

subscribed to the notion that “all signs point to the approaching supremacy of the United States.” Indeed, that this was so was an “inexorable decree of destiny.”

America’s entry into the First World War only deepened that sense of singularity. Here’s Walter Lippmann, who later in life became something like the dean of American realists, writing about President Woodrow Wilson in the *New Republic* in 1917: “other men have led nations to war to increase their glory, their wealth, their prestige no other statesman has ever so clearly identified the glory of his country with the peace and liberty of the world.”

Decades later, during the Cold War, Lippmann regained his sanity, while *TNR* all but lost its. And indeed, it was during that 40-year-long “twilight struggle” between the U.S. and the USSR that the messianic consensus grabbed hold of the American mind and, to this day, has not let go. But the roots of that way of thinking, as we have seen, are deep and long predate the Cold War.

And so I would submit that the reason the three major American newspapers are “allergic to realism” is because they are part and parcel of an establishment that has, for well over a century now, been in thrall to a messianic vision of global supremacy.

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WPost’s Deadly Lack of Realism

The Washington Post’s neocon editors advocate one regime change after another, oblivious to the death and destruction that their strategies have unleashed across the Mideast and now into Europe and reflecting a lack of realism about what U.S. foreign policy can achieve, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar notes.

By Paul R. Pillar

Fred Hiatt, whose *Washington Post* editorial page has been beating its drum incessantly for more U.S. intervention in Syria, comes at that same theme from another angle with a signed [column](#) that criticizes President Obama’s State of the Union address. Hiatt’s critique illustrates some recurring and fallacious patterns of thought that arise in debate about U.S. intervention and especially military intervention.

Hiatt didn't like that the President, in Hiatt's words, reserved any optimism in the speech for America and that "for the rest of the world, Obama was pessimistic, even fatalistic."

Specific passages in the speech Hiatt cites are one that referred to the Middle East "going through a transformation that will play out for a generation, rooted in conflicts that date back millennia" and another that noted how "instability will continue for decades in many parts of the world, in the Middle East, in Afghanistan, parts of Pakistan, in parts of Central America, in Africa, and Asia."

Then Hiatt asks, "Why would a president ask Americans to assume that the problems of Central America, say, are intractable and inevitable?" But the President didn't say anything about intractability or inevitability. He was merely making an observation about a reality, the sort of reality that, if ignored, can work to the detriment of sound U.S. foreign policy.

Even with insertion of the time frame "for decades", the President's observation about what we can expect regarding instability "in" some regions and in "parts of" other places is so safe as to be undebatable. To expect otherwise would be to predict a sweeping, benign transformation of a conflict-prone world the likes of which have never been seen.

Hiatt comments that Costa Rica has been stable for a good while and that the internal situation in Mexico has improved noticeably in the last 20 years, both true, and then writes, "Why would we assume that El Salvador or Honduras can't accomplish as much?"

We shouldn't assume that, and the President did not say we should assume that. But neither should we assume that those states *will* accomplish as much, or, even more relevant to policy questions, that they could do so with some sort of help from the United States.

Hiatt is right that we ought to be open to favorable possibilities, but a common problem with the mindset he represents is to focus *only* on those possibilities, or to focus on them disproportionately more than on the pitfalls and problems. A related tendency is to believe that current conflicts and instability, some of which, within time frames that are politically meaningful, really are intractable, are some sort of aberration that can be smoothed out with enough good will and enough policy smarts and that the countries involved can be returned to a sort of benign state of nature.

Other examples of favorable change that Hiatt cites are South Korea progressing from "an impoverished military dictatorship" and Estonia no longer being "a

captive of the Soviet Union.” But even though his column is trying to make a point about U.S. policy, Hiatt says nothing about exactly what sorts of U.S. policy had anything to do with those changes.

In the case of South Korea, the big thing the United States did, in addition to years of substantial economic and military assistance, was the beating back of North Korean aggression, aided by China, in the Korean War and the subsequent ensuring, through a mutual security commitment and the stationing of U.S. forces in South Korea, that such aggression would not be repeated.

There was never anything like a civil war or violent ethnic or sectarian conflicts within South Korea, and certainly nothing remotely close to U.S. intervention in such internal conflicts. Neither was there anything like such U.S. intervention in Estonia, whose gaining of freedom was one data point in a much larger process of the Soviets’ European empire collapsing of its own weight.

There was sound policy and deft diplomacy on the part of the George H.W. Bush administration at the time, but that policy was distinguished as much by what it wisely did *not* try to do as by what it did. Robert Gates, who was deputy national security adviser at the time, later wrote that the smartest thing President Bush did as the Soviet empire crumbled was to “play it cool.”

Outlooks such as Hiatt’s obliterate any distinction between the idea that conscious action can be efficacious in resolving conflicts favorably, i.e., that we should not be “fatalistic” about such problems, and the idea that it is the United States that should be taking action.

Hiatt says that whether longstanding hatreds are managed or explode “is the result of political choices. It is not a matter of destiny.” Correct, and the political choices that matter above all are those of Mexicans, Koreans, or whoever’s conflict it is in the first place.

Referring to the cases of South Korea and Estonia, Hiatt writes that “it was the U.S. commitment to a peaceful democratic future ... that paved the way for their success.” This vague formulation could mean either of two things, both of which also are characteristic of the interventionist position that the columnist represents.

One is to disguise a push for some specific measure (e.g., conduct U.S. combat air operations against the Assad regime) whose costs and risks may be all too apparent by making an exhortation for something more apple pie-ish (e.g., a “peaceful democratic future”) with the costs and risks being less obvious.

The other possibility is that Hiatt is referring just to “commitment” in the

sense of expressing such a commitment, as leaders do in speeches (and it is a speech that in the first instance is what he is criticizing). That sort of approach also has become typical of much of the criticism of related policies of the Obama administration, such as the silly demand that the President say the phrase “Islamic terrorism,” as if that is somehow going to save lives from terrorism.

No matter how loudly or eloquently a leader utters a commitment or a popular phrase, speeches do not remove real obstacles and pitfalls on the ground.

A final fallacy is the apparent belief that polities and societies across the world are so homogeneous that whatever works in one place ought to work in another. Referring again to the Korean and Estonian cases, Hiatt writes, “Why would Obama set his sights lower for Afghanistan or Africa?”

If the President were indeed “setting sights” lower, it would be because of the enormous differences in political culture, ethnic geography, economic development, and much else that makes what is achievable in the way of resolving or managing conflicts in one place much different from what is possible in another place, and especially what is achievable in building stable democracies.

Hiatt repeats the same themes about Syria that he and his editorial staff have been repeating *ad infinitum*. There is the familiar and casual counterfactual assertion that if only a “modest intervention” had been undertaken earlier then we would be seeing nothing like the complicated and debilitating conflict that besets Syria today, but without any explanation as to why the roots of the conflict, involving such matters as sectarian divisions and legitimacy issues, would have been any more possible to overcome with a “modest intervention” on one date rather than another.

There is just the statement that the “modest intervention” would have been “to forestall a civil war that might spin out of control”, as if what Syria had before was a “controlled” civil war, or as if it were ever within in the power of the United States to “control” such things.

It surely would be nice if Honduras were just like Costa Rica, if Syria were just like Estonia, and if expressions of optimism by U.S. presidents about the possibility of felicitous change overseas could make such change happen. If that were so, making U.S. foreign policy would be a whole lot easier. But that’s not the way the world works.

Paul R. Pillar, in his 28 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, rose to be one of the agency’s top analysts. He is now a visiting professor at Georgetown University for security studies. (This article first appeared as [a blog post](#) at

MH-17's Unnecessary Mystery

Exclusive: Nearly 18 months after Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 crashed in eastern Ukraine, one of the troubling mysteries is why the U.S. government after rushing to blame Russia and ethnic Russian rebels then went silent, effectively obstructing the investigation into 298 deaths, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

As the whodunit mystery surrounding the shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 nears the 1½-year mark, the Obama administration could open U.S. intelligence files and help bring justice for the 298 people killed in eastern Ukraine on July 17, 2014. Instead, a separate mystery has emerged: why has the U.S. government clammed up since five days after the tragedy?

Immediately after the crash, senior Obama administration officials showed no hesitancy in pointing fingers at the ethnic Russian rebels who were then resisting a military offensive by the U.S.-backed Kiev regime. On July, 20, 2014, Secretary of State John Kerry appeared on TV talk shows claiming there was a strong circumstantial case implicating the rebels and their Russian backers in the shoot-down.

After mentioning some information gleaned from "social media," Kerry said on NBC's "Meet the Press": "But even more importantly, 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."

Two days later, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence released a "Government Assessment," also citing "social media" seeming to implicate the rebels. Then, this white paper listed military equipment allegedly supplied by Russia to the rebels. But the list did not include a Buk missile battery or other high-powered anti-aircraft missiles capable of striking MH-17, which had been flying at around 33,000 feet.

The DNI also had U.S. intelligence analysts brief a few select mainstream reporters, but the analysts conveyed much less conviction than their superiors may have wished, indicating that there was still great uncertainty about who was responsible.

The Los Angeles Times article said: “U.S. intelligence agencies have so far been unable to determine the nationalities or identities of the crew that launched the missile. U.S. officials said it was possible the SA-11 [the designation for a Russian-made anti-aircraft Buk missile] was launched by a defector from the Ukrainian military who was trained to use similar missile systems.”

That uncertainty meshed somewhat with what I had been told by a source who had been briefed by U.S. intelligence analysts shortly after the shoot-down about what they had seen in high-resolution satellite photos, which they said showed what looked like Ukrainian military personnel manning the battery which was believed to have fired the missile.

There is also an important distinction to make between the traditional “Intelligence Assessment,” which is the U.S. intelligence community’s gold standard for evaluating an issue, complete with any disagreements among the 16 intelligence agencies, and a “Government Assessment,” like the one produced in the MH-17 case.

As former CIA analyst Ray McGovern wrote: “The key difference between the traditional ‘Intelligence Assessment’ and this relatively new creation, a ‘Government Assessment,’ is that the latter genre is put together by senior White House bureaucrats or other political appointees, not senior intelligence analysts. Another significant difference is that an ‘Intelligence Assessment’ often includes alternative views, either in the text or in footnotes, detailing disagreements among intelligence analysts, thus revealing where the case may be weak or in dispute.”

In other words, a “Government Assessment” is an invitation for political hacks to manufacture what was called a “dodgy dossier” when the British government used similar tactics to sell the phony case for war with Iraq in 2002-03.

Demonizing Putin

Yet, despite the flimsiness of the “blame-Russia-for-MH-17” case in July 2014, the Obama administration’s rush to judgment proved critical in whipping up the European press to demonize President Vladimir Putin, who became the Continent’s *bete noire* accused of killing 298 innocent people. That set the stage for the European Union to accede to U.S. demands for economic sanctions on Russia.

The MH-17 case was deployed like a classic piece of “strategic communication” or “Stratcom,” mixing propaganda with psychological operations to put an adversary at a disadvantage. Apparently satisfied with that result, the Obama administration stopped talking publicly, leaving the impression of Russian guilt to corrode Moscow’s image in the public mind.

But the intelligence source who spoke to me several times after he received additional briefings about advances in the investigation said that as the U.S. analysts gained more insights into the MH-17 shoot-down from technical and other sources, they came to believe the attack was carried out by a rogue element of the Ukrainian military with ties to a hard-line Ukrainian oligarch. [See, for instance, Consortiumnews.com's "[Flight 17 Shoot-Down Scenario Shifts](#)" and "[The Danger of an MH-17 Cold Case.](#)"]

But that conclusion if made public would have dealt another blow to America's already shaky credibility, which has never recovered from the false Iraq-WMD claims in 2002-03. A reversal also would embarrass Kerry, other senior U.S. officials and major Western news outlets, which had bought into the Russia-did-it narrative. Plus, the European Union might reconsider its decision to sanction Russia, a key part of U.S. policy in support of the Kiev regime.

Still, as the MH-17 mystery dragged on into 2015, I inquired about the possibility of an update from the DNI's office. But a spokeswoman told me that no update would be provided because the U.S. government did not want to say anything to prejudice the ongoing investigation. In response, I noted that Kerry and the DNI had already done that by immediately pointing the inquiry in the direction of blaming Russia and the rebels.

But there was another purpose in staying mum. By refusing to say anything to contradict the initial rush to judgment, the Obama administration could let Western mainstream journalists and "citizen investigators" on the Internet keep Russia pinned down with more speculation about its guilt in the MH-17 shoot-down.

So, silence became the better part of candor. After all, pretty much everyone in the West had judged Russia and Putin guilty. So, why shake that up?

The Ukrainian Buks

Yet, what has become clear after the initial splurge of U.S. blame-casting is that U.S. intelligence lacked key evidence to support Kerry's hasty judgments. Despite intensive overhead surveillance of eastern Ukraine in summer 2014, U.S. and other Western intelligence services could find no evidence that Russia had ever given a Buk system to the rebels or introduced one into the area.

Satellite intelligence reviewed both before and after the shoot-down only detected Ukrainian Buk missile systems in the conflict zone. One could infer this finding from the fact that the DNI on July 22, 2014, did not allege that Buks were among the weapons systems that Russia had provided. If Russian-supplied Buks had been spotted and the batteries of four 16-foot-long missiles

hailed around by trucks are hard to miss their presence surely would have been noted.

But one doesn't need to infer this lack of evidence. It was spelled out in a little-noticed report by the Netherlands' Military Intelligence and Security Service (MIVD) that was made public last October when the Dutch Safety Board issued its findings on the causes of the doomed MH-17 flight. (Since the flight had originated in Amsterdam and carried many Dutch passengers, Netherlands took a lead role in the investigation.)

Dutch intelligence, which as part of NATO would have access to sensitive overhead surveillance and other relevant data, reported that the only anti-aircraft weapons in eastern Ukraine capable of bringing down MH-17 at 33,000 feet belonged to the Ukrainian government.

MIVD made that 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."

But the intelligence agency added that the rebels lacked that capacity: "Prior to the crash, the MIVD knew that, in addition to light aircraft artillery, the Separatists also possessed short-range portable air defence systems (man-portable air-defence systems; MANPADS) and that they possibly possessed short-range vehicle-borne air-defence systems. Both types of systems are considered surface-to-air missiles (SAMs). Due to their limited range they do not constitute a danger to civil aviation at cruising altitude."

MIVD noted that on June 29, 2014, "the Separatists captured a Ukrainian armed forces military base in Donetsk [where] there were Buk missile systems," a fact that was reported in the press before the crash and attracted MIVD's attention.

"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."

In other words, it is fair to say based on the affirmative comments from MIVD and the omissions from the U.S. DNI's "Government Assessment" that the Western powers had no evidence that the ethnic Russian rebels or their Russian allies had operational Buk missiles in eastern Ukraine, but Ukraine did.

It also would have made sense that Ukraine would be moving additional anti-aircraft systems close to the border because of a feared Russian invasion as the Ukrainian military pressed its "anti-terrorism operation" against ethnic

Russians fighters. They were resisting the U.S.-backed coup of Feb. 22, 2014, which had ousted elected President Viktor Yanukovich, whose political base was in the east.

According to the Dutch Safety Board report, issued last October, a Ukrainian warplane had been shot down by a suspected air-to-air missile (presumably from a Russian fighter) on July 16, 2014, meaning that Ukrainian defenses were probably on high alert. The Russian military also claimed that Ukraine had activated a radar system that is used to guide Buk missiles.

Gunning for Putin?

I was told by the intelligence source that U.S. analysts looked seriously at the possibility that the intended target was President Putin's official plane returning from a state visit to South America. His aircraft and MH-17 had similar red-white-and-blue markings, but Putin took a more northerly route and arrived safely in Moscow.

Other possible scenarios were that a poorly trained and undisciplined Ukrainian squad mistook MH-17 for a Russian plane that had penetrated Ukrainian airspace or that the attack was willful provocation designed to be blamed on the Russians.

Whoever the culprits and whatever their motive, one point that should not have remained in doubt was where the missile launch occurred. Remember that just three days after the crash, Secretary Kerry had said U.S. intelligence detected the launch and "We know where it came from."

But last October, the Dutch Safety Board still hadn't pinned down anything like a precise location. The report could only place the launch site within a 320-square-kilometer area in eastern Ukraine, covering territory then controlled by both Ukrainian and rebel forces. (The safety board did not seek to identify which side fired the fateful missile).

By contrast, 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 Dutch Safety Board's zone and in an area under Ukrainian government control.

So, with the firing location a key point in dispute, why would the U.S. government withhold from a NATO ally (and investigators into a major airline disaster) the launch point for the missile? Presumably, if the Obama administration had solid evidence showing that the launch came from rebel territory, which was Kerry's insinuation, U.S. officials would have been only

too happy to provide the data.

A reasonable conclusion from the failure to share this information with the Dutch investigators is that the data does not support the preferred U.S. government narrative. If there's a different explanation for the silence, the Obama administration has failed to provide it.

Amid the curious U.S. silence, the most significant public finding by Western intelligence is that the only powerful and operational anti-aircraft-missile systems in eastern Ukraine on July 17, 2014, belonged to the Ukrainian military.

Nevertheless, the mainstream "conventional wisdom" remains that either the ethnic Russian rebels or the Russians themselves shot down MH-17 and have sought to cover up their guilt.

Some of this certainty comes from the simpleminded game of repeating that Buk missiles are "Russian-made," which is true but irrelevant to the issue of who fired the missiles, since the Ukrainian military possesses Russian-made Buks.

But much of this "group think" can be credited to the speed with which the Obama administration got its narrative out immediately citing dubious "social media" and exploiting the West's disdain toward Russian President Putin. He was a ready-made villain for the story.

Lying First

A similar case occurred in 1983 when Korean Airlines Flight 007 penetrated deeply into Soviet territory and was pursued by a Soviet fighter that after issuing warnings that were ignored shot the plane down believing it was an enemy military aircraft. Though the Soviets quickly realized they had made a terrible mistake, the Reagan administration wanted to use the incident to paint the "evil empire" in the vilest of tones.

So, Reagan's propagandists edited the ground-control intercepts to make it appear that the Soviets had committed willful murder, a theme that was presented to the United Nations and was gullibly lapped up by the mainstream U.S. news media.

The fuller story only came out in 1995 with a book entitled *Warriors of Disinformation* by Alvin A. Snyder, who had been director of the U.S. Information Agency's television and film division. He described how the tapes were edited "to heap as much abuse on the Soviet Union as possible."

In a boastful but frank description of the successful disinformation campaign, Snyder noted that "the American media swallowed the U.S. government line without

reservation. Said the venerable Ted Koppel on the ABC News 'Nightline' program: 'This has been one of those occasions when there is very little difference between what is churned out by the U.S. government propaganda organs and by the commercial broadcasting networks.'"

Snyder concluded, "The moral of the story is that all governments, including our own, lie when it suits their purposes. The key is to lie first."

In the case of MH-17, however, the falsehoods and deceptions are not simply some spy-vs.-spy propaganda game of gotcha, but rather obstruction of justice in a mass murder investigation. Whatever evidence the Obama administration has, it should have long since been made available to the investigators, but so far the official Dutch reports have indicated no such assistance.

While the U.S. government maintains its official silence, the Russian manufacturer has tried to provide details about the functioning of various generations of Buks and challenged the conclusion from the Dutch Safety Board of precisely which model likely brought down MH-17. The Dutch Safety Board cited a 9M38M1 missile using a 9N314M warhead that dispersed "butterfly or bow-tie" fragments that ripped through MH-17's fuselage.

But Almaz-Antey reported that only older warheads and missiles of the 9M38 type have that signature. "The 9M38M1 missile has no H-shaped striking elements," Almaz-Antey executive Yan Novikov said. According to the manufacturer, the Russian army had phased 9M38 missiles out years ago, but they remained part of Ukraine's arsenal.

On Jan. 14, the Russian aviation agency issued its own report critical of the Dutch Safety Board's understanding of the Buk models, saying that "the strike elements" in the 9N314M warhead did not match the composition of what was recovered from MH-17. Yet, the Dutch-led criminal investigation, which is being partly run by the Ukrainian government, has shown little interest in the Russian information.

'Citizen Journalists'

The inquiry has been much more welcoming of leads from Bellingcat, a group of "citizen journalists" led by British blogger Eliot Higgins.

Despite having made significant mistakes in an earlier investigation of the Syria-sarin case in 2013 including misstating the range of suspect missiles Higgins has been treated as something of a savant on the MH-17 case, basing his analysis on photographs that popped up the Internet purportedly showing a Buk missile system heading eastward from Donetsk shortly before MH-17 was shot down.

Although one of the first lessons anyone learns about the Internet is to be cautious about what you find there, Higgins and Bellingcat relied on the images to conclude that this battery was dispatched from Russia under the command of Russian forces. The bloggers went so far as to send a list of Russian soldiers' names as suspects to the MH-17 criminal investigators.

There are, of course, problems with this sort of theorizing. First, it assumes that the photos on the Internet are genuine and not cleverly photo-shopped fakes. The Internet can be a devil's playground for both amateur and professional disinformationists.

But even assuming that the photos are real, there is the question of why if this cumbersome weapons system was lumbering around eastern Ukraine apparently for weeks did Western intelligence services not detect it from overhead surveillance either before or after the shoot-down? From Bellingcat's Internet photos, it appears there was no effort to conceal the Buk system, which curiously was headed eastward toward Russia, not westward from Russia.

Higgins also directed an Australian TV film crew to the supposed site in Luhansk where the Buk battery, minus one missile, supposedly made its getaway back into Russia. However, the location that the Australian crew filmed clearly was the wrong place. None of the landmarks matched up, but this journalistic fraud did nothing to diminish Bellingcat's sterling reputation with mainstream Western news outlets which routinely repeat the group's allegations. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[A Reckless Stand-upper on MH-17.](#)"]

It turns out that it is an excellent business model for "citizen" bloggers to find "evidence" on the Internet to reinforce whatever the U.S. government's propagandists are claiming. Since the U.S. government's credibility is shaky at best, young hip Internet readers are more inclined to trust what they hear from bloggers and when the bloggers echo what Washington claims, the mainstream media and well-funded think tanks will join in the applause.

Latest Speculation

Earlier this month, Bellingcat's speculation identifying Russian soldiers as MH-17 suspects based on their assignment to a Buk battery was splashed across the international press, including Dutch television, London's Telegraph and the British Guardian. The U.S.-funded Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty headlined [its story](#), "Russian Soldiers Said Involved in Downing of MH17 Airliner," complete with photos of Russian soldiers with their eyes blacked out, courtesy of Bellingcat.

"The Britain-based Bellingcat group said it had identified up to 100 Russian

soldiers who may have knowledge of the movements of the Buk missile launcher that destroyed the Boeing 777 on July 17, 2014, killing all 298 on board," RFE/RL reported, citing a quote that Higgins gave to the Telegraph: "We have the names and photos of the soldiers in the June convoy who traveled with the MH17 Buk, their commanders, their commanders' commanders, etc."

Higgins told Dutch TV channel NOS that Bellingcat believed that at least 20 soldiers in an air-defense unit based in Kursk "probably" either fired the missile or know who fired it.

The Dutch-led prosecution team, which collaborates with the Ukrainian government and nations that suffered large numbers of deaths from the crash including Australia and Malaysia, welcomed the Bellingcat information and promised to "seriously study it."

Not that the prosecution team has asked or appears interested, but one could also give the sleuths a list of Americans who almost certainly have knowledge about who fired the missile and from exactly where: CIA Director John Brennan, DNI James Clapper, Secretary of State John Kerry and President Barack Obama.

Any one of those officials could end the strange silence that has enveloped the U.S. government's knowledge about the MH-17 shoot-down since five days after the tragedy and by doing so perhaps they could finally bring some clarity and justice to this mystery.

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](#)).

What Hillary Knew about Libya

Exclusive: In Official Washington's propaganda world, the U.S. government and its "allies" are always standing for what's right and good and the "enemies" are the epitome of evil doing the vilest things. But some emails to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton depicted a far different reality, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

To justify U.S. "regime changes," the U.S. government has routinely spread rumors and made other dubious claims which even when later doubted or debunked are left in place indefinitely as corrosive propaganda, eating away at the image

of various “enemies” and deforming public opinion.

Even though this discredited propaganda can have a long half-life continuing to contaminate the public’s ability to perceive reality for years President Barack Obama and his administration have shown no inclination to undertake a kind of HAZMAT clean-up of the polluted information environment that American citizens have been forced to live in.

A recent case in point was the emergence in the State Department’s New Year’s Eve release of more than 3,000 emails to and from former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton of evidence that two key propaganda themes used to advance violent “regime change” in Libya in 2011 may have originated with rebel-inspired rumors passed on by Clinton’s private adviser Sidney Blumenthal.

A March 27, 2011 email from Blumenthal reminded Clinton that “I communicated more than a week ago on this story, [Libyan leader Muammar] Qaddafi placing bodies to create PR stunts about supposed civilian casualties as a result of Allied bombing, though underlining it was a rumor. But now, as you know, [Defense Secretary] Robert Gates gives credence to it.”

Blumenthal’s email, which was slugged “Rumor: Q[addafi]’s rape policy,” then plunged ahead into his new rumor: “Sources now say, again rumor (that is, this information comes from the rebel side and is unconfirmed independently by Western intelligence), that Qaddafi has adopted a rape policy and has even distributed Viagra to troops. The incident at the Tripoli press conference involving a woman claiming to be raped is likely to be part of a much larger outrage. Will seek further confirmation.”

A month later, this bizarre Viagra-rape angle became part of a United Nations presentation by then U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Susan Rice who brought up the Viagra charge in a debate about the evils of Muammar Gaddafi’s regime.

A U.N. diplomat at the closed session on April 28, 2011, told The Guardian that “It was during a discussion about whether there is moral equivalence between the Gaddafi forces and the rebels. She listed human rights abuses by Gaddafi’s forces, including snipers shooting children in the street and the Viagra story.”

On Blumenthal’s other propaganda point, it’s not clear where Defense Secretary Gates got the idea to accuse Gaddafi of “staging” scenes of U.S.-inflicted carnage, but Blumenthal’s email indicates that he was disseminating that rumor which might have been picked up by Gates, rather than independently confirmed by Gates. (It’s also true that the “staging” excuse has been used before when evidence emerges of U.S. bombs killing civilians.)

Media Self-Interest

Yet, regardless of the truth or falsity of such U.S. claims and counter-claims, the chance that someone inside Official Washington is going to review the lies and exaggerations used to rationalize a major U.S. foreign policy initiative in this case, the violent overthrow of the Gaddafi regime to, in effect, “clear” Gaddafi’s name is remote at best.

The few cases of the media debunking U.S. propaganda, such as exposing the made-up claims about Iraqi soldiers killing babies on incubators before the Persian Gulf War in 1990-91, are rare exceptions to the rule. Even rarer are cases when the U.S. government admits that it relied on false information, such as the intelligence community recanting its pre-invasion claims about Iraq hiding WMD stockpiles in 2002-03.

The much more common approach is to simply leave the decaying propaganda in place and move on to the next target of opportunity. There is little benefit for anyone to undertake the painstaking work of separating whatever slices of truth exist within the rot of lies and exaggerations that were used to justify some war.

The way mainstream journalism usually works in America is that a reporter who challenges U.S. government propaganda aimed at a foreign “enemy” is putting his or her career at risk. The reporter’s patriotism will be questioned amid suggestions that he or she is a “fill-in-the-blank-with-the-villain’s-name” apologist.

And since the reality whatever it is is usually fuzzy, there is almost never any vindication for a brave stance. So, the smart career play is to go along with the propaganda or stay silent.

A similar reality exists inside the U.S. government. Honest intelligence analysts can expect no rewards if they debunk one of these propaganda themes, especially after a number of important U.S. officials have gone out publicly and sold the falsehood to the people. Making the Secretary of State or the Defense Secretary or the President look bad is not a great career move.

France’s Designs

Plus, the propaganda themes, which stress American righteousness in standing up to foreign evil, are useful in obscuring the self-interested motives that often circle around a killing field like the one that Libya has become.

For instance, another Blumenthal memo to Clinton explained France’s political and pecuniary interests in toppling Gaddafi and thus thwarting his ambitious plans to use Libya’s oil wealth as a means of freeing parts of Africa from French domination.

In an April 2, 2011 [email](#), Blumenthal informed Clinton that sources close to one of Gaddafi's sons were reporting that "Qaddafi's government holds 143 tons of gold, and a similar amount in silver" and the hoard had been moved from the Libyan Central Bank in Tripoli closer to the border with Niger and Chad.

"This gold was accumulated prior to the current rebellion and was intended to be used to establish a pan-African currency based on the Libyan golden Dinar. This plan was designed to provide the Francophone African Countries with an alternative to the French franc (CFA)."

Blumenthal then added that "According to knowledgeable individuals, this quantity of gold and silver is valued at more than \$7 billion. French intelligence officers discovered this plan shortly after the current rebellion began, and this was one of the factors that influenced President Nicolas Sarkozy's decision to commit France to the attack on Libya."

The email added: "According to these individuals, Sarkozy's plans are driven by the following issues: a. A desire to gain a greater share of Libya oil production, b. Increase French influence in North Africa, c. Improve his internal political situation in France, d. Provide the French military with an opportunity to reassert its position in the world, e. Address the concern of his advisors over Qaddafi's long term plans to supplant France as the dominant power in Francophone Africa."

In an earlier [email](#), dated March 27, 2011, Blumenthal also discussed the French interests in the conflict, citing "knowledgeable individuals" who said that Sarkozy "is pressing to have France emerge from this crisis as the principal foreign ally of any new government that takes power."

So do you think it would be easier for the Obama administration to rally American support behind this "regime change" by explaining how the French wanted to steal Libya's wealth and maintain French neocolonial influence over Africa or would Americans respond better to propaganda themes about Gaddafi passing out Viagra to his troops so they could rape more women while his snipers targeted innocent children? Bingo!

Seeing No Jihadists

In selling the Libyan policy to the American people, it was also important to downplay another part of the crisis: that Gaddafi was right when he warned of the danger from Islamic radicals, including Al Qaeda's North African affiliate, operating in eastern Libya.

Gaddafi's original military offensive was aimed at these groups, but the Obama administration's propagandists twisted the issue into Gaddafi supposedly

committing “genocide” against the people of eastern Libya, thus requiring a U.S.-led “responsibility to protect” or “R2P” mission.

However, in the emails to Clinton, Blumenthal conveyed the actual reality that these supposedly innocent anti-Gaddafi rebels in the east indeed included jihadist elements. He wrote: “Sarkozy is also concerned about continuing reports that radical/terrorist groups such as the Libyan Fighting Groups and Al Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) are infiltrating the NLC [the rebel’s National Transitional Council] and its military command.

“Accordingly, he [Sarkozy] asked [a] sociologist who has long established ties to Israel, Syria, and other nations in the Middle East, to use his contacts to determine the level of influence AQIM and other terrorist groups have inside of the NLC. Sarkozy also asked for reports setting out a clear picture of the role of the Muslim Brotherhood in the rebel leadership.”

Blumenthal added: “Senior European security officials caution that AQIM is watching developments in Libya, and elements of that organization have been in touch with tribes in the southeastern part of the country. These [European] officials are concerned that in a post-Qaddafi Libya, France and other western European countries must move quickly to ensure that the new government does not allow AQIM and others to set up small, semi-autonomous local entities, or ‘Caliphates’, in the oil and gas producing regions of southeastern Libya.”

In other words, the danger of Islamic terror groups exploiting the power vacuum that the Obama administration and its Western allies were creating inside Libya was well understood in March 2011, but the supposed “R2P” mission pressed ahead nevertheless.

The “R2P” advocates also turned a blind eye to evidence that black Africans working for Gaddafi’s government were being systematically rounded up and murdered. As Blumenthal reported to Clinton, “Speaking in strict confidence, one rebel commander stated that his troops continue to summarily execute all foreign mercenaries captured in the fighting.”

These so-called “mercenaries” were contractors from black Africa where many people viewed Gaddafi as a champion of the continent’s development, independent of the former Western imperial powers and the harsh demands of the International Monetary Fund. While some of these blacks were part of Gaddafi’s security structure, others were involved in construction projects.

Whatever their assignments, executing prisoners of war is a war crime and the image of U.S.-backed rebels singling out black Africans for execution turns the pretense of an “R2P” mission on its head or perhaps all those noble humanitarian

arguments were just phony from the start.

As Brad Hoff of the Levant Report wrote, “historians of the 2011 NATO war in Libya will be sure to notice a few of the truly explosive confirmations contained in the new emails: admissions of rebel war crimes, special ops trainers inside Libya from nearly the start of protests, Al Qaeda embedded in the U.S. backed opposition, Western nations jockeying for access to Libyan oil, the nefarious origins of the absurd Viagra mass rape claim, and concern over Gaddafi’s gold and silver reserves threatening European currency.”

Reality’s Hard Sell

But it probably would have been a hard sell to the American people if the U.S. government explained the dark side of the “R2P” mission that it involved systematic executions of blacks and rapacious Western officials grasping for oil and gold as well as creating a vacuum for jihadists. Instead, it worked much better to promote wild rumors about Gaddafi’s perfidy.

It is in this way that U.S. citizens, the “We the People” who were supposed to be the nation’s sovereigns, are treated more like cattle herded to the slaughterhouse.

Some of us did try to warn the public about these risks. For instance, on March 25, 2011, days before Blumenthal’s emails, I described the hazard from the neocon “regime change” strategies in Libya and Syria, writing:

“In rallying U.S. support for these rebellions, the neocons risked repeating the mistake they made by pushing the U.S. invasion of Iraq. They succeeded in ousting Saddam Hussein, who had long been near the top of Israel’s enemies list, but the war also removed him as a bulwark against both Islamic extremists and Iranian influence in the Persian Gulf.

“By embracing these uprisings, the neocons invited unintended consequences, including further Islamic radicalization of the region and deepening anti-Americanism. Indeed, a rebel victory over Gaddafi risked putting extremists from an al-Qaeda affiliate in a powerful position inside Libya.

“The major U.S. news media aided the neocon cause by focusing on Gaddafi’s historic ties to terrorism, including the dubious charge that he was behind the Pan Am 103 bombing in 1988. There was little attention paid to his more recent role in combating the surge in al-Qaeda activity, especially in eastern Libya, the base of the revolt against him.” [See Consortiumnews.com’s “Neocons Regroup on Libyan War.”]

Though the 2011 concerns about Al Qaeda have since morphed into worries about

its spinoff, the Islamic State, the larger point remains valid regarding Libya, which descended into the status of failed state after Gaddafi's ouster and his brutal torture-murder on Oct. 20, 2011. Secretary Clinton greeted the news of Gaddafi's demise with glee, exulting, "we came, we saw, he died" and then laughed. [See Consortiumnews.com's "Hillary Clinton's Failed Libya Doctrine."]

More than four years later, the Obama administration still struggles to piece together some order from the chaos in Libya, where Western governments have even abandoned their Tripoli embassies. Meanwhile, the Islamic State and other jihadist groups continue to expand their control of Libyan territory.

In Syria, President Bashar al-Assad has hung on despite continued efforts by the Obama administration and its regional Sunni allies to remove him. The four years of war waged mostly by jihadists armed and financed by Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Western powers have killed a quarter million people and made millions homeless, now spreading the Mideast's disorders into Europe where the refugee crisis is dividing the European Union.

Of course, in the U.S. mainstream media, the Syrian deaths and destruction are blamed almost entirely on Assad, much as the conflict in Libya was blamed on Gaddafi and the U.S. invasion of Iraq was blamed on Saddam Hussein. In the world created by U.S. propaganda, it is always some other guy's fault.

In the Syrian case, the major decaying propaganda theme that continues to contaminate public understanding of the crisis has been the accusation that Assad "gassed his own people" with sarin on Aug. 21, 2013. Although independent evidence has long been pointing in the direction of a rebel provocation, perhaps aided by Turkey, the old rotting propaganda is routinely dug up by neocons and their liberal interventionist sidekicks to justify why "Assad must go!" [See Consortiumnews.com's "The Collapsing Syria-Sarin Case."]

In the case of Libya, Blumenthal's emails provide a useful window into what was actually happening behind the scenes and what Secretary of State Clinton knew.

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).
