

America's Dying Democracy

Democracy, as a noble principle of self-governance, is fading away in big ways and small, with special interests seizing control of both media and politicians and with the people increasingly manipulated and misinformed. In this impassioned appeal, Bill Moyers calls it "the fight of our lives."

By Bill Moyers

In the fall of 2001, in the aftermath of 9/11, as families grieved and the nation mourned, Washington swarmed with locusts of the human kind: wartime opportunists, lobbyists, lawyers, ex-members of Congress, bagmen for big donors: all of them determined to grab what they could for their corporate clients and rich donors while no one was looking.

Across the land, the faces of Americans of every stripe were stained with tears. Here in New York, we still were attending memorial services for our firemen and police. But in the nation's capital, within sight of a smoldering Pentagon that had been struck by one of the hijacked planes, the predator class was hard at work pursuing private plunder at public expense, gold-diggers in the ashes of tragedy exploiting our fear, sorrow, and loss.

What did they want? The usual: tax cuts for the wealthy and big breaks for corporations. They even made an effort to repeal the alternative minimum tax that for 15 years had prevented companies from taking so many credits and deductions that they owed little if any taxes. And it wasn't only repeal the mercenaries sought; they wanted those corporations to get back all the minimum tax they had ever been assessed.

They sought a special tax break for mighty General Electric, although you would never have heard about it if you were watching GE's news divisions, NBC News, CNBC, or MSNBC, all made sure to look the other way. They wanted to give coal producers more freedom to pollute, open the Alaskan wilderness to drilling, empower the president to keep trade favors for corporations a secret while enabling many of those same corporations to run roughshod over local communities trying to protect the environment and their citizens' health.

It was a disgusting bipartisan spectacle. With words reminding us of Harry Truman's description of the GOP as "guardians of privilege," the Republican majority leader of the House dared to declare that "it wouldn't be commensurate with the American spirit" to provide unemployment and other benefits to laid-off airline workers. As for post 9/11 Democrats, their national committee used the crisis to call for widening the soft-money loophole in our election laws.

America had just endured a sneak attack that killed thousands of our citizens, was about to go to war against terror, and would soon send an invading army to the Middle East. If ever there was a moment for shared sacrifice, for putting patriotism over profits, this was it. But that fall, operating deep within the shadows of Washington's Beltway, American business and political mercenaries wrapped themselves in red, white and blue and went about ripping off a country in crisis.

H.L. Mencken got it right: "Whenever you hear a man speak of his love for his country, it is a sign that he expects to be paid for it."

Fourteen years later, we can see more clearly the implications. After three decades of engineering a winner-take-all economy, and buying the political power to consummate their hold on the wealth created by the system they had rigged in their favor, they were taking the final and irrevocable step of separating themselves permanently from the common course of American life. They would occupy a gated stratosphere far above the madding crowd while their political hirelings below look after their earthly interests.

The \$1.15 trillion spending bill passed by Congress last Friday and quickly signed by President Obama is just the latest triumph in the plutocratic management of politics that has accelerated since 9/11. As Michael Winship and I described [here last Thursday](#), the bill is a bonanza for the donor class that powerful combine of corporate executives and super-rich individuals whose money drives our electoral process.

Within minutes of its passage, congressional leaders of both parties and the President rushed to the television cameras to praise each other for a bipartisan bill that they claimed signaled the end of dysfunction; proof that Washington can work.

Mainstream media (including public television and radio), especially the networks and cable channels owned and operated by the conglomerates, didn't stop to ask: "Yes, *but work for whom?*" Instead, the anchors acted as amplifiers for official spin, repeating the mantra-of-the-hour that while this is not "a perfect bill," it does a lot of good things. "*But for whom? At what price?*" went unasked.

Now we're learning. Like the drip-drip-drip of a faucet, over the weekend other provisions in the more than 2,000-page bill began to leak. Many of the bad ones we mentioned on Thursday are there, those extended tax breaks for big business, more gratuities to the fossil fuel industry, the provision to forbid the Securities & Exchange Commission from requiring corporations to disclose their political spending, even to their own shareholders.

That one's a slap in the face even to Anthony Kennedy, the justice who wrote the Supreme Court's majority opinion in *Citizens United*. He said: "With the advent of the Internet, prompt disclosure of expenditures can provide shareholders and citizens with the information needed to hold corporations and elected officials accountable for their positions."

Over our dead body, Congress declared last Friday, proclaiming instead: Secrecy today. Secrecy tomorrow. Secrecy forever. They are determined that we not know who owns them.

The horrors mount. As Eric Lipton and Liz Moyer reported for *The New York Times* on Sunday, in the last days before the bill's passage "lobbyists swooped in" to save, at least for now, a loophole worth more than \$1 billion to Wall Street investors and the hotel, restaurant and gambling industries. Lobbyists even helped draft crucial language that the Senate Democratic leader Harry Reid furtively inserted into the bill.

Lipton and Moyer wrote that, "The small changes, and the enormous windfall they generated, show the power of connected corporate lobbyists to alter a huge bill that is being put together with little time for lawmakers to consider. Throughout the legislation, there were thousands of other add-ons and hard to decipher tax changes."

No surprise to read that "some executives at companies with the most at stake are also big campaign donors." The *Times* reports that "the family of David Bonderman, a co-founder of TPG Capital, has donated \$1.2 million since 2014 to the Senate Majority PAC, a campaign fund with close ties to Mr. Reid and other Senate Democrats." Senator Reid, lest we forget, is from Nevada. As he approaches retirement at the end of 2016, perhaps he's hedging his bets at taxpayer expense.

Consider just two other provisions: One, insisted upon by Republican Sen. Thad Cochran, directs the Coast Guard to build a \$640 million National Security Cutter in Cochran's home state of Mississippi, a ship that the Coast Guard says it does not need. The other: A demand by Maine Republican Sen. Susan Collins for an extra \$1 billion for a Navy destroyer that probably will be built at her state's Bath Iron Works again, a vessel our military says is unnecessary.

So it goes: The selling off of the Republic, piece by piece. What was it Mark Twain said? There is "no distinctive native American criminal class except Congress."

Can we at least face the truth? The plutocrats and oligarchs are winning. The vast inequality they are creating is a death sentence for government by consent

of the people at large. Did any voter in any district or state in the last Congressional election vote to give that billion-dollar loophole to a handful of billionaires? To allow corporations to hide their political contributions? To add \$1.4 trillion to the national debt? Of course not.

It is now the game: Candidates ask citizens for their votes, then go to Washington to do the bidding of their donors. And since one expectation is that they will cut the taxes of those donors, we now have a permanent class that is afforded representation without taxation.

A plutocracy, says my old friend, the historian Bernard Weisberger, "has a natural instinct to perpetuate and enlarge its own powers and by doing so slams the door of opportunity to challengers and reduces elections to theatrical duels between politicians who are marionettes worked by invisible strings." Where does it end?

By coincidence, this past weekend I watched the final episode of the British television series *Secret State*, a 2012 remake of an earlier version based on the popular novel *A Very British Coup*. This is white-knuckle political drama. Gabriel Byrne plays an accidental prime minister thrust into office by the death of the incumbent, only to discover himself facing something he never imagined: a shadowy coalition of forces, some within his own government, working against him.

With some of his own ministers secretly in the service of powerful corporations and bankers, his own party falling away from him, press lords daily maligning him, the opposition emboldened, and a public confused by misinformation, deceit, and vicious political rhetoric, the prime minister is told by Parliament to immediately invade Iran (on unproven, even false premises) or resign.

In the climactic scene, he defies the "Secret State" that is manipulating all this and confronts Parliament with this challenge: "Let's forget party allegiance, forget vested interests, forget votes of confidence. Let each and every one of us think only of this: Is this war justified? Is it what the people of this country want? Is it going to achieve what we want it to achieve? And if not, then what next?"

"Well, I tell you what I think we should do. We should represent the people of this country. Not the lobby companies that wine and dine us. Or the banks and the big businesses that tell us how the world goes 'round. Or the trade unions that try and call the shots. Not the civil servants nor the war-mongering generals or the security chiefs. Not the press magnates and multibillion dollar donors [We must return] democracy to this House and the country it represents."

Do they? The movie doesn't tell us. We are left to imagine how the crisis, the struggle for democracy, will end.

As we are reminded by this season, there is more to life than politics. There are families, friends, music, worship, sports, the arts, reading, conversation, laughter, celebrations of love and fellowship and partridges in pear trees. But without healthy democratic politics serving a moral order, all these are imperiled by the ferocious appetites of private power and greed.

So enjoy the holidays, including *Star Wars*. Then come back after New Year's and find a place for yourself, at whatever level, wherever you are, in the struggle for democracy. This is the fight of our lives and how it ends is up to us.

Bill Moyers is the managing editor of *Moyers & Company* and BillMoyers.com.

The Myth of 'Taking Out' ISIS

"Tough-guy-gal-ism" remains the dominant rhetoric of Official Washington as politicians and pundits compete to outdo each other in advocating bloody remedies for "taking out" the Islamic State. But the armchair warriors misunderstand the problem and offer no solution, writes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

The perceptions and the politics in the United States regarding the use of military force against the so-called Islamic State or ISIS are now clear and well-established. The issue has become a classic case of those without the responsibilities of office seizing on a matter of public fear and concern and lambasting those with such responsibilities for not doing more, with the lambasters enjoying the luxury of not having to develop specific and well-thought-out measures and not having to consider the costs, risks, effectiveness and consequences of any such measures.

Thus we hear the Republican presidential candidates making a huge deal of what they describe as a grievous threat from ISIS and using bombastic language to let us believe that most of them would make quicker and more extensive use of military force against this group than is the supposedly reticent and weak-kneed incumbent in the White House.

But despite the volume and intensity of such rhetoric we hear very little about exactly how they would use force differently and even less about how any

different measures should be expected to work. Even systematic efforts to catalog what candidates have said on the subject yield mostly spotty and vaguely phrased results.

The public mood being exploited is clear enough. A recent Monmouth University poll showed 78 percent of respondents believing ISIS to be “a major threat to U.S. security” and 68 percent saying that the U.S. Government is “not doing enough to defeat ISIS.” When asked whether ISIS can be stopped without U.S. troops, can be stopped only with U.S. troops, or cannot be stopped, a plurality (47 percent) said only with U.S. troops.

President Obama has felt it necessary to join in some of the public chorus on this topic. After a televised address from the Oval Office did not receive good enough reviews, the President a week later spoke from the Pentagon about the military side of anti-ISIS efforts, citing numbers of bombing sorties as if that were a good gauge of making progress on counterterrorism. Then a couple of days later he made another publicly covered appearance, with additional talk about the ISIS problem, at the National Counterterrorism Center.

When we see a strong association between politicians’ rhetoric and a pattern of public concern reflected in opinion polls, we need to be careful about what is cause and what is effect. Politicians exploit public beliefs, but segments of the public form many of their beliefs based on cues they get from political leaders whom they most support and political parties with which they most identify.

An event such a high-profile terrorist incident can trigger a shift in mood, but then the political rhetoric and exploitation have a snowball effect. If political leaders of both parties had been making public statements much more consistent with the actual interests of the nation and what threatens those interests most severely, poll results on questions about ISIS would have been significantly different.

Perhaps the single formulation in the presidential candidates’ rhetoric on this subject that has gotten most attention is Ted Cruz’s recommendation to use “carpet bombing.” As Major General Robert Scales, a military historian and former commandant of the Army War College, comments, carpet bombing “is just another one of those phrases that people with no military experience throw around.”

When Cruz is pressed on the subject, it becomes clear he does not know what he is talking about in his use of the terminology and doesn’t actually have a plan for use of air power that looks different from what the current administration is doing.

Max Boot, in a piece that gives Cruz far too much credit for having a serious proposal for use of air power rather than merely using *carpet bombing* as a term that sounds tough, gives good reasons why simply bombing ISIS will not defeat it.

Boot, who is a serious analyst in his own right but is identified in this article as a foreign policy adviser to Marco Rubio, ends up with a vaguely stated conclusion that U.S. ground troops will have to be sent against ISIS. Rubio's own statements on this subject also have been vague, with some references to a need for using more special operations forces.

It has been left to also-ran candidates to be at all specific about numbers of U.S. ground troops they would favor using. Sen. Lindsey Graham has used the figure of 10,000 troops; Mike Huckabee and Rick Santorum have talked about 10,000 or more.

But as experience in other wars indicates and as analysis by Stephen Biddle and Jacob Shapiro concludes, one would need to add a zero and then some to get results on the ground that would be anything like what these politicians claim could be gotten through application of U.S. military force. Biddle and Shapiro write that "well over 100,000" troops would be needed in such a mission.

Meanwhile, back at the Oval Office, where the buck stops and where costs, risks, effectiveness and consequences do need to be seriously considered, President Obama, notwithstanding his felt need to join in some of the rhetorical highlighting of ISIS and of the role military force plays in dealing with it, has shown that he has a better grasp of the realities involved than the candidates who are trying to ride the issue into the White House.

The President laid out some of his thinking earlier this week in a discussion with some opinion writers that was supposed to be off the record but had much of its substance come out in a column by David Ignatius and through other participants. A fundamental basis of the President's policy is the correct judgment that ISIS, though posing a significant security problem in several respects, is not an existential threat to the United States or anything close to it, as much of the American rhetoric about the group would suggest.

It thus is not worth the costs that a significantly expanded military campaign in the Middle East would entail. The President mentioned monthly costs to the United States, hypothetical but certainly plausible, of 100 dead, 500 injured, and \$10 billion in expenditures.

One fundamental reason an expanded military campaign against ISIS therefore is not warranted is that to get any meaningful result it would entail far greater

costs than what the politicians agitating for doing more are suggesting, and than what the American people would consider after the fact to have been a worthwhile expenditure.

But even if the American people were knowingly willing to assume such a burden, another fundamental reason such a campaign would not be warranted is that it still would not, despite the heavy costs, solve the main problems, involving terrorism and instability, it would be intended to solve. In important respects it would be counterproductive. President Obama has only touched on some aspects of this latter reason, lest he be seen to go too far from what has become the rhetorical mainstream about threats from ISIS and the need to confront it militarily.

Advocacy of larger and more direct use of U.S. military force against the group rests on a notion of ISIS as a discrete set of people, places and institutions that could be "taken out" with a concerted attack by the powerful U.S. military.

Sen. John McCain, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, who has mentioned the same figure of 10,000 troops as his friend Lindsey Graham, uses the "take out" concept. This is an incorrect image of ISIS. ISIS is not some discrete set of people; it is gaining and losing both leaders and recruits all the time. It is not some one place where we can play a game of capture the flag; it moves around and has been gaining and losing (more recently, mostly losing) territory throughout its history.

One of the biggest chapters of that history was its move out of Iraq and into Syria when it was able to take advantage of the disorder of a growing civil war there. If a U.S. or U.S.-led military campaign captured and held Raqqa and all other cities that ISIS now controls, that would not mark the end of the campaign but only its move into a new phase. A large insurgency, or several insurgencies, would continue.

"Taking out" ISIS with the capturing of cities and the occupation of territory and the driving of ISIS leaders out of whatever is their current domicile would no doubt give rise to the temptation to declare "mission accomplished" and to make celebratory flights to aircraft carriers, just as such an event once did after the invasion of Iraq. And the grounds for the celebration would be no stronger than they were in that earlier instance in Iraq.

U.S. or Western troops, even assuming the willingness of their publics to sustain the large costs of an indefinite occupation, will never be able to provide stability in the parts of Syria and Iraq they occupy. Only the locals, with suitable political will, can do that.

A huge unanswered question about notions of taking out ISIS with military force is what fills the void once it has been taken out, what, that is, other than an indefinite and costly foreign occupation. That question will have a satisfying answer only when peace-making diplomacy and political reconciliation have made much more progress than they have so far. Until that happens, the place of a taken-out ISIS will be taken by more of the conflict and chaos that violent extremists, whether they bear the ISIS name or some other label, are best able to exploit.

Even just limiting our purview to ISIS itself, there is nothing unique about the territory that it happens to control at the moment in Iraq and Syria. The group already is repeating some of the same pattern of decentralization as Al Qaeda, with pieces on the periphery possibly being more threatening than the original core. Libya, where there is much well-founded doubt about the impact of the recently announced agreement between the rival regimes there, is a prime place where we might wake up to find the most viable part of ISIS. Taking out the group in Iraq and Syria would be only a stage in more campaigns and occupations elsewhere in the Middle East.

As for the type of threat that most concerns Americans, terrorism inside the United States, the taking out of ISIS positions in Iraq and Syria simply does not translate into the removal of such a threat. Such terrorism, time and again, has not depended on some group's control of real estate in the Middle East or South Asia.

The San Bernardino shootings certainly did not depend on it. Many incidents outside the Middle East have been described with some accuracy as "inspired" by ISIS. The state of the ISIS enclave in the Middle East, and whether it is advancing or shrinking, does have something to do with how much would-be terrorists elsewhere are inspired by it. But you cannot take out an inspiration. And people have long been inspired, some of them inspired to do very destructive things, by what is dead as well as what is living.

A major U.S. or U.S.-led military campaign in Syria and Iraq would play into the hands of ISIS in terms of ideology and messaging, which have at least as much to do with inspiration as control of real estate does. Such a campaign would be seen by many as confirming the ISIS narrative of this group standing up for Muslims against the attacks of the non-Muslim West.

More specifically it would be seen as confirming the group's apocalyptic prophecy about armed confrontation between itself and the infidels. A substantially enlarged U.S. military campaign would be counterproductive partly by adding to the group's credibility in this respect and thus to its power to inspire. It also would be counterproductive insofar as it added to the

collateral damage, which there will be even without carpet bombing, that produces anger and resentment that in turn inspires still more anti-U.S. terrorism.

The exploitation of the ISIS issue in American politics no doubt will continue and continue loudly, but we should hope that its infection of U.S. policy will be kept to a minimum.

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 The National Interest's Web site. Reprinted with author's permission.)

A Call for Proof on Syria-Sarin Attack

One reason why Official Washington continues to insist that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad "must go" is that he supposedly "gassed his own people" with sarin on Aug. 21, 2013, but the truth of that allegation has never been established and is in growing doubt, U.S. intelligence veterans point out. [Updated on Dec. 23 with new signers.]

MEMORANDUM FOR: U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, and Foreign Minister of Russia Sergey Lavrov

FROM: Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS)

SUBJECT: Sarin Attack at Ghouta on Aug. 21, 2013

In a [Memorandum of Oct. 1, 2013](#), we asked each of you to make public the intelligence upon which you based your differing conclusions on who was responsible for the sarin chemical attack at Ghouta, outside Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013. On Dec. 10, 2015, Eren Erdem, a member of parliament in Turkey, citing official documents, blamed Turkey for facilitating the delivery of sarin to rebels in Syria.

Mr. Kerry, you had blamed the Syrian government. Mr. Lavrov, you had described the sarin as "homemade" and suggested anti-government rebels were responsible. Each of you claimed to have persuasive evidence to support your conclusion.

Neither of you responded directly to our appeal to make such evidence available to the public, although, Mr. Lavrov, you came close to doing so. In a [speech](#) at the UN on Sept. 26, 2013, you made reference to the views we presented in our

VIPS Memorandum, *Is Syria a Trap?*, sent to President Obama three weeks earlier.

Pointing to strong doubt among chemical weapons experts regarding the evidence adduced to blame the government of Syria for the sarin attack, you also referred to the "open letter sent to President Obama by former operatives of the CIA and the Pentagon," in which we expressed similar doubt.

Mr. Kerry, on Aug. 30, 2013, you blamed the Syrian government, publicly and repeatedly, for the sarin attack. But you failed to produce the kind of "Intelligence Assessment" customarily used to back up such claims.

We believe that this odd lack of a formal "Intelligence Assessment" is explained by the fact that our former colleagues did not believe the evidence justified your charges and that, accordingly, they resisted pressure to "fix the intelligence around the policy," as was done to "justify" the attack on Iraq.

Intelligence analysts were telling us privately (and we told the President in our Memorandum of Sept. 6, 2013) that, contrary to what you claimed, "the most reliable intelligence shows that Bashar al-Assad was *not* responsible for the chemical incident that killed and injured Syrian civilians on August 21."

This principled dissent from these analysts apparently led the White House to create a new art form, a "Government Assessment," to convey claims that the government in Damascus was behind the sarin attack. It was equally odd that the newly minted genre of report offered not one item of verifiable evidence.

(We note that you used this new art form "Government (not Intelligence) Assessment" a second time again apparently to circumvent intelligence analysts' objections. On July 22, 2014, just five days after the shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, after the media asked you to come up with evidence supporting the charges you leveled against "pro-Russian separatists" on the July 20 Sunday talk shows, you came up with the second, of only two, "Government Assessment." Like the one on the chemical attack in Syria, the assessment provided meager fare when it comes to verifiable evidence.)

Claims and Counterclaims

Speaking to the United Nations General Assembly on Sept. 24, 2013, President Obama asserted: "It's an insult to human reason and to the legitimacy of this institution to suggest that anyone other than the [Syrian] regime carried out this attack [at Ghouta]."

Mr. Lavrov, that same day you publicly complained that U.S. officials kept claiming "'the Syrian regime,' as they call it, is guilty of the use of chemical weapons, without providing comprehensive proof." Two days later you told the

U.N. General Assembly you had given Mr. Kerry “the latest compilation of evidence, which was an analysis of publicly available information.” You also told the Washington Post, “This evidence is not something revolutionary. It’s available on the Internet.”

On the Internet? Mr. Kerry, if your staff avoided calling your attention to Internet reports about Turkish complicity in the sarin attack of Aug. 21, 2013, because they lacked confirmation, we believe you can now consider them largely confirmed.

Documentary Evidence

Addressing fellow members of parliament on Dec. 10, 2015, Turkish MP Eren Erdem from the Republican People’s Party (a reasonably responsible opposition group) confronted the Turkish government on this key issue. Waving a copy of “Criminal Case Number 2013/120,” Erdem referred to official reports and electronic evidence documenting a smuggling operation with Turkish government complicity.

In an interview with RT four days later, Erdem said Turkish authorities had acquired evidence of sarin gas shipments to anti-government rebels in Syria, and did nothing to stop them.

The General Prosecutor in the Turkish city of Adana opened a criminal case, and an indictment stated “chemical weapons components” from Europe “were to be seamlessly shipped via a designated route through Turkey to militant labs in Syria.” Erdem cited evidence implicating the Turkish Minister of Justice and the Turkish Mechanical and Chemical Industry Corporation in the smuggling of sarin.

The Operation

According to Erdem, the 13 suspects arrested in raids carried out against the plotters were released just a week after they were indicted, and the case was closed – shut down by higher authority. Erdem told RT that the sarin attack at Ghouta took place shortly after the criminal case was closed and that the attack probably was carried out by jihadists with sarin gas smuggled through Turkey.

Small wonder President Erdogan has accused Erdem of “treason.” It was not Erdem’s first “offense.” Earlier, he exposed corruption by Erdogan family members, for which a government newspaper branded him an “American puppet, Israeli agent, a supporter of the terrorist PKK and the instigator of a coup.”

In our Sept. 6, 2013 [Memorandum for the President](#), we reported that coordination meetings had taken place just weeks before the sarin attack at a Turkish military garrison in Antakya just 15 miles from the Syrian border with Syria and 55 miles from its largest city, Aleppo.

In Antakya, senior Turkish, Qatari and U.S. intelligence officials were said to be coordinating plans with Western-sponsored rebels, who were told to expect an imminent escalation in the fighting due to “a war-changing development.” This, in turn, would lead to a U.S.-led bombing of Syria, and rebel commanders were ordered to prepare their forces quickly to exploit the bombing, march into Damascus, and remove the Assad government.

A year before, the New York Times reported that the Antakya area had become a “magnet for foreign jihadis, who are flocking into Turkey to fight holy war in Syria.” The Times quoted a Syrian opposition member based in Antakya, saying the Turkish police were patrolling this border area “with their eyes closed.”

And, Mr. Lavrov, while the account given by Eren Erdem before the Turkish Parliament puts his charges on the official record, a simple Google search including “Antakya” shows that you were correct in stating the Internet contains a wealth of contemporaneous detail supporting Erdem’s disclosures.

Mr. Kerry, while in Moscow on Dec. 15, you said to a Russian interviewer that Syrian President Assad “has gassed his people I mean, gas hasn’t been used in warfare formally for years for and gas is outlawed, but Assad used it.”

Three days later The Washington Post dutifully repeated the charge about Assad’s supposed killing “his own people with chemical weapons.” U.S. media have made this the conventional wisdom. The American people are not fully informed. There has been no mainstream media reporting on Turkish MP Erdem’s disclosures.

Renewed Appeal

We ask you again, Secretary Kerry and Foreign Minister Lavrov, to set the record straight on this important issue. The two of you have demonstrated an ability to work together on important matters the Iran nuclear deal, for example and have acknowledged a shared interest in defeating ISIS, which clearly is *not* Turkish President Erdogan’s highest priority. Indeed, his aims are at cross-purposes to those wishing to tamp down the violence in Syria.

After the shoot-down of Russia’s bomber on Nov. 24, President Vladimir Putin put Russian forces in position to retaliate the next time, and told top defense officials, “Any targets threatening our [military] group or land infrastructure must be immediately destroyed.” We believe that warning should be taken seriously. What matters, though, is what Erdogan believes.

There is a good chance Erdogan will be dismissive of Putin’s warning, as long as the Turkish president believes he can depend on NATO always to react in the supportive way it did after the shoot-down.

One concrete way to disabuse him of the notion that he has *carte blanche* to create incidents that could put not only Turkey, but also the U.S., on the verge of armed conflict with Russia, would be for the U.S. Secretary of State and the Russian Foreign Minister to coordinate a statement on what we believe was a classic false-flag chemical attack on Aug. 21, 2013, facilitated by the Turks and aimed at mousetrapping President Obama into a major attack on Syria.

One of our colleagues, a seasoned analyst of Turkish affairs, put it this way: "Erdogan is even more dangerous if he thinks that he now has NATO license to bait Russia, as he did with the shoot-down. I don't think NATO is willing to give him that broader license, but he is a loose cannon."

FOR THE STEERING GROUP, VETERAN INTELLIGENCE PROFESSIONALS FOR SANITY

Graham E. Fuller, Vice-Chair, National Intelligence Council (ret.)

Philip Giraldi, CIA, Operations Officer (ret.)

Larry Johnson, CIA & State Department (ret.)

John Kiriakou, Former CIA Counterterrorism Officer

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

David MacMichael, National Intelligence Council (ret.)

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

Elizabeth Murray, Deputy National Intelligence Officer for the Near East, National Intelligence Council (ret)

Todd E. Pierce, MAJ, US Army Judge Advocate (Ret.)

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

Coleen Rowley, FBI Special Agent and former Minneapolis Division Legal Counsel (ret.)

Robert David Steele, former CIA Operations Officer

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

Kirk Wiebe, former Senior Analyst, SIGINT Automation Research Center, NSA

Ann Wright, Col., US Army (ret.); Foreign Service Officer (resigned)

Trump Schools ABC-TV Host on Reality

Exclusive: The spectacle of clueless U.S. media personalities, like George Stephanopoulos, chastising Donald Trump for getting facts wrong would be funny if it weren't indicative of a political-media system failing the American people and what's left of the democratic Republic, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Mainstream media and politicians are fond of denouncing Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump for trafficking in conspiracy theories and playing fast and loose with the facts, but some of them slide into the same patterns in attacking Trump or other demonized leaders, such as Russian President Vladimir Putin.

For instance, on ABC-TV's "This Week," host George Stephanopoulos deployed a favorite "conspiracy theory" technique to accuse Putin of murdering journalists and then demanded that Trump explain why he would welcome praise from such a nefarious character. The technique was to cite a sizable number of "mysterious deaths" as proof that the conspiracy-theory target was guilty, even if there was no specific evidence in any individual case.

Stephanopoulos challenged Trump by asking: "When you were pressed about [Putin's] killing of journalists, you said, 'I think our country does plenty of killing too.' What were you thinking about there? What killing sanctioned by the U.S. government is like killing journalists?"

Trump responded that "in all fairness to Putin, you're saying he killed people. I haven't seen that. I don't know that he has. Have you been able to prove that? Do you know the names of the reporters that he's killed? Because I've been – you know, you've been hearing this, but I haven't seen the name. Now, I think it would be despicable if that took place, but I haven't seen any evidence that he killed anybody in terms of reporters."

Stephanopoulos then backed up his murder charge against Putin by saying: "here's what Mitt Romney tweeted about that. He said, there's an important distinction here. Thug Putin kills journalists and opponents. Our presidents kill terrorists and enemy combatants."

Trump answered back, "Does he [Romney] know for a fact that he [Putin] kills the reporters? I don't know – I don't think anybody knows that. It's possible that he does. But I don't think it's been proven. Has anybody proven that he's killed reporters? And I'm not trying to stick up for anybody."

Stephanopoulos: "There have been many allegations that he was behind the killing of (INAUDIBLE) and ..."

Trump: "No, no, allegations. There are allegations. Yes, sure, there are allegations. I've read those allegations over the years, but nobody's proven that he's killed anybody as far as I'm concerned. He hasn't killed reporters that it's been proven. Now, if he has"

Stephanopoulos's next rejoinder was perhaps even more startling: "But what killing has the United States government done?"

Sadly, such cluelessness is now typical of the mainstream U.S. news media as if these "journalists" have been hiding under a rock for the past 15 years if not much longer. But back to the aspect of Stephanopoulos's charge against Putin that just because there are lots of allegations even without supporting evidence we must accept a person's guilt.

Clinton's 'Mysterious Deaths'

That "conspiracy theory" technique should be familiar to Stephanopoulos since he was an aide to President Bill Clinton when right-wing enemies compiled a list of "Clinton's mysterious deaths," which included anyone who had even tangential contact with Arkansas Gov. Clinton and then died in some "suspicious" manner.

The best known of these cases was deputy White House counsel Vincent Foster who became distraught over becoming the subject of other scandal-mongering and committed suicide on July 20, 1993, but the "strength" of the "murder" allegations against Clinton was in the lengthy list of "mysterious deaths."

At the time, a longtime conservative source faxed me the list, marveling at the number and saying that if even a few were true that would be "a big story." I responded that if even one were true that a sitting U.S. president had murdered a single political opponent "that would be a big story, but there's got to be proof."

Many of the cases on the list were murky old tales from Arkansas, but I noticed one fairly recent one with a local angle. A federal bureaucrat who had some minor connection to the investigation of Clinton's Whitewater real-estate investment had died from a fall out of a new apartment high-rise in Arlington, Virginia.

But it really wasn't much of a mystery. My investigation quickly determined that the man was suffering from AIDS and was faced with a grim prognosis. So, he traveled from his home in Washington D.C. to Arlington, asked a real-estate agent to show him a top-floor apartment, went to the balcony, asked the startled

young woman if what he was about to do would hurt, and jumped to his death. (I even interviewed the poor woman.)

President Clinton had nothing to do with this tragedy, a fact that I imparted to my conservative source who was in touch with the makers of the list. Yet, several months later when an updated list was sent my way, the same “mystery” was still there.

In other words, the list creators were not interested in fairness toward Clinton or the merits of any one case. They understood that it was the cumulative number of cases that sent the desired propaganda message, building up a suspicion that Clinton was a murderer. Then, anyone who challenged the methodology and pointed to the absence of any real proof could be dismissed as a “Clinton apologist.”

Stephanopoulos saw these tactics up close in the 1990s. I even met with him once at his White House office to discuss this pattern of right-wing conspiracy-mongering. But now he is practicing the same tactics against Putin and Trump.

The WMD Scam

In the early 2000s, a similar technique was used to trick the U.S. intelligence community into buying into the falsehoods about Iraq’s Saddam Hussein hiding stockpiles of WMD and reviving a nuclear-weapons program. Then, it was a case of the Iraqi National Congress funneling a series of Iraqi “defectors” into the CIA with well-rehearsed tales about supposed first-hand knowledge of Hussein’s trickery.

As at least 19 “defectors” walked in, the CIA analysts succeeded in debunking some of them, but the sheer number combined with heavy White House pressure to find “proof” of its WMD claims led the analysts to begin accepting the allegations as true. Only after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 did the CIA analysts realize that they had been had by an organized effort at fabrication. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“Chalabi’s Legacy of Lies.”](#)]

Given the U.S.-inflicted havoc on Iraq, Afghanistan and a wide variety of other countries including a large number of civilian deaths the rest of Stephanopoulos’s tirade toward Trump on Sunday was instructive about other deep-seated biases of Official Washington and its compliant mainstream media.

Though a key principle of journalism is objectivity, Stephanopoulos made it clear that he was part of Official Washington’s team, decrying Putin “when he backs our adversaries like [Syrian President] Bashar Assad, when he backs Iran, when he invades Ukraine.” He then asked Trump, “Is it wise to be praising our adversaries and alienating our allies?”

Stephanopoulos added, “you said, ‘I think our country does plenty of killing too.’ What killing are you talking about there, ordered by the United States government?”

Trump answered: “Well, take a look at what we’re doing in the Middle East. We went into Iraq. We shouldn’t have. You know that I was opposed to going into Iraq many years ago. In 2003/2004 there were headlines in Reuters that Trump is opposed to the war, because you’re going to destabilize the Middle East.

“I said, if you do this, you’ll destabilize the Middle East and Iran will take over. Very simple, Iran will take over Iraq. That’s exactly what’s happening. And on top of that we have ISIS, which is another problem and another complicating factor. Now, we should have never gone into Iraq. When we left, we made a mistake.

“We made a big mistake with Libya. We’ve destabilized all these places. We now have a migration with thousands and hundreds of thousands and even millions of people that don’t know where they’re going. I mean it’s a terrible thing. We have been run by incompetent people, incompetent politicians. They don’t know – and that’s probably why I’m leading so high in the polls because people are tired of seeing very, very stupid and very, very incompetent people running our country into the ground.

“In the meantime, we owe \$19 trillion, soon going to be \$21 trillion and we better get our act together fast, George, because our country is going down if we don’t.”

‘Moral Equivalence’

In stunned disbelief, Stephanopoulos shot back with the old “moral equivalence” argument that was developed by CIA propagandists and neoconservatives during the Reagan administration to justify U.S.-backed slaughters in Central America and elsewhere: “Your comments seem to suggest some moral equivalence for the United States and Russia. Is that what you believe?”

Trump: “I’m not saying anything. I’m saying, when you say a man [Putin] has killed reporters, I’d like you to prove it. And I’m – I’m saying it would be a terrible thing if it were true, but I have never seen any information or any proof that he killed reporters, George. You’re just saying, he killed reporters. You and other people tell me he killed reporters. I don’t know that he killed reporters. I haven’t seen it. If he did, I think it’s despicable. I think it would be horrible. But you’re making these accusations and I don’t – I don’t see any proof. And, by the way, he totally denies that he kills reporters. He totally denied it.”

Stephanopoulos: "I'm still waiting for the evidence that we've been directly involved in killing people as well. You made your points about Iraq. But I do want to move on."

As hard as it may be to believe, Stephanopoulos presenting himself as a leading American journalist pretends to be unaware of the killings associated with the brutal interrogations of "war on terror" and Iraq War detainees, the targeted drone killings that both President George W. Bush and President Barack Obama have signed off on, the mass slaughter of citizens in Fallujah and other Iraqi cities bombarded by the U.S. military, the more recent killings of doctors and patients at a Doctors Without Borders hospital in Kunduz, Afghanistan, and relevant to the issue of journalists the killings of Al Jazeera, Reuters and other reporters in Iraq.

One could go back through history and remind Stephanopoulos of many other examples of the U.S. government slaughtering large numbers of civilians either directly in places such as Vietnam or indirectly through proxies in regions such as Central and South America. But the stance of a "respectable" American "journalist" apparently must be that none of that ever happened or, if it did happen, it was all an unintended mistake.

Though Trump is regularly accused of getting his facts wrong, he responded to Stephanopoulos with incredulity: "Excuse me, take a look at the rampage all over the place. And you know what we've gotten for Iraq? We've spent \$2 trillion, OK? We've – thousands, hundreds of thousands of people killed. We've lost thousands and thousands of our great young people, soldiers.

"So, \$2 trillion, deaths, wounded warriors, we have nothing, and Iran is now taking over Iraq with the second largest oil reserves in the world. We're run by people that don't have a clue."

But Stephanopoulos apparently did not realize that Donald Trump of all people had just taken him to school on the question of who had a better grasp of reality. So, the ABC-TV "newsman" lamely shot back with a non-sequitur: "And Iran has been backed by Vladimir Putin."

While much of what Trump says can be fairly criticized for inaccuracies and exaggerations as well as for offensive and divisive rhetoric the sad reality is that the mainstream media personalities who pose as "truth-tellers" are often more detached from facts and more beholden to delusions than he is.

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 Object to Syrian Democracy

Exclusive: President Obama has infuriated Official Washington's neocons by accepting the Russian stance that the Syrian people should select their own future leaders through free elections, rather than the neocon insistence on a foreign-imposed "regime change," reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The Washington Post's editorial board is livid that President Barack Obama appears to have accepted the Russian position that the Syrian people should decide for themselves who their future leaders should be when the Post seems to prefer that the choice be made by neoconservative think tanks in Washington or other outsiders.

So, in a furious [editorial](#) on Friday, the Post castigated Secretary of State John Kerry for saying after a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow that the Obama administration and Russia see the political solution to Syria "in fundamentally the same way," meaning that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad could stand for election in the future.

The Post wrote: "Unfortunately, that increasingly appears to be the case, and not because Mr. Putin has altered his position. For four years, President Obama demanded the departure of Mr. Assad, who has killed hundreds of thousands of his own people with chemical weapons, 'barrel bombs,' torture and other hideous acts. Yet in its zeal to come to terms with Mr. Putin, the Obama administration has been slowly retreating from that position."

The Russian position, which Obama finally seems to be accepting, is that the Syrian people should be allowed to choose their own leaders through fair, internationally organized elections, rather than have outside powers dictate who can and who can't compete in a democratic process. Obama's [previous stance](#) was that Assad must be prevented from running in an election.

But that meant the Syrian bloodshed and resulting chaos now spreading across Europe and into the U.S. political process would continue indefinitely as the United States took the curious position of opposing democracy in favor of an insistence that "Assad must go," a demand favored by U.S. neocons and liberal interventionists, Israel and regional Sunni "allies," such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar.

To the chagrin of the Post's editors, Obama finally ceded to the more democratically defensible position that the Syrian people should pick their own leaders. After all, if Obama is right about how much the Syrian people hate Assad, elections would empower them to implement their own "regime change" through the ballot box. But that uncertain outcome is not what the Post's editors want. They want a predetermined result – Assad's ouster – regardless of the Syrian people's wishes.

And regarding the editorial, you also should note the reference to Assad killing "his own people with chemical weapons," an apparent allusion to the now-discredited but still widely accepted (inside Official Washington at least) claim that Assad was behind a lethal sarin gas attack outside Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013.

To this day, the U.S. government (or, for that matter, the Washington Post) has not presented any verifiable evidence to support the Assad-did-it allegation, but it nevertheless has become an Everyone-Knows-It-To-Be-True "group think" based on endless repetition, much as Official Washington concluded that Iraq's Saddam Hussein had WMD stockpiles, based on the fact that it was stated as flat fact by lots of Important People, including the Post's editorial writers.

Official Washington's epistemology seems to be that if enough Important People say something is true, then it becomes true regardless of where the actual evidence leads. [See Consortiumnews.com's ["The Collapsing Syria-Sarin Case."](#)]

Hypocritical Outrage

Other parts of the Post's attacks are equally dubious in that the Post's editors – who were all-in for the "shock and awe" bombing of Iraq and wouldn't think of sharing blame for the hundreds of thousands of Iraqis killed as a result of President George W. Bush's Washington Post-endorsed invasion – are now outraged over Syria's homemade "barrel bombs" and blame Assad for all the deaths, even though many of the dead were Syrian soldiers killed by Islamic jihadists, armed and financed by U.S. "allies," Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and others.

And, by the way, some torture blamed on Syria was carried out in coordination with the Bush administration's "extraordinary rendition" program as part of the "global war on terror." For instance, Canadian citizen Maher Arar, who was seized by the U.S. government at New York's Kennedy International Airport in September 2002 while on his way home to Canada, was shipped to Syria as a suspected Al Qaeda member. Arar was tortured in Syria before being cleared of suspicions by both Syria and Canada, according to a later Canadian investigation.

But, hey, you don't expect The Washington Post's neocon editors to give you any honest context, do you?

The more immediate issue is the Post's fury over the prospect that the Syrian people would be allowed to vote on Assad's future rather than have it dictated by neocon think tanks, Islamic jihadist rebels and their Turkish-Saudi-Qatari-Israeli-CIA backers.

The Post's editors wrote, "On Tuesday in Moscow, Mr. Kerry took another big step backward: 'The United States and our partners are not seeking so-called regime change,' he said. He added that a demand by a broad opposition front that Mr. Assad step down immediately was a 'non-starting position', because the United States already agreed that Mr. Assad could stay at least for the first few months of a 'transition process.'"

Kerry "now agrees with Mr. Putin that the country's future leadership must be left to Syrians to work out," the Post's outraged editors wrote. Yes, you read that correctly.

Though the Post predicted on Friday morning that the notion of the Syrian people being allowed to decide their future leaders was "a likely recipe for an impasse," later on Friday the United Nations Security Council voted unanimously in favor of a roadmap for a cease-fire in Syria, negotiations on a transitional government and elections within 18 months after the start of talks.

The agreement makes no reference as to whether Assad can or cannot run in the new U.N.-organized elections, meaning apparently that he will be able to participate surely to the additional dismay of the Post's editors.

Many Obstacles

Obviously, the U.N. plan faces many obstacles, especially the continued insistence on "regime change" from Saudi Arabia, Turkey and other Sunni-led regional governments, which disdain Assad who is an Alawite, an offshoot of Shia Islam. Further condemning Assad in their eyes, he seeks to maintain a secular government that protects Christians, Alawites, Shiites and other minorities.

The Saudis, Turks and Qataris have been among the leaders in supporting violent Sunni jihadists, including Ahrar al-Sham and Al Qaeda's Nusra Front, which operate under the Saudi umbrella called the Army of Conquest, which has received hundreds of sophisticated U.S.-made TOW missiles that have proved devastating in killing Syrian government troops. Israel also has provided some support to these jihadists operating along the Golan Heights.

While Turkey, a member of NATO, denies assisting terrorists, its intelligence

services have been implicated in helping Nusra Front operatives carry out the Aug. 21, 2013 sarin gas attack outside Damascus, with the goal of pinning the blame on Assad and tricking Obama into ordering a devastating series of air strikes against Syrian government forces. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Was Turkey Behind Syria Sarin Attack?](#)"]

Turkey also has allowed the hyper-brutal Islamic State to transit through nearly 100 kilometers of openings on the Syrian-Turkish border, including passage of vast truck convoys of Islamic State oil into Turkey for resale, a reality that Obama recently raised with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who has long promised but failed to seal the border. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[A Blind Eye Toward Turkey's Crimes.](#)"]

At home, President Obama also faces political difficulties from Israel and from Official Washington's alliance of neoconservatives and liberal interventionists who have made Assad's ouster a cause cœlœbre despite the disastrous experiences overthrowing other secular regimes in Iraq and Libya.

In the past, Obama has been highly sensitive to criticism from this group, including nasty comments on the Post's editorial page. But the Post's ire on Friday suggests that at least for the moment Obama is putting pragmatism (i.e., the need to stop the Syrian killing and the global insecurity that it is causing) ahead of neocon/liberal-hawk ideological desires.

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](#)).

A GOP Split on Neocon Orthodoxy

The mainstream U.S. media remains focused on the acrimony of the GOP presidential race while less noticed is a growing split among top candidates over the neocon foreign policy prescription of regime change and more regime change. Several hopefuls are deviating from that orthodoxy, notes James W Carden.

By James W Carden

On Tuesday night, the Republican Party clown car deposited its passengers onto the main stage of the Venetian Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas for the troupe's final performance of 2015. Because Donald Trump remains the GOP front runner by

as much as 27 points, the Venetian was an apt location: a tawdry setting with fake Venetian landmarks for a faux debate.

The debate didn't produce the fireworks CNN was clearly hoping for. Relations between Trump and his main rival, Texas Sen. Ted Cruz, remained downright cordial, while the moderator's several attempts to goad Jeb Bush into attacking Trump failed to elicit much in the way of a response from the Donald, aside from facial contortions.

Along with CNN, another disappointed party must have been the owner of the Venetian, Sheldon Adelson. The casino mogul, a longtime bankroller of neoconservative candidates and causes, could not have been pleased that the so-called "national security" debate turned into an argument over the merits of "regime change" in the Middle East.

While five of the nine candidates (Marco Rubio, John Kasich, Jeb Bush, Carly Fiorina and Chris Christie) parroted the standard neocon talking points, four of them, including Trump and current Iowa frontrunner Ted Cruz, pushed back on the idea that the U.S. has been well served by toppling the regimes of Iraq's Saddam Hussein and Libya's Muammar Gaddafi.

Early on, Marco Rubio came in for a heavy drubbing by both Rand Paul and Ted Cruz for his endorsement of the National Security Agency's bulk metadata collection program. Later on, a question over whether or not we would be "better off" with dictators ruling the Middle East touched off the evening's most edifying exchange.

Kentucky Sen. Paul noted that the administration's decision to try and overthrow Bashar al-Assad by sending 600 tons of weapons to the "moderate" Syrian opposition helped give rise to ISIS. Cruz said that democracy promotion was "a distraction" and called for an "America first" foreign policy, while Trump called President George W. Bush's Iraq War a "tremendous disservice not only to the Middle East but to humanity."

Whether or not Trump will take a moment to consider whether his own proposals, such as the targeting of innocent civilians and instituting a religious test to gain entry into the U.S., do much to further the cause of "humanity" remains to be seen.

Throughout the night the unhinged militarism of the Republican Party's establishment candidates constantly bubbled up to the surface. Ohio Gov. John Kasich's performance surely gave him a boost in the so-called Adelson primary. When asked how he would defeat ISIS, Kasich said he would "go in massively." Later on, the Ohio governor and former member of the House Armed Services

committee said that he believes it is time we “punch the Russians in the nose.”

Not to be outdone, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie called President Barack Obama, whose leadership he so effusively praised in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, a “feckless weakling.” Christie also said that he would enforce a “no-fly zone” over Syria and that he would shoot down any Russian aircraft that dared violate it. Jeb Bush also reiterated his support for a “no-fly zone” over Syria without seeming to notice, or care, that that airspace is firmly under Russian control.

If many of the soon-to-be second-tier candidates were positively bloodthirsty, some of the others seemed to be on autopilot. Trump lazily (so much for “high energy”) repeated lines from his standard stump speech, while Christie continued to channel 2008 presidential candidate Rudy Giuliani by shamelessly invoking 9/11 whenever the opportunity presented itself.

Rubio also stuck closely to his favorite themes and in so doing reminded this viewer of Alden Pyle, the “quiet American” of Graham Greene’s creation who was “impregnable armored by his good intentions and his ignorance.” Like Pyle, Rubio exudes a kind of boyish earnestness that serves to mask a white-hot fanaticism.

Rubio defended his support for NATO’s intervention in Libya by claiming Gaddafi was “going to go one way or another.” He darkly warned that the West is losing “the propaganda war” with ISIS, and also attacked Cruz for repeatedly voting against Defense Authorization Acts which, according to Rubio, fund “important programs” like the Iron Dome. Pointing out that the Iron Dome enhances Israeli, not American, security would surely doom one’s chances of success in the Adelson primary. So no one did.

Overall, however, the tenor of the debate must have come as something of a rude shock to Adelson, who has long sought to parlay his largess into influence, particularly with regard to American Middle East policy. In spite of all of those millions he has lavished on Republicans, nearly half the candidates signaled that they were ready, in some limited respects anyway, to move past the failed neoconservative foreign policies that have been on offer by the GOP for the past three election cycles.

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

Political Carnival Pays Off for TV

As the U.S. presidential race especially on the Republican side descends into the political equivalent of a rowdy reality TV show, the TV networks are thrilled by higher-than-expected ratings and loads of political ads bought by secretive groups, say Bill Moyers and Michael Winship.

By Bill Moyers and Michael Winship

Television news has gone off its rocker and turned our politics into the equivalent of a freak show's hall of mirrors. The networks have grasped Donald Trump to their collective bosom like the winner of one of those misogynistic, televised beauty pageants he owns. Each pronouncement from the Sultan of Slur is treated as epic, no matter how deeply insulting, bigoted or just plain ridiculous.

You may have seen by now that recent Tyndall Report analysis of the nightly news shows on ABC, CBS, and NBC. It found that from Jan. 1 through November, the big three had devoted 234 minutes of reporting to Donald Trump but only ten to Bernie Sanders. At ABC, *World News Tonight* had given the Trump campaign 81 minutes of coverage while Bernie Sanders has received less than a minute. A minute!

Our friend and colleague John Nichols at *The Nation* magazine says that it's useless to try to get the networks to dial it back; every Trump bellow leaves them begging for more.

Rather, he writes, "When a candidate is playing to the worst fears of Americans, what's needed is more serious and intensive coverage that puts things in perspective. The point is to recognize that there are other candidates who are getting as much support as Trump, that are exciting crowds and gaining significant support, and that are advancing dramatically different responses to the challenges facing America. That's not happening now."

Big surprise, the problem is money. Tons of it. Trump brings ratings and ratings raise advertising revenue. What's more, in an insane election cycle like this one, cash already is pouring in from the production, sale and placement of political TV advertising, cash that also makes television executives and political strategists wealthy.

Here's CBS chief executive Les Moonves at an investor presentation last week, cheering on Trump and the other Republican candidates: "The more they spend, the better it is for us. Go Donald! Keep getting out there. And you know, this is fun, watching this, let them spend money on us. We're looking forward to a very

exciting political year in '16."

Fun? Exciting? Only if you enjoy getting rich, as Moonves apparently does, while watching the country go collectively bonkers.

This is the same Les Moonves who declared during the 2012 campaign, "Super PACs may be bad for America, but they're very good for CBS." And earlier this year, on an investors call, he said, "Looking ahead, the 2016 presidential election is right around the corner and, thank God, the rancor has already begun."

You can hear the fictional Howard Beale of Paddy Chayefsky's Network spinning in his fictional grave, still mad as hell. Moonves likes to play the wise guy but he also knows that some are predicting that the 2016 presidential election may cost as much as \$5 billion, with much if not most of it going to television.

Hard to believe that, as Julie Bykowicz at the Associated Press reported earlier this month, "Some 62,462 presidential ads have been on broadcast airwaves already this year, according to advertising tracker Kantar Media's CMAG. The 2016 hopefuls and their related political groups, such as super PACs, have plans to spend \$133 million on broadcast TV by the beginning of March, CMAG information shows."

This is why, despite the encroachments of cable, satellite and the Internet, local and network broadcast television is still such a money-making machine. At some TV stations, a third of advertising revenue comes from political ads.

So is it any wonder local and national TV news is squeamish about taking on real, in-depth coverage of the campaigns that unload endless wheelbarrows of cash on their doorsteps? That broadcast executives have no qualms about ruining the airwaves and honest discourse while taking glee at the windfalls of profits?

And let's not forget the ferocity with which television stations and networks have been fighting against campaign finance reform, fearing the death, or at least hobbling, of the golden goose.

At The Intercept earlier this year, Lee Fang wrote, "For nearly two decades, the National Association of Broadcasters, a lobby group for media corporations, has fought bipartisan efforts to provide free airtime to candidates, a reform advocates say would reduce the moneyed barriers to political entry for candidates. In more recent years, media companies have attempted to obstruct FCC rules promulgated during the Obama administration to digitize mandatory forms revealing information about political ad buys. Even that minor reform was too much."

Too much for the likes of Rupert Murdoch's News Corp, owner of Fox News; and

Comcast subsidiary NBCUniversal, parent of NBC News and MSNBC, among others. They and their allies are determined that we, the people, not know who's paying for the ads that enrich those who have made a swamp of the public airwaves and a mockery of political discourse

The good news is that people are pushing back. As Lee Fang noted, since 2012, broadcast TV stations have been required to place their public inspection files online, including information on all the political advertising they air.

But, as Trevor Potter, founder and president of the nonpartisan of the Campaign Legal Center, points out, "The stations are not required to provide the information in a searchable, sortable, downloadable format. As a result, the current database is difficult to navigate and does not permit the aggregation of spending by a particular campaign or outside group."

In other words, private citizens can't get a good look at totality of the numbers. Legislation that would fix this roadblock to transparency is before the House Energy and Commerce Committee, where unfortunately it probably will be allowed a slow if not merciful death.

But even if the files become more accessible, the information still will remain incomplete until we know just who really is behind the money bankrolling the ads, especially the ones funded with anonymous dark money from super PACs and so-called educational non-profits. It's not good enough to say the money comes from the XYZ Fund for Swell Americans; we need to know for real who the wealthy individuals and corporate interests are secretly pulling the levers and pushing the buttons of a machine that already is demolishing democracy.

"It's unlawful," writes former FCC Commissioner Michael Copps, now special adviser to Common Cause's Media and Democracy Reform Initiative. "There are laws and rules on the books that mandate identification of the real sponsors of ads (both commercial and political), but they go unimplemented when it comes to the political genre. Failure to enforce the law is corrupting our politics, and goodness knows our politics don't need any more corrupting!"

Tell that to the conservatives on the Supreme Court, Mike, who, like Les Moonves, seem to think the corruption is fun and exciting, which may be why they keep tolerating, even encouraging it.

Petitions have been filed, legislation has been proposed, but really, all the FCC has to do is enforce rules that already exist and do it within 60, 90 or at most 120 days, according to Copps, "giving all parties a chance to weigh in on how best to formulate the sponsorship information and to make sure there is no evasion."

It's simple, he says: "Voters have a clear, unambiguous right to know who is trying to influence them. Democracy is about holding power accountable. If we don't even know *whom* to hold accountable, how do we hope to govern ourselves successfully?"

Bill Moyers is the managing editor of Moyers & Company and BillMoyers.com. Michael Winship is the Emmy Award-winning senior writer of Moyers & Company and BillMoyers.com, and a former senior writing fellow at the policy and advocacy group Demos. Follow him on Twitter at [@MichaelWinship](https://twitter.com/MichaelWinship).

[This story originally appeared at <http://billmoyers.com/story/bad-news-for-democracy-is-great-news-for-tv-profits/>]

Sam Parry Receives 'Gary Webb Award'

Sam Parry has received the "Gary Webb Freedom of the Press" award in recognition of Sam's central role in creating Consortiumnews.com as the first investigative news magazine based on the Internet. The award was granted by the Board of Directors of the Consortium for Independent Journalism as part of the site's 20th anniversary.

In 1995, Sam was the original architect of the Web site, building it from the ground up at a time when the Internet was still in its infancy and there were no convenient templates or easy-to-use how-to guides. Sam mastered how to write HTML code and scripts and how to implement them online. Though not a "techie," Sam demonstrated great persistence, patience and dedication in bringing this unique Web site to the public.

Journalist Robert Parry recalled how one day in 1995, after getting hold of "secret" and "top secret" documents from a congressional investigation into clandestine contacts between senior Republicans and Iranians dating back to 1980, he was frustrated by the disinterest that he encountered from mainstream news outlets.

"I was complaining about this dilemma when my oldest son Sam, who had just finished college, said there was this thing called the Internet where you could create a thing called a Web site where you could publish the articles and the documents," Robert Parry said. "At the time, I had only the faintest idea what the Internet was. But Sam took the lead in figuring out how to build the Web

site. Without Sam, it couldn't have happened."

In the two decades since, as Internet technology evolved, Sam, now 42, remained active in upgrading and designing the site into its present form. He also contributed a number of articles about the growing global environmental crisis, the crucial issues at stake in the pivotal Election 2000, and President George W. Bush's fallacious case for war with Iraq in 2002-03. (Sam was a co-author of *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush.*)

The award stated, "Without his hard work, Consortiumnews.com and much of the important journalism that it has produced might well never have reached the public. We are indebted to Sam for his creative idea and diligent execution, thinking outside the box and experimenting with what was then a brand new medium the Internet.

"It is therefore with the deepest gratitude and appreciation that we grant Sam Parry the 'Gary Webb Freedom of the Press' award for his invaluable contribution to the creation of Consortiumnews.com, to the telling-of-truth, and to the betterment of the planet." (The Consortium for Independent Journalism is the non-profit that publishes Consortiumnews.com.)

The new award is named in honor of the late investigative reporter Gary Webb, who revived the Nicaraguan Contra-cocaine scandal in the mid-1990s and faced extreme hostility from the major U.S. newspapers that had ignored or dismissed the scandal when it first surfaced in the 1980s.

Rather than join Webb in finally exposing the depths of the Reagan administration's collaboration with Contra drug traffickers, the mainstream media destroyed Webb's reputation and career, a shameful campaign that continued even after the CIA's Inspector General admitted that the spy agency knew of the drug smuggling but chose to protect its clients rather than turn them in.

For Webb, the consequences for his courageous reporting were severe. He was driven out of mainstream journalism and made essentially unemployable in his profession. Unable to find decent-paying work and shunned by many of his former colleagues, Webb took his own life in 2004. Webb's ordeal was recounted in a book and movie, both named "Killing the Messenger."

[For more background on Gary Webb, see Consortiumnews.com's "[A Day When Journalism Died](#)" and "[The Sordid Contra-Cocaine Saga.](#)"]

Rethinking Donald Trump

Donald Trump's freewheeling and narcissistic presidential campaign has earned the consensus contempt of the mainstream media and establishment politicians, but that's partly because he has dared challenge dangerous orthodoxies, like the neocon/liberal-hawk mania for "regime change," writes Sam Hussein.

By Sam Hussein

The Establishment so wants everyone to unfriend Donald Trump's supporters on Facebook, there's even an [app to block them](#). That'll teach them!

Yes, Trump plays a bully boy as he appeals to populist (good) as well as nativist, xenophobic and racist (bad) sentiments. The bad need to be meaningfully addressed and engaged rather than dismissed by self-styled sophisticates, noses raised. The good should be recognized and encouraged.

Focusing on the negative aspects of his campaign has blinded many people to what's good in it and I don't mean good like "Oh, the Democrat can beat this guy!" I mean good like it's good that some important issues like the militarized role of the U.S. in the world are getting aired.

Trump is appealing to nativist sentiments as Pat Buchanan did in the 1992 campaign but along with Buchanan's "America First" arguments came a distrust of imperial adventures. Similarly, Trump recently said Secretary of State Hillary Clinton "killed hundreds of thousands of people with her stupidity. ... The Middle East is a total disaster under her."

Now, I think that's pretty accurate, though U.S. policy in my view may be more Machiavellian than stupid, but the remark is a breath of fresh air on the national stage. So, at times, Trump is a truth-teller, including when he says politicians sell themselves to rich donors and when he calls out "free-trade" deals for costing American workers their middle-class jobs.

But the mainstream meme about Trump is that he's a total liar. The *New York Times* [recently purported to grade the veracity of presidential candidates](#). By the *Times'* accounting, Trump was off the scales lying. But I never saw anyone fact-check his assertion about former Secretary Clinton's record of bringing bloody chaos to Libya, Syria and other Mideast countries. That's not an argument that establishment media wants to have.

Of course, a few sentences after Trump's comment about Clinton's death toll, he turned to the Sept. 11, 2001 attack on the [CIA station in Benghazi](#), causing Salon to dismiss him as embracing "[conspiracies](#)," which is all that many people

will hear, not the fuller context.

Shouldn't someone who at times articulates truly inconvenient truths be credited for breaking "politically correct" taboos, such as acknowledging the obvious disasters of U.S. interventionism across the Mideast? Trump speaks such truths, as he did during the Las Vegas debate about U.S. wars:

"We've spent \$4 trillion trying to topple various people that frankly, if they were there and if we could've spent that \$4 trillion in the United States to fix our roads, our bridges, and all of the other problems; our airports and all of the other problems we've had, we would've been a lot better off. I can tell you that right now."

Frankly, that is a stronger critique of military spending than we've heard from Sen. Bernie Sanders of late. But Trump's – or Sen. Rand Paul's – remarks about U.S. policies of "regime change" and bombings are often ignored. It's more convenient to focus on U.S. kindness in letting a few thousand refugees in than to examine how millions of displaced people from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somali and other countries lost their homes as a result of U.S. government policies.

A Long-Ignored Constitution

Some critics say Trump's proposal to temporarily ban Muslim immigrants is unconstitutional (although that argument is debatable as a matter of law regardless of what one thinks of the morality and practicality of his idea).

But there's also the question of how frequently recent presidents have violated the Constitution in recent years with hardly a peep from the mainstream media. News flash: the sitting Democratic president has bombed seven countries without a declaration of war. We've effectively flushed the Constitution down the toilet. Does that justify violating it more? No. But the pretend moral outrage on this score is hollow.

And there's some logic to the nativist Muslim bashing. It's obviously wrong on many levels, but it's understandable given the skewed information the public is given. Since virtually no one on the national stage is seriously and systematically criticizing U.S. policy in the Middle East, such as the multiple U.S. "regime change" invasions and the longstanding U.S. alliances with Saudi Arabia and Israel, it makes sense to say that we've got to change something and that something is separating from Muslims.

Some sophisticates also slammed Trump for acting in the Las Vegas debate like he didn't know what the nuclear triad is (the Cold War-era strategy of delivering nuclear bombs by land-based missiles, strategic bombers and submarine launches).

Well, I have no idea if he knows what the nuclear triad is or if he was just acting that way. But I'm rather glad he didn't adopt the administration's position of saying it's a good idea to spend a trillion dollars to "modernize" the U.S. nuclear arsenal so we can efficiently threaten the planet for another generation.

People may recall that for all the rhetoric from President Barack Obama about ending nuclear weapons, it was President Ronald Reagan, after all his bluster about the Evil Empire and basing intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Europe, who almost rose to the occasion when Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev proposed eliminating nuclear arsenals.

For today's mainstream journalists, it's just easier to go with the flow and hate Trump, as all the major media outlets want us to do. After all, much of our political culture lives off hate. Apparently hate is what gets people to do what you want them to do. So you scare them by building up villainous bogeymen, such as Saddam Hussein, Bashar al-Assad, Vladimir Putin.

People were so encouraged to hate Hussein that many backed the disastrous invasion of Iraq. They were propagandized into hating Assad so much that U.S. policy helped give rise to ISIS. Putin has been transformed into such a comic-book villain that people who should know better talk casually about shooting down Russian planes and seeking "regime change" in Moscow.

Ohio Gov. John Kasich, the supposedly "reasonable" Republican "moderate," says "it's time that we punched the Russians in the nose." Who cares about risking nuclear war? Don't we all just hate Putin?

Now, many Americans Republicans and Democrats alike are demonizing Trump. Whatever he says is put in the most negative context with no expectation of balance. He has become the focus of hate, hate, hate. He's a black-hatted, black-hearted villain. But why can't we just view people for who they are, seeing both the good and bad in them?

Asking Why the Hate

Trump calls for a cutoff of immigration of Muslims "until we can figure out what the hell is going on" – which, given our political culture's seeming propensity of never figuring out much of anything might be forever, but the comment actually raises a serious question: why are people in the Mideast angry at U.S. policy?

Says Trump: "There's tremendous hatred [among Muslims toward the United States]. Where it comes from, I don't know." But Trump – unlike virtually anyone else with a megaphone – is actually raising the issue about why there's so much

resentment against the U.S. in the Mideast.

Virtually the only other person on the national stage stating such things is Sen. Rand Paul, R-Kentucky, though his articulations have also been uneven and have been a pale copy of what his father, former Rep. Ron Paul, R-Texas, has said.

Of course, what should be said is: If we don't know "what the hell is going on!" – then maybe we should stop bombing. But that doesn't get processed because the general public lives under the illusion that Barack Obama is a pacifistic patsy. The reality is that Obama has been bombing more countries than any president since World War II by his own count seven Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya and Somalia.

Half of what Trump says may be borderline deranged and false. But he also says true things – and critically, important things that no one else with any media or political access is saying.

At this week's Las Vegas debate, Trump said: "When you had the World Trade Center go, people were put into planes that were friends, family, girlfriends, and they were put into planes and they were sent back, for the most part, to Saudi Arabia."

Granted, Trump's comment was mangled and imprecise he may have been referring to President George W. Bush's extraordinary decision to let rich Saudis, including bin Laden family members, onto the first civilian planes allowed back into the air after 9/11 so they could avoid intensive FBI questioning and possible hostility from the American people but Trump's remark raises the legitimate question of Saudi Arabia's relation to 9/11.

Yes, Trump says he'll bomb the hell out of Syria, as does virtually every other Republican candidate. (Sen. Ted Cruz wants to see if "sand can glow in the dark," phrasing usually associated with nuclear war.) But Obama's already is bombing Syria and Iraq albeit without much media fanfare. So people think it's not happening and thus believe that Obama's passivity is the problem.

What Americans are right in sensing is that President Obama, former President Bush and the rest of the Establishment are playing endless geopolitical games and keeping them in the dark. As citizens in what is supposed to be a democratic Republic, they're right to be sick of it. Many of the people supporting or sympathizing with Trump seem to sense that he may be the only one ready to tip over the furniture and make a fuss.

Trump, the Anti-Imperialist?

Trump touts his alleged opposition to the Iraq War, although I don't recall him attending any of the anti-war rallies in 2002-03. But he apparently made a few critical remarks in 2003-04. Certainly nothing great or courageous. But it's good that someone with the biggest megaphone is saying the Iraq War was bad.

People who are getting behind Trump thus may be reachable regarding the U.S. government's proclivity toward endless war. And think for a minute about what a Trump-Clinton race would be like, given that she voted for the invasion of Iraq – and then promoted violent “regime change” in Libya and Syria. Trump might end up as the anti-imperialist candidate.

At least, Trump conveys the *impression* that he would act like a normal nationalist and not a conniving globalist. And much of the U.S. public seems to want that. And, if that's true, it's a good thing. It's also a positive that Trump is energizing some people who had given up on politics.

Trump – apparently alone among Republican presidential candidates – is saying that he will talk to Russian President Putin. Having some sense that the job of a president is to attempt to have reasonable relations with the other major nuclear state is a serious plus in my book. He conveys the image of being a die-hard nationalist, but – unlike most of our recent leaders – not hell-bent on global domination. People who want a better world could use that.

No prominent Democrat has called for a serious reexamination of how the United States conducts its foreign policy. Hillary Clinton wins praise from arch-neocon Robert Kagan for what he calls her “liberal interventionism,” which he correctly assesses as virtually the same as neo-conservatism. [See Consortiumnews.com's “Obama's True Foreign Policy 'Weakness.'”]

Though Bernie Sanders voted against the Iraq War, he has displayed little interest or sophistication about who's fueling much of the extremist violence in the Middle East. He wants the Saudis to “get their hands dirty” when they have already done so by financing and arming brutal Sunni jihadist forces, including those tied to Al Qaeda and the Islamic State.

Sanders doesn't seem to understand that the Sunni jihadists are, in effect, paramilitary forces that the Saudis have supported since the 1980s when Afghan fundamentalist mujahedeen were funded and armed to overthrow the Soviet-backed secular regime in Kabul. That conflict gave rise to Osama bin Laden, Al Qaeda, the Taliban and the modern jihadist movement.

A Missed Opportunity

During a Democratic debate right after the Paris terror attacks of Nov. 13, Sanders had a historic opportunity to address these issues in a serious way. He

could have pointed out the contradiction between U.S. alliances with nations such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar and the “war on terror.” He could have explained the fallacy of seeking “regime change” against secular governments as with Iraq, Libya and Syria when that only invites chaos, bloodshed and extremism.

Sanders could have stressed how perpetual war not only is doomed to failure as a strategy against terrorism but is incompatible with the investments that he hopes to make in education, health care, infrastructure, the environment and other domestic priorities. He could have called for a thorough reappraisal of these misguided policies and energized the Democratic base.

But Sanders refused to engage in a thoughtful way on foreign policy, reverting back to his preferred topic: income inequality. Now he’s complaining about a lack of media coverage. Yes, the mainstream media is unfair toward progressive candidates, but you don’t do any good by refusing to engage in what is arguably the great, defining debate of our time.

The only significant candidate on the national stage who has seriously challenged the interventionist impulse was Rep. Ron Paul, who was demonized in 2008 in ways similar to what’s being done to Trump now. It’s true that the comparison is imprecise: Trump has provided few specifics on how he would approach the world differently from either President Obama or his Republican rivals. Many of his comments have been elliptical about his skills as a negotiator rather detailed about policies and he has sounded bellicose when talking about the Islamic State.

If he got into office, Trump might be little different from other recent presidents after all the State Department and Pentagon are staffed with bureaucrats who have risen through the ranks by toeing the establishment lines of neoconservatism and liberal interventionism. But Trump, as a world-wide deal-maker, might be more pragmatic than ideological.

In terms of economics, Trump is alone in the Republican field in defending a progressive tax and he has praised Social Security. Tom Ferguson has noted: “lower income voters seem to like him about twice as much as the upper income voters who like him in the Republican poll.” Trump has “even dumped on some issues that are virtually sacred to the Republicans, notably the carried interest tax deduction for the super rich.”

Trump has been blunt about the corruption in American politics. Writes Lee Fang: “Donald Trump Says He Can Buy Politicians, None of His Rivals Disagree.”

Is There Good in Trump?

So, can progressives pause for a moment and note that it may be a good thing

that many discouraged voters fed up with politics as usual are finding someone who speaks to both their fears and their hopes, albeit in ways that are often confused and even offensive.

It's important to stress: I have no idea what Trump actually believes. Backing him for president is probably akin to guessing what's behind a door on "The Price is Right." His political philosophy if that's the right word is a hodgepodge of conflicting ideas. He could be even more authoritarian than what we've seen so far. But, in some ways, he is a welcome break from the Establishment's ugly orthodoxy.

It's also possible that he's just putting on an act to lure the Republican anti-establishment wing and would revert to old establishment policies if he were to get into office much like Obama has done especially on foreign policy. After all, Trump says, "I was a member of the Establishment seven months ago."

By the way, I have no personal love for Trump. I lived in one of his buildings when I was growing up in Queens. His flamboyance as my dad and I were scraping by in a one-bedroom apartment sickened me. I remember seeing the luxurious Trump Tower in Manhattan as a teen with my father. My dad joked that he'd own one square inch for the monthly rent checks he wrote to Trump for years.

Sam Hussein is communications director for the Institute for Public Accuracy and founder of votepact.org – which urges left-right cooperation. Follow him on twitter: [@samhusseini](https://twitter.com/samhusseini).

The Danger After Putin

Exclusive: America's neocons are lusting for their ultimate "regime change" destabilizing Russia and getting rid of President Putin but they ignore the likelihood that the leader after Putin would be a much more hardline nationalist, a prospect addressed by Gilbert Doctorow.

By Gilbert Doctorow

As in Soviet times, Russian taxi drivers remain among the best informed and eager interlocutors about the ins and outs of the country's often opaque politics what we used to call "Kremlinologists" who would decipher who was rising or falling based on who was standing closest to whom at public events.

To show that "Kremlinology" is alive and well, the taxi drivers were speculating this week on the imminent removal of St. Petersburg Governor Georgi Poltavchenko

because he was nowhere to be seen at the top shows of the Fourth International Cultural Forum, a major event in the old imperial capital which attracted the big bosses from Moscow who were everywhere.

But more significant to the West is the power line-up behind President Vladimir Putin if he were to leave office for whatever reason. For years now, American hardliners and particularly the neoconservatives have been lusting for “regime change” in Moscow, hoping that some malleable figure like the late President Boris Yeltsin would be put back on top.

However, as my well-informed taxi drivers tell me, the man one heart-beat away from Putin is Sergei Ivanov, who would make Putin look like a pussy-cat in dealing with the West. And if not Ivanov, the next in line is likely Dmitry Rogozin, another fervent patriot and Kremlin favorite.

Despite what Russian dissidents Mikhail Khodorkovsky and Masha Gessen have been telling the readers of *The New York Times*, “regime change” in Moscow would almost surely not achieve the goal of a second Yeltsin era. Memories are still too fresh of the humiliating 1990s after the Soviet collapse when the West dispatched financial “experts” who prescribed capitalist “shock therapy” for the Russian system leading to a precipitous decline in living standards and an alarming rise in death rates.

What’s clear is that there are no “liberals” beloved of the West in Russia’s present Matryoshka doll of power, a message that Beltway insiders would do well to absorb. Not that there is any significant sign of public disapproval of Putin.

On the streets of St. Petersburg, the hoopla of the Cultural Forum was just a backdrop for the visit to the city by Putin, who has not been here for months, I was told. His expected appearance at opening ceremonies of the Forum was the talk of the town.

Russian media promoted the event to the domestic audience as the “Davos of Culture,” a reference to the renowned international business conference at Davos, Switzerland. There would be 9,000 visitors to concerts, dance performances and panel discussions led by curators, film directors and a lot of well-known art scholars.

The venues were concentrated in the General Staff building of the Hermitage on Palace Square but also spread out across the historic center of the city. The international dimension would come from diplomats and government officials from more than 40 countries. If Europe would be woefully underrepresented (just Luxembourg was on the roster of participants), there would be a lot of Far

Eastern worthies to make up the gaps.

Moreover, the biggest foreign presence was UNESCO-related, part of the 70th anniversary of that institution which just happens to be headed by a Russian-speaking graduate of the Moscow University for International Affairs, Irina Bokova from Bulgaria.

A vast number of little celebrities vied for an invitation to the closed events, while various “security organs” at local and federal levels tried to outdo themselves to ensure there were no incidents.

Some bright guys in these special services put so many hurdles in the path of issuing badges, with or without access to certain events (notably the ones with Putin), with or without holograms, that their computer system crashed, causing utter chaos in processing visitors from the general public, journalists and participants in the Forum.

The madness continued at the entrance to the Mariinsky-2 Theater, where the main opening ceremony was held Monday evening. Our printed invitations proved to be worthless. The end result was improvised violation of the system by the staff who were totally overwhelmed and pasted on the essential holograms to move folks along.

Once past the lines for re-accreditation, past the machine verification of access and the metal detectors, a surreal calm and note of elegant hospitality at the presidential level took over. Flutes of champagne were distributed by radiant young staff.

Putin did not keep us waiting. He was first to speak on stage, delivering a brief salutation to the audience and making a quick exit. The two-hour ceremony was followed by a traditional Russian “walking dinner” as guests thronged and picked clean the passing trays of caviar and crab sandwiches.

For those who read into my account the suggestion that there are vulnerabilities in the presidential security, my best advice is to send in emails to the Kremlin urging Putin to yet again sack his security detail and bring in more clever folks. The last thing we all need is “regime change” in Russia.

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