

Hitting Saudi Arabia Where It Hurts

Exclusive: Though faced with a global terrorism crisis, Official Washington can't get beyond its neocon-led "tough-guy-gal" rhetoric. But another option financial sanctions on Saudi Arabia might help finally shut down the covert supply of money and arms to Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

As the Islamic State and Al Qaeda enter a grim competition to see who can kill more civilians around the world, the fate of Western Civilization as we've known it arguably hangs in the balance. It will not take much more terror for the European Union to begin cracking up and for the United States to transform itself into a full-scale surveillance state.

Yet, in the face of this crisis, many of the same people who set us on this road to destruction continue to dominate and indeed frame the public debate. For instance, Official Washington's neocons still insist on their recipe for "regime change" in countries that they targeted 20 years ago. They also demand a new Cold War with Russia in defense of a corrupt right-wing regime in Ukraine, further destabilizing Europe and disrupting U.S.-Russian cooperation in Syria.

Given the stakes, you might think that someone in a position of power or one of the many candidates for U.S. president would offer some pragmatic and realistic ideas for addressing this extraordinary threat. But most Republicans from Marco Rubio to Carly Fiorina to Ted Cruz only offer more of "more of the same," i.e. neocon belligerence on steroids. Arguably, Donald Trump and Rand Paul are exceptions to this particular hysteria, but neither has offered a coherent and comprehensive counter-analysis.

On the Democratic side, frontrunner Hillary Clinton wins praise from the neocon editors of The Washington Post for breaking with President Barack Obama's hesitancy to fully invade Syria. Former Secretary of State Clinton wants an invasion to occupy parts of Syria as a "safe area" and to destroy Syrian (and presumably Russian) planes if they violate her "no-fly zone."

Much like the disastrous U.S. invasions of Iraq and Libya, Clinton and her neocon allies are pitching the invasion of Syria as a humanitarian venture to remove a "brutal dictator" in this case, President Bashar al-Assad as well as to "destroy" the Islamic State, which Assad's army and its Iranian-Russian allies have also been fighting. Assad's military, Iranian troops and Russian planes have hit other jihadist groups, too, such as Al Qaeda's Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham, which receives U.S. weapons as it fights side-by-side with Nusra in the Army of Conquest.

Clinton's strategy likely would protect jihadists except for the Islamic State – and thus keep hope alive for “regime change” – explaining why the Post's neocon editors, who were enthusiastic boosters of the Iraq War in 2003, hailed her hawkish approach toward Syria as “laudable.”

To Clinton's left, Sen. Bernie Sanders has punted on the issue of what to do in either Syria or the Middle East, failing to offer any thoughtful ideas about what can be done to stabilize the region. He opted instead for a clever but vacuous talking point, arguing that the Saudis and other rich oil sheiks of the Persian Gulf should use their wealth and militaries to bring order to the region, to “get their hands dirty.”

The problem is that the Saudis, the Qataris and the Kuwaitis along with the Turks are a big part of the problem. They have used their considerable wealth to finance and arm Al Qaeda and its various allies and spinoffs, including the Islamic State. Their hands are already very dirty.

Saudi 'Hard Power'

What we have seen in the Middle East since the 1980s is Saudi Arabia and other Sunni states creating “hard power” for their regional ambitions by assembling paramilitary forces that are willing and even eager to lash out at “enemies,” whether against Shiite rivals or Western powers.

While the wealthy Saudis, Qataris and other pampered princes don't want to become soldiers themselves, they're more than happy to exploit disaffected young Sunnis, turn them into jihadists and unleash them. Al Qaeda (dating back to the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s) and the Islamic State (emerging in resistance to the U.S.-installed Shiite regime in Iraq after 2003) are Saudi Arabia's foot soldiers.

This reality is similar to how the Reagan administration supported right-wing paramilitary forces in Central America during the 1980s, including “death squads” in El Salvador and Guatemala and the drug-tainted “Contras” in Nicaragua. These extremists were willing to do the “dirty work” that Reagan's CIA considered necessary to reverse the tide of leftist revolution in the region, but with “deniability” built in so Official Washington couldn't be directly blamed for the slaughters.

Also, in the 1980s, the Reagan administration's hardliners, including CIA Director William J. Casey, saw the value of using Islamic extremism to undermine the Soviet Union, with its official position of atheism. The CIA and the Saudis worked hand in hand in building the Afghan mujahedeen an Islamic fundamentalist movement to overthrow the Soviet-backed secular government in Kabul.

The “success” of that strategy included severe harm dealt to the struggling Soviet economy and the eventual ouster (and murder) of the Moscow-backed president, Najibullah. But the strategy also gave rise to the Taliban, which took power and installed a medieval regime, and Al Qaeda, which evolved from the Saudi and other foreign fighters (including Saudi Osama bin Laden) who had flocked to the Afghan jihad.

In effect, the Afghan experience created the modern jihadist movement and the Saudis, in particular, understood the value of this paramilitary force to punish governments and political groups that the Saudis and their oil-rich friends considered threats. Officially, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other Sunni oil states could claim that they weren't behind the terrorists while letting money and arms slip through.

Though Al Qaeda and the other jihadists had their own agendas and could take independent action the Saudis and other sheiks could direct these paramilitary forces against the so-called “Shiite crescent,” from Iran through Syria to Lebanon (and after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, against Iraq's Shiite government as well).

At times, the jihadists also proved useful for the United States and Israel, striking at Hezbollah in Lebanon, fighting for “regime change” in Syria, collaborating in the 2011 ouster (and murder) of Libya's Muammar Gaddafi, even joining forces with the U.S.-backed Ukrainian government to kill ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine.

Israeli Role

Since these Sunni jihadists were most adept at killing Shiites, they endeared themselves not only to their Saudi, Qatari and Kuwaiti benefactors, but also to Israel, which has identified Shiite-ruled Iran as its greatest strategic threat. Thus, the American neocons, who collaborate closely with Israel's right-wing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, had mixed attitudes toward the Sunni jihadists, too.

Plus, high-profile terrorism, including the 9/11 attacks, enabled the tough-talking neocons to consolidate their control over U.S. foreign policy, diverting American fury over Al Qaeda's killing nearly 3,000 people in New York and Washington to implement the neocons' “regime change” agenda, first in Iraq though it had nothing to do with 9/11, with plans to move on to Syria and Iran.

As the Military-Industrial Complex made out like bandits with billions upon billions of dollars thrown at the “War on Terror,” grateful military contractors kicked back some profits to major think tanks where neocon thinkers were

employed to develop more militaristic plans. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[A Family Business of Perpetual War.](#)"]

But the downside of this coziness with the Sunni jihadists has been that Al Qaeda and its spinoff, the Islamic State, perceive the West as their ultimate enemy, drawing from both [historic and current injustices](#) inflicted on the Islamic world by Europe and the United States. The terrorist leaders cite this mistreatment to recruit young people from impoverished areas of the Middle East and the urban slums of Europe and get them to strap on suicide-belts.

Thus, Al Qaeda and now the Islamic State not only advance the neocon/Israeli/Saudi agenda by launching terror attacks in Syria against Assad's government and in Lebanon against Hezbollah, but they strike out on their own against U.S. and European targets, even in Africa where Al Qaeda claimed responsibility for last week's murderous assault on an upscale Radisson Blu hotel in Bamako, Mali.

It also appears that Al Qaeda and the Islamic State have entered into a competition over who can stage the bloodiest attacks against Westerners as a way to bolster recruitment. The Bamako attack was an attempt by Al Qaeda to regain the spotlight from the Islamic State which boasted of a vicious string of attacks on Paris, Beirut and a Russian tourist flight in the Sinai.

The consequence of these murderous rampages has been to threaten the political and economic cohesion of Europe and to increase pressures for a strengthened surveillance state inside the United States. In other words, some of the most treasured features of Western civilization personal liberty and relative affluence are being endangered.

Yet, rather than explain the real reasons for this crisis and what the possible solutions might be no one in the U.S. mainstream political world or the major media seems able or willing to talk straight to the American people about how we got here.

Sanders's Lost Opportunity

While you might have expected as much from most Republicans (who have surrounded themselves with neocon advisers) and from Hillary Clinton (who has cultivated her own ties to the neocons and their liberal interventionist sidekicks), you might have hoped that Sanders would have adopted a thoughtful critique of Official Washington's neocon-dominated "group think."

But instead he offers a simplistic and nonsensical prescription of demanding the Saudis do more when that would only inflict more death and destruction on the region and beyond. Arguably, the opposite would make much more sense impose

tough financial sanctions against Saudi Arabia as punishment for its continued support for Al Qaeda and the Islamic State.

Freezing or confiscating Saudi bank accounts around the world might finally impress on the spoiled princes of the Persian Gulf oil states that there is a real price to pay for dabbling in terrorism. Such an action against Saudi Arabia also would send a message to smaller Sunni sheikdoms that they could be next. Other pressures, including possible expulsion from NATO, could be brought to bear on Turkey.

If the West finally got serious about stopping this financial and military support for Al Qaeda, the Islamic State and their jihadist allies in Syria, the violence might finally abate. And, if the United States and Europe put pressure on the “moderate” Syrian opposition whatever there is of it to compromise, a political solution might be possible, too.

Right now, the biggest obstacle to a political agreement appears to be the U.S. insistence that President Assad be barred from elections once Syria achieves some stability. Yet, if President Obama is so certain that the Syrian people hate Assad, it seems crazy to let Assad’s presumed defeat at the polls obstruct such a crucial deal.

The only explanation for this U.S. stubbornness is that the neocons and the liberal hawks have made “regime change” in Syria such a key part of their agenda that they would lose face if Assad’s departure was not mandated. However, with the future of Western civilization in the balance, such obstinate behavior seems not only feckless but reckless.

From understanding how this mess was made, some U.S. politician could fashion an appeal that might have broad popular support across the political spectrum. If Sanders took up this torch for a rational plan for bringing relative peace to the Middle East, he also might shift the dynamics of the Democratic race.

Of course, to challenge Official Washington’s “group think” is always dangerous. If compromise and cooperation suddenly replaced “regime change” as the U.S. goal, the neocons and liberal hawks would flip out. But the stakes are extremely high for the planet’s future. Maybe saving Western civilization is worth the risk of facing down a neocon/liberal-hawk temper tantrum.

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](#)). You also can order Robert Parry’s trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The

trilogy includes *America's Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

A 'See-No-Evil' Drone War

The mainstream U.S. news media has failed miserably in holding the U.S. government to account for the killing of civilians in its drone strikes during the 14-year-old "war on terror," rarely supplying such unpleasant facts even when they become available, writes John Hanrahan.

By John Hanrahan

By now you know the drill: The CIA or U.S. military forces unleash a drone strike or other aerial bombardment in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia or any other country that the United States claims the right to attack.

A U.S. government spokesperson reports 5 or 7 or 17 or 25 or whatever number of "militants" killed, Taliban, or Al Qaeda or ISIS/ISIL/Islamic State fighters, according to its fill-in-the-blanks press release. Wire services, mainstream newspapers, television newscasters dutifully report in brief fashion on another successful drone or missile strike, fulfilling minimal journalistic standards by attributing it to the Pentagon, or intelligence or U.S. government sources, sometimes even naming the spokesperson who issued the news release.

And then, usually nothing. Yes, sometimes someone with a little clout raises a stink, say the Afghan president, or some prominent local official who was an eyewitness to the attack, or Doctors without Borders after the U.S. attack on their Afghanistan hospital in October. (* See footnote.) In such challenges to the Americans' claims of killing only "militants," these pesky eyewitnesses contend that many of those killed were actually noncombatants, even women and children.

But on those occasions when U.S. officials are confronted with too-strong evidence of civilian casualties, they typically issue an apology (while not usually admitting civilians were actually killed), promise an investigation, and then that's the last we ever seem to hear of it in the mainstream press.

Now, an American University (A.U.) academic, Jeff Bachman, has [documented](#) what some readers may have surmised in reading drone news coverage over the years, but didn't have the data to back it up. In examining articles by *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* in the immediate aftermath of U.S. drone strikes between 2009 and 2014, Bachman concluded:

“Both papers have substantially underrepresented the number of civilians killed in drone strikes in Pakistan and Yemen, failed to correct the public record when evidence emerged that their reporting was wrong and ignored the importance of international law.”

Bachman’s research dovetails with *The Intercept*’s recently published “[Drone Papers](#)” articles, which among other things document the U.S. government’s lying to the press and public about the number of noncombatants killed in drone strikes.

Bachman, professional lecturer in human rights and the co-director of Global Affairs M.A. Program at A.U.’s School of International Service, examined a sample of 81 *Times* articles and 26 *Post* articles published within two days of particular drone strikes between 2009 and 2014. He then compared the two papers’ reporting to the research and tracking of drone strikes by the London-based The Bureau of Investigative Journalism (TBIJ). He said he considered TBIJ’s data authoritative “because they used a methodology that has been endorsed by the Center for Civilians in Conflict and Human Rights” at Columbia University’s Law School.

In the drone attacks reported on by *The Times*, TBIJ found civilians killed in 26 of the 81 attacks. *The Times*, though, reported civilians killed in only two of those attacks, Bachman wrote.

Looking at *The Post*’s coverage of drone attacks, Bachman found that TBIJ reported civilians killed in seven of the 26 attacks, while *The Post* reported civilians killed in only one attack.

In the 33 strikes that produced civilian casualties, TBIJ found that between 180 and 302 civilians were killed, yet *Times* and *Post* articles reported on the deaths of only nine civilians in the three stories in which they noted that there were civilian casualties.

“This trend of underreporting of civilian casualties means readers are not being informed of the real consequences of drone strikes in Yemen and Pakistan,” Bachman wrote. “It represents a failure by journalists at these papers to view critical government claims regarding who is killed in particular strikes.”

Even worse, Bachman reports what happened when he contacted both newspapers to question them “about the inaccuracies in their reporting on civilian casualties, and to see whether either newspaper published corrections” about civilian deaths from drone strikes. “The answer from both was that they had not,” he wrote.

Read Bachman’s [article](#) to see the full summary of his findings and the exact comments he reports receiving from *Times* and *Post* representatives. But for one

sample of mainstream media indifference to this issue, consider what Bachman reported he was told by Sylvester Monroe, *The Post's* assistant managing editor.

Monroe, wrote Bachman, "stated that when using 'official sources' it is impossible to 'independently verify which of the dead were members of militant groups and which might have been innocent civilians.'"

According to Bachman, Monroe added this amazing disclosure: "Even if the CIA were to acknowledge that its count was inaccurate, it would not be up to us to run a correction." Let that sink in: *The Post* will apparently not make corrections of a spy agency's lies and misrepresentations even in the unlikely event the agency itself admits them.

Bachman also noted that the term "human rights", and various equivalents, showed up in only five of *The Times's* 81 drone attack stories, and in only one of the 26 *Post* articles. The term "laws of war" or "laws of armed conflict", needed to "place the drone strikes in their international legal context", were not mentioned in any of the articles.

"Without government transparency and accurate reporting, whistleblowers, like the source of *The Intercept's* 'Drone Papers,' are the only source for information that will allow us to understand the real consequences of the drone strikes," Bachman concluded.

*The Oct. 2 multiple U.S. bombings on the Doctor Without Borders hospital in Kunduz, Afghanistan, where at least 30 staff, patients and others were killed, might prove to be that unique case that events will force to be seriously investigated. But don't count on it. In the Kunduz hospital case, eyewitnesses, Westerners/doctors from a highly respected international humanitarian medical organization making allegations that the bombings were deliberate, could not be so easily written off by the Pentagon and our usually incurious mainstream media.

Doctors without Borders has called the multiple bombardments on the hospital a possible war crime and wants the attack investigated by an international inquiry under the Geneva Conventions. Instead, General John F. Campbell, the American commander in Afghanistan, has appointed a two-star general from another command to head what Campbell termed an independent investigation, a far cry from what Doctors Without Borders has called for.

Keeping the investigation within the military's own house makes it much more likely that we may be heading for one of those mistakes-were-made Pentagon reports, rather than a war-crimes-were-committed report. Even this inadequate, conflicted investigative step, though, is far more than usually happens when

ordinary civilians are killed by U.S. attacks and there are no Westerners or credentialed people to witness them.

John Hanrahan, currently on the editorial board of ExposeFacts, is a former executive director of The Fund for Investigative Journalism and reporter for "The Washington Post," The Washington Star, UPI and other news organizations. He also has extensive experience as a legal investigator. Hanrahan is the author of "Government by Contract" and co-author of *Lost Frontier: The Marketing of Alaska*. He wrote extensively for NiemanWatchdog.org, a project of the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University. [This article was originally published by ExposeFacts.org.]

The Brutal Paris Terror Attack

As horrific as the Paris terror attack was, it was not a sophisticated operation engineered by some diabolical mastermind. It was a low-tech, brutal assault that has distracted from a more important debate how to give young, disaffected Muslim men more reason to live writes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

A strong tendency in the wake of major terrorist attacks is to associate the impact the event has on our own fears and thoughts (which generally are correlated with the number of Westerners who died in the incident) with the level of skill and sophistication of the attackers. The skill and sophistication in turn tend to be thought of as associated with the size and strength of some foreign organization that sponsored the attackers.

These presumed associations are false. The plain (and after such incidents, disturbing) fact is that the inherent vulnerabilities in our free and open Western societies are such that it does not require any noteworthy skill or sophistication to kill a lot of people. What it takes are extreme inclinations and a willingness to die in pursuit of malevolent ideas.

The terrorist attacks in Paris illustrate the point. Some organizational aptitude was needed to put together an operation that involved simultaneous dispatch of multiple attack teams, but this did not require organizing any more people than would be needed to put together a neighborhood soccer team.

The death toll for all of the Paris attacks, as shocking as it understandably was, nonetheless was much less than a more skillfully conducted operation involving a comparable number of attackers would have inflicted. The attack team

that went after the most target-rich location, a sports arena with tens of thousands of people, managed to kill only one other person besides themselves. The spraying of bullets in crowded places such as cafes or concert halls is not a high-skill endeavor, especially when the shooters have resigned themselves to being killed as well.

Jack Shafer at *Politico*, who criticizes mainstream media for giving alleged attack organizer Abdelhamid Abaaoud too much credit by labeling him a “mastermind,” observes that earlier failed shooting attacks that Abaaoud was suspected of being behind “took about as much imagination and skill as ordering a pizza.”

Shafer also has done the math to determine that the Paris terrorists inflicted fewer deaths per attacker than did one deranged individual at Sandy Hook Elementary School. That is an apt comparison given the nature of the counterterrorist task that the FBI and other U.S. authorities currently face in trying to prevent mass-casualty attacks in the United States.

Americans attempting to travel to ISIS-controlled territory in Syria and Iraq barely constitute a trickle: an average of only two persons a month since July. Battalions of radicals traveling to and from the ISIS mini-state clearly are not the core of any threat to American security.

As a *New York Times* article about these patterns aptly puts it, “thwarting an Islamic State-inspired attack in the United States” is “less like stopping a traditional terrorist plot and more like trying to prevent a school shooting.” *Washington Post* editorial cartoonist Tom Toles illustrates the same basic point in another way.

As debate rages on about U.S. policy toward Syria, the debate would be more focused and useful if it could dispense with two persistent misconceptions. One is that being a skilled terrorist requires being sponsored and trained by some organization that occupies a piece of land overseas. The other is that inflicting a lot of casualties in a terrorist attack requires being skilled and trained.

Ian Buruma provides a better insight in explaining why countering ISIS-inspired terrorism is more a matter of giving young men with a death wish a reason to live.

The future of the ISIS mini-state certainly is important for multiple reasons, many of which have much more to do with politics and stability in the Middle East than with terrorism in the West. A terrorist-related reason is that the fortunes of the ISIS enclave help determine how much inspiration it provides to

already radicalized individuals and thus is an influence in determining the likelihood of such individuals performing acts that are both suicidal and lethal to others.

It is a mistake to regard the ISIS entity as a font of critical skills needed to kill people.

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.)

The Saudi Connection to Terror

Exclusive: While Official Washington devotes much sound and fury to demands for a wider war in Syria and the need to turn away Syrian refugees, Democrats and Republicans dodge the tougher question: how to confront Saudi Arabia about its covert funding for Islamic State and Al Qaeda terrorists, writes Daniel Lazare.

By Daniel Lazare

How does ISIS pay for its operations? This is the key question as the war against the terror organization advances to a new level in the wake of the Paris atrocities. But the mainstream's approved answer is part of the problem.

That approved answer, from many political leaders and assorted "terrorism experts," is that ISIS (also known as ISIL, Islamic State and Daesh) funds its operations through a variety of illicit activities such as illegal antiquity sales, kidnapping for ransom, holding up banks, and peddling crude from oil fields it controls in northern Syria and Iraq.

The line, dutifully parroted by news outlets from *The New York Times* to *The Wall Street Journal* and the *Guardian*, is nothing if not politically convenient. If ISIS is truly self-supporting, then it's essentially self-contained. If so, then all the Western powers have to do once they've sealed it off in its self-proclaimed caliphate is to send in the F-18's and Mirage 2000's to rain down smart bombs and blow it to smithereens.

This is the thinking behind President Barack Obama's unfortunate remarks on Nov. 12. When ABC *This Week* host George Stephanopoulos asked whether ISIS was gaining strength, Obama shot back that it was simply not the case:

“What is true is that from the start, our goal has been first to contain, and we have contained them. They have not gained ground in Iraq. And in Syria they’ll come in, they’ll leave. But you don’t see this systematic march by ISIL across the terrain. What we have not yet been able to do is to completely decapitate their command-and-control structures. We’ve made some progress in trying to reduce the flow of foreign fighters.”

Contain and decapitate this the essence of the U.S. strategy. Hence, the more the Obama administration tries to contain ISIS militarily, the more it puts out word that it is also self-sustaining economically.

But what if it isn’t? In fact, there is every reason to be skeptical of the U.S. position and not only because American leaders have been claiming success for close to two decades in various struggles against Islamic terrorism even as it has morphed from a few scattered cells to a vast movement stretching from Nigeria to Bangladesh.

Exaggerating the Sums

So let’s start with antiquities. Last year, NBC News breathlessly reported that ISIS was tapping into a \$7 billion underground market in order to finance its operations. “Priceless pieces of history snatched from illicit diggings or swiped from museum cases have become one of the four most common commodities – next to drugs, weapons and human beings – to be trafficked by smugglers,” it declared.

But the \$7 billion total is dubious considering that the contemporary art market, entirely above board of course, amounts to only \$2 billion. Black markets are all but impossible to measure for the simple reason that participants scatter like rats as soon as the lights go on.

ISIS’s role, moreover, is doubly difficult since it operates under deep cover. But we do know a few things, one of which is that antiquities do not move as easily as, say, corn or wheat. To the contrary, buyers are relatively few and far between, appraisals are required, and haggling is standard. With so many police snooping around, buyers are especially wary of getting caught funneling money to ISIS. So the role of antiquities would seem to be no more than ancillary.

The same goes for bank heists. Although ISIS was widely credited with making off with \$400 million when it took Mosul, in northern Iraq, in July 2014, *The Financial Times* described the seizure as the biggest heist that “never happened.”

“We speak to the banks there all the time,” it quoted an Iraqi banking official

as saying. “We have been informed that all are guarded from the outside by their own guards and that nothing has been removed from the premises of any banks, not even a piece of paper.”

Kidnapping for ransom also seems less than lucrative in an economy inside ISIS-controlled territory that is going increasingly downhill. Ditto local taxation. While illicit oil sales may play an important role, they are also probably not as profitable as believed. Assuming they were filled to the brim, the 116 tanker trucks that U.S. planes destroyed on Monday may have contained a hundred barrels of crude each, oil that, at today’s prices, ISIS would be lucky to sell for around \$30 a barrel. Thus, the damage to the Islamic State’s “treasury” weighs in at a relatively minor \$350,000 or so.

Moreover, ISIS is by now a very large operation. Troop-size estimates start at 20,000 to 31,500 (figures put out by the C.I.A. in September 2014) and go as high as 200,000, although 100,000 seems more plausible. Fighters reportedly earn anywhere from \$350 a month to \$800 or more. These are very imprecise numbers, but at the very least they suggest an organization with a monthly budget in the tens of millions.

So the proceeds from a hundred-odd oil trucks doesn’t explain how ISIS pays its bills. Nor does the speculation about ISIS’s antiquity sales. So if Islamic State does not get the bulk of its funds from such sources, where does the money come from?

The Saudi Connection

The politically inconvenient answer is from the outside, i.e., from other parts of the Middle East where the oil fields are not marginal as they are in northern Syria and Iraq, but, rather, rich and productive; where refineries are state of the art, and where oil travels via pipeline instead of in trucks. It is also a market in which corruption is massive, financial controls are lax, and ideological sympathies for both ISIS and Al Qaeda run strong.

This means the Arab Gulf states of Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia, countries with massive reserves of wealth despite a 50-percent plunge in oil prices. The Gulf states are politically autocratic, militantly Sunni, and, moreover, are caught in a painful ideological bind.

Worldwide, Sunnis outnumber Shi’ites by at least four to one. But among the eight nations ringing the Persian Gulf, the situation is reversed, with Shi’ites outnumbering Sunnis by nearly two to one. The more theocratic the world grows and theocracy is a trend not only in the Muslim world, but in India, Israel and even the U.S. if certain Republicans get their way the more

sectarianism intensifies.

At its most basic, the Sunni-Shi'ite conflict is a war of succession among followers of Muhammad, who died in the Seventh Century. The more one side gains political control in the name of Islam, consequently, the more vulnerable it becomes to accusations from the other side that its claim to power is less than legitimate.

The Saudi royal family, which styles itself as the "custodian of the two holy mosques" of Mecca and Medina, is especially sensitive to such accusations, if only because its political position seems to be growing more and more precarious. This is why it has thrown itself into an anti-Shi'ite crusade from Yemen to Bahrain to Syria.

While the U.S., Britain and France condemn Bashar al-Assad as a dictator, that's not why Sunni rebels are now fighting to overthrow him. They are doing so instead because, as an Alawite, a form of Shi'ism, he belongs to a branch of Islam that the petro-sheiks in Riyadh regard as a challenge to their very existence.

Civil war is rarely a moderating force, and as the struggle against Assad has intensified, power among the rebels has shifted to the most militant Sunni forces, up to and including Al Qaeda and its even more aggressive rival, ISIS.

In other words, the Islamic State is not homegrown and self-reliant, but a product and beneficiary of larger forces, essentially a proxy, paramilitary army of Gulf state sheiks. Evidence of broad regional support is abundant even if news outlets like *The New York Times* have done their best to ignore it. Some of the highlights of this money trail:

—In a 2009 diplomatic memo made public by Wikileaks, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated that "donors in Saudi Arabia constitute the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide."

(On Thursday, in a hawkish speech to the Council on Foreign Relations, Clinton, now the frontrunner for the Democratic presidential nomination, focused on her plan for military escalation, including a U.S. invasion of Syria to "impose no-fly zones" and secure what she called a "safe area." But she added a brief and exasperated reference to the financial reality, saying: "once and for all, the Saudis, the Qataris and others need to stop their citizens from directly funding extremist organizations as well as the schools and mosques around the world that have set too many young people on a path to radicalization.")

—An August 2012 report by the Defense Intelligence Agency stating that Al Qaeda, Salafists, and the Muslim Brotherhood dominated the Syrian rebel movement and

that their goal was to establish a “Salafist principality in eastern Syria” where Islamic State’s caliphate is now located.

–The *Times*’s own report two months earlier stating that the C.I.A. was working with the Muslim Brotherhood to channel Turkish-, Saudi- and Qatari-supplied arms to Sunni rebels in Syria.

–Vice President Joe Biden’s remarkable admission at Harvard’s Kennedy School in October 2014 that “the Saudis, the emirates, etc. were so determined to take down Assad and essentially have a proxy Sunni-Shia war [that] they poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of thousands of tons of military weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad except the people who were being supplied were Al Nusra and Al Qaeda.”

–A *Times* editorial just last month complaining that Saudis, Qataris and Kuwaitis were continuing to channel donations to Islamic State.

–Finally, in a front-page article on Friday, the *Times* belatedly acknowledged the devastating DIA report, a mere six months after it was made public by the conservative watchdog group Judicial Watch. But even then, reporter Ian Fisher managed to leave out the most important part, which is that the Salafist stronghold that the Sunnis were seeking to establish is “exactly what the supporting powers to the opposition” i.e. the West, the Gulf states, and Turkey “want in order to isolate the Syrian regime.”

In asserting that there are “many strands of blame” in the ongoing debacle, Fisher managed to criticize everyone except his own paper.

Money Talks

Why is telling the truth so difficult? A big part of the answer is money. Because the U.S., France and other Western powers are dependent on the Gulf states for oil and see the Gulf states as an increasingly important market for high-tech weaponry.

Just last month, the Pentagon announced that it was selling to the Saudis up to four Littoral Combat Ships made by Lockheed for a total of \$11.25 billion, while last week it followed up with the news that it was selling the Saudis \$1.29 billion worth of smart bombs manufactured by Boeing and Raytheon to replace those the kingdom has dropped on Yemen as part of its crusade against the Shi’ite Houthis.

The U.S. thus supplies the Saudis with bombs with which to flatten Yemeni neighborhoods, generate more refugees and, in the process, strengthen “Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula” so that the U.S. can then send in drones to take out a

few Al Qaeda operatives.

Everyone makes out arms manufacturers, the Pentagon, Washington politicians like the Clintons who benefit from Saudi largesse, even Al Qaeda, which, while it may lose a few personnel, sees its power grow as a consequence.

Making too big a point about how money from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states is flowing to groups responsible for the carnage in Paris would put at risk this mutual-benefit society. Jeopardizing this lucrative money cycle is something that Washington cannot bear to do, which is why the Obama administration prefers to make ISIS appear to be a self-supporting operation that can be crippled by such military actions as bombing a convoy of oil trucks.

While Europe explodes with xenophobia, the real issue is not the Arabs or Islam, but the “special” U.S.-Saudi relationship which may be even more sacrosanct than the relationship with Israel. It is an alliance that demands of the U.S. that it see, hear and speak no evil about its major Arab partner. Hence, Washington must cover up the real cause of the horrors ranging from the World Trade Center to the Bataclan concert hall to the Syrian civil war.

As long as this U.S.-Saudi “special” relationship continues, the bodies will keep piling up.

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

Tangled Threads of US False Narratives

Exclusive: Official Washington’s many false narratives about Russia and Syria have gotten so tangled that they have become a danger to the struggle against Sunni jihadist terrorism and conceivably a threat to the future of the planet, a risk that Robert Parry explores.

By Robert Parry

One way to view Official Washington is to envision a giant bubble that serves as a hothouse for growing genetically modified “group thinks.” Most inhabitants of the bubble praise these creations as glorious and beyond reproach, but a few dissenters note how strange and dangerous these products are. Those critics, however, are then banished from the bubble, leaving behind an evermore concentrated consensus.

This process could be almost comical as the many armchair warriors repeat What Everyone Knows to Be True as self-justifying proof that more and more wars and confrontations are needed but the United States is the most powerful nation on earth and its fallacious “group thinks” are spreading a widening arc of chaos and death around the globe.

We even have presidential candidates, especially among the Republicans but including former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, competing to out-bellicose each other, treating an invasion of Syria as the least one can do and some even bragging about how they might like to shoot down a few Russian warplanes.

Though President Barack Obama has dragged his heels regarding some of the more extreme proposals, he still falls in line with the “group think,” continuing to insist on “regime change” in Syria (President Bashar al-Assad “must go”), permitting the supply of sophisticated weapons to Sunni jihadists (including TOW anti-tank missiles to Ahrar ash-Sham, a jihadist group founded by Al Qaeda veterans and fighting alongside Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front), and allowing his staff to personally insult Russian President Vladimir Putin (having White House spokesman Josh Earnest in September demean Putin’s posture for sitting with his legs apart during a Kremlin meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu).

Not surprisingly, I guess, Earnest’s prissy disapproval of what is commonly called “man spread” didn’t extend to Netanyahu who adopted the same open-leg posture in the meeting with Putin on Sept. 21 and again in last week’s meeting with Obama, who it should be noted sat with his legs primly crossed.

This combination of tough talk, crude insults and reckless support of Al Qaeda-connected jihadis (“our guys”) apparently has become *de rigueur* in Official Washington, which remains dominated by the foreign policy ideology of neoconservatives, who established the goal of “regime change” in Iraq, Syria and Iran as early as 1996 and haven’t changed course since. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “How Neocons Destabilized Europe.”]

Shaping Narratives

Despite the catastrophic Iraq War based on neocon-driven falsehoods about WMD and the complicit unthinking “group think” the neocons retained their influence largely through an alliance with “liberal interventionists” and their combined domination of major Washington think tanks, from the American Enterprise Institute to the Brookings Institution, and the mainstream U.S. news media, including The Washington Post and The New York Times.

This power base has allowed the neocons to continue shaping Official

Washington's narratives regardless of what the actual facts are. For instance, [a Post editorial](#) on Thursday repeated the claim that Assad's "atrocities" included use of chemical weapons, an apparent reference to [the now largely discredited claim](#) that Assad's forces were responsible for a sarin gas attack outside Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013.

After the attack, there was a rush to judgment by the U.S. State Department blaming Assad's troops and leading Secretary of State John Kerry to threaten retaliatory strikes against the Syrian military. But U.S. intelligence analysts refused to sign on to the hasty conclusions, contributing to President Obama's last-minute decision to hold off on a bombing campaign and to accept Putin's help in negotiating Assad's surrender of all Syrian chemical weapons (though Assad still denied a role in the sarin attack).

Subsequently, much of the slapdash case for bombing Syria fell apart. As more evidence became available, it increasingly appeared that the sarin attack was a provocation by Sunni jihadists, possibly aided by Turkish intelligence, to trick the United States into destroying Assad's military and thus clearing the way for a Sunni jihadist victory.

We now know that the likely beneficiaries of such a U.S. attack would have been Al Qaeda's Nusra Front and the spinoff known as the Islamic State (also called ISIS, ISIL or Daesh). But the Obama administration never formally retracted its spurious sarin claims, thus allowing irresponsible media outlets, such as The Washington Post, to continue citing the outdated "group think."

The same Post editorial denounced Assad for using "barrel bombs" against the Sunni rebels who are seeking to overthrow his secular government, which is viewed as the protector of Syria's minorities including Christians, Alawites and Shiites who could face genocide if the Sunni extremists prevail.

Though this "barrel bomb" theme has become a favorite talking point of both the neocons and liberal "human rights" groups, it's never been clear how these homemade explosive devices shoved out of helicopters are any more inhumane than the massive volumes of "shock and awe" ordnance, including 500-pound bombs, deployed by the U.S. military across the Middle East, killing not only targeted fighters but innocent civilians.

Nevertheless, the refrain "barrel bombs" is accepted across Official Washington as a worthy argument for launching devastating airstrikes against Syrian government targets, even if such attacks clear the way for Al Qaeda's allies and offshoots gaining control of Damascus and unleashing even a worse humanitarian cataclysm. [See Consortiumnews.com's ["Obama's Ludicrous 'Barrel Bomb' Theme."](#)]

False-Narrative Knots

But it is now almost impossible for Official Washington to disentangle itself from all the false narratives that the neocons and the liberal hawks have spun in support of their various “regime change” strategies. Plus, there are few people left inside the bubble who even recognize how false these narratives are.

So, the American people are left with the mainstream U.S. news media endlessly repeating storylines that are either completely false or highly exaggerated. For instance, we hear again and again that the Russians intervened in the Syrian conflict promising to strike only ISIS but then broke their word by attacking Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front and “our guys” in Sunni jihadist forces armed by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and the CIA.

Though you hear this narrative everywhere in Official Washington, no one ever actually quotes Putin or another senior Russian official promising to strike only at ISIS. In all the quotes that I’ve seen, the Russians refer to attacking “terrorists,” including but not limited to ISIS.

Unless Official Washington no longer regards Al Qaeda as a terrorist organization a trial balloon that some neocons have floated then the Putin-lied narrative makes no sense, even though every Important Person Knows It to Be True, including Obama’s neocon-leaning Defense Secretary Ashton Carter.

The U.S. political and media big shots also mock the current Russian-Iranian proposal for first stabilizing Syria and then letting the Syrian people decide their own leadership through internationally observed democratic elections.

Okay, you might say, what’s wrong with letting the Syrian people go to the polls and pick their own leaders? But that just shows that you’re a Russian-Iranian “apologist” who doesn’t belong inside the bubble. The Right Answer is that “Assad Must Go!” whatever the Syrian people might think.

Or, as the snarky neocon editors of The Washington Post wrote on Thursday, “Mr. Putin duly dispatched his foreign minister to talks in Vienna last weekend on a Syrian political settlement. But Moscow and Tehran continue to push for terms that would leave Mr. Assad in power for 18 months or longer, while, in theory, a new constitution is drafted and elections organized. Even a U.S. proposal that Mr. Assad be excluded from the eventual elections was rejected, according to Iranian officials.”

In other words, the U.S. government doesn’t want the Syrian people to decide whether Assad should be kicked out, an odd and contradictory stance since President Obama keeps insisting that the vast majority of Syrians hate Assad. If that’s indeed the case, why not let free-and-fair elections prove the point? Or

is Obama so enthralled by the neocon insistence of “regime change” for governments on Israel’s “hit list” that he doesn’t want to take the chance of the Syrian voters getting in the way?

Reality Tied Down

But truth and reality have become in Official Washington something like Gulliver being tied down by the Lilliputians. There are so many strands of lies and distortions that it’s impossible for sanity to rise up.

Another major factor in America’s crisis of false narratives relates to the demonizing of Russia and Putin, a process that dates back in earnest to 2013 when Putin helped Obama sidetrack the neocon dream of bombing Syria and then Putin compounded his offense by assisting Obama in getting Iran to constrain its nuclear program, which derailed another neocon dream to bomb-bomb-bomb Iran.

It became ominously clear to the neocons that this collaboration between the two presidents might even lead to joint pressure on Israel to finally reach a peace agreement with the Palestinians, a possibility that struck too close to the heart of neocon thinking which, for the past two decades, has favored using “regime change” in nearby countries to isolate and starve Lebanon’s Hezbollah and Palestinian groups, giving Israel a free hand to do whatever it wished.

So, this Obama-Putin relationship had to be blown up and the point of detonation was Ukraine on Russia’s border. Official Washington’s false narratives around the Ukraine crisis are now also central to neocon/liberal-hawk efforts to prevent meaningful coordination between Obama and Putin in countering ISIS and Al Qaeda in Syria and Iraq.

Inside Official Washington’s bubble, the crisis in Ukraine is routinely described as a simple case of Russian “aggression” against Ukraine, including an “invasion” of Crimea.

If you relied on The New York Times or The Washington Post or the major networks that repeat what the big newspapers say, you wouldn’t know there was a U.S.-backed coup in February 2014 that overthrew the elected Ukrainian government of Viktor Yanukovich, even after he agreed to a European compromise in which he surrendered many powers and accepted early elections.

Instead of letting that agreement go forward, right-wing ultra-nationalists, including neo-Nazis operating inside the Maidan protests, overran government buildings in Kiev on Feb. 22, 2014, causing Yanukovich and other leaders to flee for their lives.

Behind the scenes, U.S. officials, such as neocon Assistant Secretary of State

for European Affairs Victoria Nuland, had collaborated in the coup plans and celebrated the victory by Nuland's handpicked leaders, including the post-coup Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, whom she referred to in an earlier intercepted phone call as "Yats is the guy."

Nor would you know that the people of Crimea had voted overwhelmingly for President Yanukovich and after the coup voted overwhelmingly to get out of the failed Ukrainian state and reunify with Russia.

The major U.S. news media twists that reality into a Russian "invasion" of Crimea even though it was the strangest "invasion" ever because there were no photos of Russian troops landing on the beaches or parachuting from the skies. What the Post and the Times routinely ignored was that Russian troops were already stationed inside Crimea as part of a basing agreement for the Russian fleet at Sevastopol. They didn't need to "invade."

And Crimea's referendum showing 96 percent approval for reunification with Russia though hastily arranged was not the "sham" that the U.S. mainstream media claimed. Indeed, the outcome has been reinforced by various polls conducted by Western agencies since then.

The MH-17 Case

The demonization of Putin reached new heights after the July 17, 2014 shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over eastern Ukraine killing all 298 people onboard. Although substantial evidence and logic point to elements of the Ukrainian military as responsible, Official Washington's rush to judgment blamed ethnic Russian rebels for firing the missile and Putin for supposedly giving them a powerful Buk anti-aircraft missile system.

That twisted narrative often relied on restating the irrelevant point that the Buks are "Russian-made," which was used to implicate Moscow but was meaningless since the Ukrainian military also possessed Buk missiles. The real question was who fired the missiles, not where they were made.

But the editors of the Post, the Times and the rest of the mainstream media think you are very stupid, so they keep emphasizing that the Buks are "Russian-made." The more salient point is that U.S. intelligence with all its satellite and other capabilities was unable both before and after the shoot-down to find evidence that the Russians had given Buks to the rebels.

Since the Buk missiles are 16-foot-long and hauled around by slow-moving trucks, it is hard to believe that U.S. intelligence would not have spotted them given the intense surveillance then in effect over eastern Ukraine.

A more likely scenario of the MH-17 shoot-down was that Ukraine moved several of its Buk batteries to the frontlines, possibly fearing a Russian airstrike, and the operators were on edge after a Ukrainian warplane was shot down along the border on July 16, 2014, by an air-to-air missile presumably fired by a Russian plane.

But after rushing out a white paper five days after the tragedy pointing the finger at Moscow the U.S. government has refused to provide any evidence or intelligence that might help pinpoint who fired the missile that brought down MH-17.

Despite this remarkable failure by the U.S. government to cooperate with the investigation, the mainstream U.S. media has found nothing suspicious about this dog not barking and continues to cite the MH-17 case as another reason to despise Putin.

How upside-down this “Everything Is Putin’s Fault” can be was displayed in a New York Times “news analysis” by Steven Erlanger and Peter Baker on Thursday when all the “fundamental disagreements” between Obama and Putin were blamed on Putin.

“Dividing them are the Russian annexation of Crimea and its meddling in eastern Ukraine, Moscow’s efforts to demonize Washington and undermine confidence in NATO’s commitment to collective defense, and the Kremlin’s support of President Bashar al-Assad of Syria,” Erlanger and Baker wrote.

Helping ISIS

This tangle of false narratives is now tripping up the prospects of a U.S.-French-Russian-Iranian alliance to take on the Islamic State, Al Qaeda and other Sunni jihadist forces seeking to overthrow Syria’s secular government.

The neocon Washington Post, in particular, has been venomous about this potential collaboration which while possibly the best chance to finally resolve the horrific Syrian conflict would torpedo the neocons’ long-held vision of imposed “regime change” in Syria.

In editorials, the Post’s neocon editors also have displayed a stunning lack of sympathy for the 224 Russian tourists and crew killed in what appears to have been a terrorist bombing of a chartered plane over the Sinai in Egypt.

On Nov. 7, instead of expressing solidarity, the Post’s editors ridiculed Putin and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi for not rushing to a judgment that it was an act of terrorism, instead insisting on first analyzing the evidence. The Post also mocked the two leaders for failing to vanquish the terrorists.

Or as the Post's editors put it: "While Mr. Putin suspended Russian flights on [Nov. 6], his spokesman was still insisting there was no reason to conclude that there had been an act of terrorism. While Western governments worried about protecting their citizens, the Sissi and Putin regimes were focused on defending themselves.

"Both rulers have sold themselves as warriors courageously taking on the Islamic State and its affiliates; both are using that fight as a pretext to accomplish other ends, such as repressing peaceful domestic opponents and distracting attention from declining living standards. On the actual battlefield, both are failing."

Given the outpouring of sympathy that the United States received after the 9/11 attacks and the condolences that flooded France over the past week, it is hard to imagine a more graceless reaction to a major terrorist attack against innocent Russians.

As for the Russian hesitancy to jump to conclusions earlier this month, that may have been partially wishful thinking but it surely is not an evil trait to await solid evidence before reaching a verdict. Even the Post's editors admitted that U.S. officials noted that as of Nov. 7 there was "no conclusive evidence that the plane was bombed."

But the Post couldn't wait to link the terrorist attack to "Mr. Putin's Syrian adventure" and hoped that it would inflict on Putin "a potentially grievous political wound." The Post's editors also piled on with the gratuitous claim that Russian officials "still deny the overwhelming evidence that a Russian anti-aircraft missile downed a Malaysian airliner over Ukraine last year." (There it is again, the attempt to dupe Post readers with a reference to "a Russian anti-aircraft missile.")

The Post seemed to take particular joy in the role of U.S. weapons killing Syrian and Iranian soldiers. On Thursday, the Post wrote, "Syrian and Iranian troops have lost scores of Russian-supplied tanks and armored vehicles to the rebels' U.S.-made TOW missiles. Having failed to recapture significant territory, the Russian mission appears doomed to quagmire or even defeat in the absence of a diplomatic bailout."

Upping the Ante

The neocons' determination to demonize Putin has upped the ante, turning their Mideast obsession with "regime change" into a scheme for destabilizing Russia and forcing "regime change" in Moscow, setting the stage for a potential nuclear showdown that could end all life on the planet.

To listen to the rhetoric from most Republican candidates and Democratic frontrunner Hillary Clinton, it is not hard to envision how all the tough talk could take on a life of its own and lead to catastrophe. [See, for instance, Philip Giraldi's [review](#) of the "war with Russia" rhetoric free-flowing on the campaign trail and around Official Washington.]

At this point, it may seem fruitless even naive to suggest ways to pierce the various "group thinks" and the bubble that sustains them. But a counter-argument to the fake narratives is possible if some candidate seized on the principle of an informed electorate as vital to democracy.

An argument for empowering citizens with facts is one that transcends traditional partisan and ideological boundaries. Whether on the right, on the left or in the center, Americans don't want to be treated like cattle being herded by propaganda or "strategic communication" or whatever the latest euphemism is for deception and manipulation.

So, a candidate could do the right thing and the smart thing by demanding the release of as much U.S. intelligence information to cut this Gordian knot of false narratives as possible. For instance, it is way past time to declassify the 28 pages from the congressional 9/11 report addressing alleged Saudi support for the hijackers. There also are surely more recent intelligence estimates on the funding of Al Qaeda's affiliates and spin-offs, including ISIS.

If this information embarrasses some "allies" such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey so be it. If this history makes some past or present U.S. president look bad, so be it. American elections are diminished, if not made meaningless, when there is no informed electorate.

A presidential candidate also could press President Obama to disclose what U.S. intelligence knows about other key turning points in the establishment of false narratives, such as what did CIA analysts conclude about the Aug. 21, 2013 sarin attack and what do they know about the July 17, 2014 shoot-down of MH-17.

The pattern of the U.S. government exploiting emotional moments to gain an edge in an "info-war" against some "enemy" and then going silent as more evidence comes in has become a direct threat to American democracy and in regards to nuclear-armed Russia possibly the planet.

Legitimate secrets, such as sources and methods, can be protected without becoming an all-purpose cloak to cover up whatever facts don't fit with the desired propaganda narrative that is then used to whip the public into some mindless war frenzy.

However, at this point in the presidential campaign, no candidate is making

transparency an issue. Yet, after the deceptions of the Iraq War and with the prospects of another war based on misleading or selective information in Syria and potentially a nuclear showdown with Russia it seems to me that the American people would respond positively to someone treating them with the respect deserving of citizens in a democratic Republic.

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](#)). You also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America's Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

How Russians See the West and Russia

The U.S. mainstream media's recent depictions of Russia amount to little more than crass propaganda, including the inside-out insistence that it is the Russian people who are the ones brainwashed by their government's propaganda. Author Natylie Baldwin found a different reality in a tour of Russian cities.

By Natylie Baldwin

After a year and a half of conducting research on Russia, the world's largest country, mostly for [a book](#) I co-authored on the history of post-Soviet U.S.-Russia relations and its context for the Ukraine conflict, it was time for me to finally go see this beautiful, fascinating and complex nation in person and to meet its people on their own terms and territory.

On this maiden voyage to Russia, I visited six cities in two weeks: Moscow, Simferopol, Yalta, Sevastopol, Krasnodar and St. Petersburg. In each city, I talked to a cross-section of people, from cab drivers and bus riders to civil society workers, professionals, and entrepreneurs of small- to medium-sized businesses.

I even had an opportunity to hear what teenagers had to say in two of those cities as my travel mate and I participated in a Q&A session with students of a private high school in St. Petersburg and teens who were part of various youth clubs in Krasnodar. Their questions reflected a thoughtful engagement with the world as they led to discussions on environmental sustainability, socially responsible economics and how to promote initiative, goodwill and peaceful

conflict resolution.

Many of the adults were no less thoughtful during the formal interviews and informal conversations I had with them. Admittedly, I wondered how I would be received as an American during one of the most acrimonious periods of U.S.-Russia relations since the end of the Cold War.

It helped that my travel mate has been going in and out of Russia since the 1980s, lives part-time in St. Petersburg, and has developed good relations with many Russians across the country. Once most Russians realized that I came in goodwill and did not approach them or their country with a superiority complex, they usually responded with some combination of curiosity, honesty and hospitality.

Below is a summary of what Russians that I spoke to thought about a range of issues, from their leader to their economy to the Ukraine war, Western media's portrayal of them and what they wanted to say to Americans.

What Russians Think About Putin

In every place I visited in Russia, there was a consistent attitude among the people on a number of significant issues. First of all, there was consensus that the Yeltsin era in the 1990s was an unmitigated disaster for Russia, resulting in massive poverty, an explosion in crime, the theft of the Soviet Union's resources and assets by a small number of well-connected Russians who went on to become the oligarchs, and the worst mortality crisis since World War II.

As Victor Kramarenko, an engineer and foreign trade relations specialist during the Soviet period and, more recently, a years-long executive with a major American corporation in Moscow, explained the Yeltsin era: "The Russian economy was devastated. We went from being an industrial power that defeated the Nazis, showed resilience, rebuilt quickly, and had great achievements in aviation and space to a place where morale collapsed and a lack of trust and a pirate mentality emerged."

I learned from my interviews that Russians credit Vladimir Putin with taking the helm of a nation that was on the verge of collapse in 2000 and restoring order, increasing living standards five-fold, investing in infrastructure, and taking the first steps toward reigning in the oligarchy. Many stated that they wished Putin would do more to decrease corruption.

A couple of people I spoke to said they believed that Putin would like to do more on this front but has to work within certain limitations at the top. However, according to a recent report by Russian news magazine, *Expert*, Putin may be initiating a serious anti-corruption drive using a secret Russian

police unit that is outsmarting corrupt officials who are used to evading investigation and accountability. Time will tell how successful and far-reaching this turns out to be.

Russians also think Putin has been a good role model in certain respects. As Natasha Ivanova told me over lunch at an Uzbek restaurant in Krasnodar, "He's fit and doesn't drink alcohol or smoke. Now you see young people more interested in sports and fitness and not smoking and drinking."

After the mortality crisis of the 1990s when millions of Russians died premature deaths from heart problems and complications from alcoholism, this development is celebrated. Natasha Ivanova's friend, Anna, chimed in, "Putin's also orderly and has common sense."

Natasha Shidlovskaja, an ethnic Russian who grew up in western Ukraine and now lives in St. Petersburg, admires Putin's sharp mind: "He's very smart. His speech is very structured and organized. When a person speaks, you know how he thinks."

Jacek Popiel, a writer and consultant with first-hand experience in Russia and the former Soviet Union, has commented on the Russian historical experience of constant invasions and periodic famines and how it has shaped their view of government and leadership: "Russians will readily accept an authoritarian government because such is needed when national survival is at stake – which, in Russia's history, has been a recurring situation."

But Russian acceptance of powerful central authority also includes a check on it. This is the concept of *Pravda*. The literal translation of this word is "truth," but it has a deeper and wider significance – something like "justice" or "the right order of things." This means that while accepting authority and its demands, Russians nevertheless require that such authority be guided by moral principle. If authority fails to demonstrate this they will, in time, rise against it or remove it.

A group of professionals in Krasnodar echoed this when they insisted during a discussion one evening that a strong leader was needed to get things done, but the leader needed to be responsible to the people and their needs. Most believed that Putin successfully met this criteria as is confirmed by his nearly 90 percent approval rating. Moreover, when the subject of freedom and its definition was raised, one participant asked, "Does freedom presuppose a framework of rules and order? Or does it just mean that everyone does whatever they want?"

One criticism I heard from two women in Krasnodar was disappointment that Putin

had divorced, particularly in the same time frame as when he'd declared "The Year of the Family."

Another four women, who were involved in civil society work, were upset that some authentic Russian non-governmental organizations (or NGO's) were getting caught in the dragnet of the foreign agents law – legislation they understood was motivated by a desire to crack down on provocateurs associated with the National Endowment for Democracy.

But, due to the effects it was having on genuine NGO's in the country, they believe the law is ultimately a mistake. Three of the four were prepared to continue their work, including reform of the law's implementation, while the fourth was considering leaving Russia.

Economic Conditions

Russians acknowledge that they are in a recession and attribute it to a combination of sanctions, low oil prices and lack of economic diversity and access to credit. But they generally do not blame Putin and did not express despair, or resentment that money was being invested in Crimea. Instead, they are putting their heads down, adapting and getting through it.

As the participants at the Krasnodar meeting of professionals explained, Russian entrepreneurs were becoming more creative by forming cooperatives to get new ventures off the ground; for example, finding one person in their network who has access to raw materials and another who has needed skills.

Despite what some commentators in the western corporate media have said, Russians are not going hungry. I saw plenty of food in the markets and some Russians told me that there were pretty much the same everyday products on store shelves as before, they just noticed higher prices due to inflation, which has started to come down. That downward trend is expected to continue into 2016, according to the International Monetary Fund.

We ate out frequently during our stay and most restaurants were doing decent business while some were very busy, including during non-rush hours. I did not notice any significant number of vacant or shuttered buildings, although many were under renovation. Russians in every city I visited were as well dressed as people in American cities and suburbs and looked as healthy (although, I noted fewer overweight people in Russia).

And, alas, the smart phone was nearly as ubiquitous among Russian youth as American.

Ukraine, Crimea and Foreign Policy

Almost everyone I spoke with strongly supported what they view as Putin's calm but decisive policies of standing up to major provocations from the West, including attempts to exploit historical ethnic and political divisions in Ukraine, resulting in the illegitimate removal of a democratically elected leader.

Kramarenko explained a sentiment I've often heard from Russians about the high hopes they had after the end of the Cold War and how Russians have subsequently become disillusioned over the years with the actions of Washington policymakers. It also helps one to understand the more negative attitudes toward the West that the independent polling agency, Levada Center, has reported in recent months:

"'Back to the civilized world.' That was the motto. Russians were fairly open about wanting to cooperate and integrate [with the West]. But they have gotten three wake-up calls over the years. The first was the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia. It was painful and wrong but we figured 'let bygones be bygones.' The second wake-up call was the Sochi Olympics. I worked with a sponsor and there was a flood of anti-Russian sentiment, Russia was always in the wrong. Russians asked why do they characterize us so black when it doesn't correspond to reality? Ukraine was the third wake-up call. We were under no illusions about Yanukovyich's corruption, but the turning point came when the [Maidan] protests became violent and the police were attacked. There was a split among Russian intellectuals at that point, but the general people turned against it."

Volodya Shestakov, a lifelong resident of St. Petersburg, agrees:

"Yanukovich was extremely corrupt and ripe for a revolt. The original Maidan protesters wanted to get rid of oligarchy, but they didn't get less oligarchy. The Ukrainian economy is in very bad shape. Western corporations like Monsanto planned to go in. There are also shale gas deposits. It will be an environmental nightmare. [Current President Petro] Poroshenko is a puppet of Washington."

The conclusion that Kiev's current leadership consists of Washington lackeys came up often in conversations with both continental Russians and Crimeans. Tatyana, a professional tour guide from Yalta, a resort city in Crimea, told me:

"No one asked us if we wanted to go along with Maidan. There are Russians as well as people who are a mix of Russian and Ukrainian here. We are not against Ukraine as many of us have relatives there, but Maidan was not simply a spontaneous protest. We are aware of the phone call with Victoria Nuland and Geoffrey Pyatt, we saw the photos of her with Yatsenyuk, Tiagnibok [leader of

Svoboda, the neo-fascist group that was condemned by the EU in 2012], and Klitschko on television. We saw the images of her handing out cookies to the protesters.”

Crimeans saw the violence that erupted on the Maidan as well as the slogans being chanted by a segment of the protesters [“Ukraine for Ukrainians”] and became very concerned. The citizens of Sevastopol, a port city in Crimea and longtime home to Russia’s Black Sea fleet, had meetings on what they should do if events in Kiev spiraled further out of control, possibly creating dangerous consequences for the majority ethnic Russian population there.

They believe that those dangerous consequences were prevented when Putin intervened and agreed to requests from Crimeans to be reunited with Russia. Crimeans and continental Russians believe that this intervention protected Crimea from those extremist elements that had hijacked the Maidan protests and risen to power in Kiev, threatening Crimeans’ safety and interests.

Moreover, Crimeans that I interviewed who participated in or were witness to events that led up to what is variously referred to as the “Crimean Spring” or the “Third Defense of Sevastopol,” did not expect the Russian government to step in and assist them or to accept their requests for reunification. This was due to the numerous times since the 1990s when Crimeans voted, either directly or through their parliament, for reunification, which Russia had always ignored.

According to Anatoliy Anatolievich Mareta, leader (ataman) of the Black Sea Hundred Cossacks, a turning point came after the Feb. 21, 2014 agreement (in which Yanukovich agreed to reduced powers and early elections) was rejected by armed ultra-nationalists on the Maidan and the Europeans subsequently abandoned their role as guarantors:

“A one-day meeting of anti-Maidan supporters was held in Sevastopol. Thirty thousand Crimeans gathered in the center of the port city to resist and declare that they didn’t recognize the coup government in Kiev and would not pay taxes to it. They then decided to defend Sevastopol and the Crimean isthmus with arms. They chose a people’s mayor, Aleksai Chaly, and checkpoints were set up. After extremist Tatars and Ukrainian ultra-nationalists showed up in Simferopol, throwing bottles, teargas, and beating busloads of ethnic Russians with flag poles, our help was requested.”

As the situation deteriorated further, with a standoff between local residents and local police officials who were beholden to and taking orders from Kiev underway, Mareta admitted that the Cossacks realized that theirs was a revolt that amounted to a suicide mission if Kiev gave the order to put it down with full force. “Their hearts were in it, but their minds knew they might lose,”

Mareta said.

This was confirmed by Savitskiy Viktor Vasilievich, a retired Russian naval officer and resident of Crimea who served as an election monitor during the Crimean referendum in Sevastopol. "The Russian military was very cautious and waited for the order to intervene," he said. "It was an unexpected gift."

From Feb. 28-29, 2014, Cossacks from parts of continental Russia, including Kuban and Don, began to arrive to reinforce the isthmus after Ukrainian planes were blocked from landing at the local airport as Russian soldiers, stationed legally in Crimea under contract, manned the gates.

Crimeans told me that it was understood at the time that the "little green men" who appeared on the streets in the coming days were Russian soldiers under lease at the naval base who had donned unmarked green uniforms. The people viewed them as protectors who allowed them to peacefully conduct their referendum without interference from Kiev, not invaders.

The population expressed gratitude to the Russian president for protecting them. I saw billboards throughout Crimea with Putin's image on them, which read: "Crimea. Russia. Forever." I asked several residents if this represented the general sentiment among the population. They confirmed enthusiastically that it did.

While in country, I attempted to get an interview with a representative of the Crimean Tatars, an ethnic minority population in which there is reportedly division in terms of support for the reunification with Russia, but was unsuccessful.

But the overall support for reunification with Russia should not come as a surprise to those familiar with Crimea's history. The Russian naval fleet has been based at Sevastopol since Catherine the Great's reign in the Eighteenth Century. During the Soviet era, Premier Nikita Khrushchev – who was Ukrainian – decided to move Crimea from Russian administration and give it as a gift to Ukraine.

Since both Russia and Ukraine were part of the Soviet Union at the time, the possible future consequences of such a decision were not considered. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, Crimea remained in Ukraine as an autonomous region while Russia kept its naval base there as part of a legal agreement (lease) with the Ukrainian government.

Not only is Sevastopol Russia's only warm water port, it is the place where the Soviet army blocked the Nazi advance for eight months during World War II. By the time, the siege was over, around 90 percent of the city had been devastated.

Kramarenko summed up continental Russians' view of the reunification: "Most people, both Crimean and Russian, think Crimea is Russian. The referendum, along with the lack of violence, gives it legitimacy."

Surveys of Crimean and Russian opinion by Pew, Gallup and GfK within a year of the referendum show consistent support for Crimea's reunification with Russia and the legitimacy of the referendum itself. See [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

Western Media

When I asked Russians if they had access to Western media, they all said they did, through both satellite and the Internet. But they did not find the Western media to be accurate or thorough in their coverage of Russia in general and the Ukraine crisis in particular.

Volodya Shestakov told me, "The Western media narrative of Russia is distorted. The corporate media distorts news in its own interests ... and to suit politics. Americans are the first target of corporate propaganda."

Nikolay Viknyanschuk, originally from eastern Ukraine and also a resident of St. Petersburg explained further: "There are certain patterns used [within the Western media] and they prefer to stay within those patterns. What they cannot explain, they cut off or ignore. If Russia is an aggressor, why didn't it take Kiev?"

He also lamented Western media's over-reliance on a short news cycle, sound bites and talking heads who lead the audience in what to think, "Commentators and so-called journalists' interpretations are relied upon instead of presenting primary source material."

Lack of context was another complaint about the Western media's presentation of the Ukraine issue. I can personally attest to this as the conversations I had with educated Americans about the Ukraine crisis reflected little to no historical understanding of the country as having been under the control of different political and cultural entities, creating divisions that, combined with poverty and deep corruption, made it vulnerable to instability.

As Shestakov explained: "Russia, Ukraine and Belorussia [Belarus] are ethnically and culturally the same. There are only mild differences. Russia started in Kiev [Kiev Rus] but expanded and the capital moved to Moscow. When Ukraine got independence in 1991, a fictitious narrative was pushed in school textbooks of an independent people who were repressed by Russia. The Ukrainians have been manipulated. Russians don't hate Ukrainians. There is no hostility on our part. We regret what has happened."

Vasilievich reiterated these historical points: "There was resentment that Ukraine was always viewed as the 'little brother' in the relationship after Russia united to become its own independent nation. Parts of Ukraine were always under the rule of Russia [in the east], Poland or the Austro-Hungarians [in the west]. Ukraine is a vast area with rural villages and there is an ideology of small rural areas with Polish influence in the western most regions. The Americans knew what divisions they were manipulating."

According to the extensive research of Walter Uhler, president of the Russian-American International Studies Association, there was no historical reference to even a clearly defined, much less independent, territory called Ukraine until the Sixteenth Century when the term was used by Polish sources, but "with the demise of Polish rule, the name *Ukraine* fell into disuse as a term for a specific territory, and was not revived until the early Nineteenth Century."

Tatyana confirmed that Western media is freely available online in Crimea as well for those who understand English, but it is often seen as distorted.

Additionally, most Russians find the demonization of their president by Western media and politicians to be childish and a reflection of the observation that Washington policymakers seem to have assigned Russia the role of enemy long ago for their own reasons, regardless of what Russia actually is or does in reality.

As Valery Ivanov, a 25-year old college graduate who earns a living as an emcee and a translator in Krasnodar, said, "The Western media and government portrays Russia as an aggressor because Russia is a strong country and a potential competitor."

What to Say to Americans

One thing that stood out in my discussions with Russians was how they almost always made a point of differentiating between the American people and the government in Washington. They like and admire the American people for their openness and achievements, but they find Washington policymakers' penchant for interfering in other parts of the world in which they don't understand the consequences of their actions to be profoundly misguided and dangerous.

At the end of my interview with each person, I asked them if there was one thing they could say to the American people, what would it be. It was interesting how, even though they all worded it differently, the essence of their answers was identical: we are all the same; we may have minor differences in language, culture and geography that influence us but we all want the same things – peace and a stable, prosperous future for our children and grandchildren.

Several Russians underscored the point that if Russians and Americans got

together and related to each other as regular people, there would be no real conflict. Valery Ivanov said, "If we were to meet in a bar for a drink, over American whiskey or Russian vodka, we would become good friends."

Nikolay Viknyanschuk added, "Let's be friends on a personal and family level. We should strengthen friendship between San Francisco and St. Petersburg. You are people and we are people. We all have five fingers on each hand."

Volodya Shestakov offered this insight about his own transformation in how he saw Americans during the Cold War versus how he saw them afterward, when he was able to travel and to meet them: "When I looked at U.S. people, I saw them as alien, like from another planet. When I met American people, I no longer saw them that way. The liquid in our bodies is all from the same ocean."

They also would like more Americans to come visit Russia and open themselves up to what Russia has to offer. Marina and Irina, two of the civil society activists in Krasnodar emphasized, "Let's cooperate. Let's share experience and meet each other. We have a rich history and culture to share and we want to invite Americans to come and meet us."

Natylie Baldwin is co-author of *Ukraine: Zbig's Grand Chessboard & How the West Was Checkmated*, available from Tayen Lane Publishing. In October 2015, she traveled to six cities in the Russian Federation. Her fiction and nonfiction have appeared in various publications including Sun Monthly, Dissident Voice, Energy Bulletin, Newtopia Magazine, The Common Line, New York Journal of Books, OpEd News and The Lakeshore. She blogs at natyliesbaldwin.com.

Baiting Obama to 'Shock and Awe'

Official Washington's armchair warriors are pounding their drums again, demanding a larger U.S. invasion of Syria and decrying President Obama as "feckless" for showing some restraint. But these hawks offer little thinking about the consequences of another long-term occupation, says ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

President Barack Obama has repeatedly made adjustments to what he probably considered privately to have been the best U.S. policy toward armed conflicts overseas, as he has had to cope with the pressures from public discourse in Washington, to count his available political capital, and to decide which political battles to fight at home while also deciding which military battles

the United States should fight abroad.

He has adjusted too much in the view of some of his critics on the left, who have not been happy about the extension of the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan or the reinsertion of some U.S. troops into Iraq. Far louder criticism, however, has come from the opposite direction and has called for more, not less, use of military force in foreign conflicts, especially conflicts in the Middle East.

This latter criticism is partly a matter of the usual reflexive rhetorical attacks with a heavy partisan tinge, which seem to have become especially habitual when aimed at the current president. But there is an additional dynamic that comes into play no matter who is in the White House and that produces a bias in the Washington discourse in favor of more rather than less use of military force, notwithstanding the notice that may be taken from time to time of the public's lack of appetite for getting involved in another costly ground war.

This dynamic partly comes out of the tendency to look at any problem overseas as not only a U.S. problem but also a problem the United States ought to be able to solve, and thus a black mark on whoever happens to be U.S. president. It comes as well from the false equating of doing something visible and forceful with the solving of a problem.

There also are false equations between the use of military force and being tough, and between being tough and exercising leadership. There is the further luxury in opposition of being able to carp and criticize without the responsibility of implementing a policy that will actually improve matters. All of these patterns are accentuated at times of high emotional reaction to salient, jarring events, which is why they are especially apparent now in the wake of the terrorist attacks in Paris.

Mr. Obama, to his credit, is not adjusting his course in response to the current pressure to make the pseudo-tough move of significantly escalating U.S. military operations in Syria to battle the so-called Islamic State or ISIS, beyond the current carefully targeted airstrikes and the small Special Forces contingent that is already there. In particular, putting U.S. ground combat forces in Syria would be a bad idea for multiple reasons.

One reason is that it would not resolve the problem that it ostensibly would be intended to deal with, which is anti-Western terrorism conducted under the banner of ISIS. Whether an ISIS mini-state lives or dies in northeast Syria is not a critical variable that will determine whether radical and resourceful individuals and small groups determined to wreak havoc in Western cities will do

so.

Maybe something will yet emerge from investigation of the Paris attacks to suggest that the fate of the mini-state is such a variable, but so far nothing has. So far the picture is one of a Belgium-based gang being responsible for the attack, with only vague connections to Syria and not necessarily to an ISIS decision-making structure. If there is any evidence (and an after-the-fact claim statement is not it) of an order from an ISIS high command in Raqqa to conduct this operation, we in the public have not been told about it.

An expanded U.S.-led military operation would play directly into narratives favored by ISIS and like-minded radicals, about Middle Eastern Muslims being the targets of forceful domination by a predominantly Christian West. The United States should stand side by side with France with regard to the latter's role as a victim of terrorism. The United States has no interest in identifying with France as a colonial overseer of Syria in the interwar years, or a France that might be seen as trying to re-assert its dominance there. Problems of mistaken beliefs about a religious dimension of American intentions are made only worse by the abominable call from some presidential candidates to apply a religious test to decisions whether to admit refugees from Syria.

An expanded U.S.-led military expedition expands the radicalizing resentment, and the resulting recruiting ability of ISIS and extremist groups, from collateral damage from the military operations. This would be a result not only of a ground war but also a more indiscriminate air war. It certainly would be a result of following Ted Cruz's foolish advice that we should just not care about collateral damage.

The direct costs to American blood and treasure are what should be an obvious reason not to embark on something like a ground war in Syria, especially given the historical record of costs in such endeavors going well beyond what was originally projected.

James Jeffrey, who calls for just such a U.S. ground war in an op-ed in the *Washington Post*, assures us that this time would be different because, you see, an offensive in Syria would not be like those other messy endeavors but instead would be a "short," "crisp," "rapid takedown" of ISIS. We have heard similar assurances before. Reality has had a way of becoming much different from the images in the pre-war assurances. Shock and awe, anyone?

A reality in Syria is that rapidly taking down ISIS would leave the sort of chaos in that part of Syria that is itself fuel for radicalism, at least as long as the rest of the multifaceted Syrian war continues, and at least without a long foreign military occupation that would have huge direct costs as well as

providing still more fuel for radicalizing resentment. Jeffrey is remarkably casual in brushing aside such considerations. All he has to say is that “while figuring out the ‘day after’ might be difficult and implementing any solutions costly,” he thinks a continuation of ISIS would be worse.

President Obama spoke trenchant truths at his press conference in Turkey on Monday. In response to a series of questions that were all just reworded versions of “Gee, those Paris attacks were really awful, don’t you think you should do something much different from what you have been doing so far about ISIS?”

Mr. Obama demonstrated much better understanding of the challenges involved than his “do something, anything” critics. In describing the nature of the terrorist threat we face, he explained, “It’s not their sophistication or the particular weapon that they possess, but it is the ideology that they carry with them and their willingness to die.”

He acknowledged that the success of ISIS in establishing and maintaining its so-called caliphate is indeed a factor in the terrorist equation, but mainly as matter of perceptions; it makes the group “more attractive to potential recruits.”

Given that this is largely a problem of perceptions and beliefs and related emotions and resentment, it is important not to do things that only make matters worse along that dimension. In that regard, the President observed, “We play into the [ISIS] narrative when we act as if they’re a state, and we use routine military tactics that are designed to fight a state that is attacking another state. That’s not what’s going on here.”

As for launching a U.S.-led ground war, Mr. Obama accurately said, “We can retake territory. And as long as we leave our troops there, we can hold it, but that does not solve the underlying problem of eliminating the dynamics that are producing these kinds of violent extremist groups.”

The President also indirectly commented on the false equations that so much of the carping in Washington involves. He will not do things that “somehow, in the abstract, make America look tough, or make me look tough.” He is not interested, he said, “is posing or pursuing some notion of American leadership or America winning, or whatever other slogans they come up with that has no relationship to what is actually going to work to protect the American people.”

One of the oft-voiced but invalid comments about the previous administration’s signature military adventure is that the escalation, several years into the Iraq War, that became known as the “surge” was an “act of courage” on the part of

President George W. Bush. It was nothing of the sort. It was a way to tamp down temporarily the surging violence in Iraq and to hold it at a less egregious level long enough to get out of Washington and bequeath the remaining mess, including all the still-unresolved political problems in Iraq, to the next administration.

President Obama, with just 14 months left in his presidency and getting all the political flak he is getting about ISIS, must feel tempted to do the same sort of thing now in Syria. Think about it: if he did so he would not only take wind out of the sails of hawkish critics but also be able to claim a place in history as the leader who smashed ISIS.

Of course, the terrorism and the chaos would still be there, as would an even messier and more complicated situation than before in Syria. But that would all be a problem for the next administration. We should be glad that President Obama is showing enough responsibility and true leadership not to do anything like that.

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.)

CIA Whistleblower Kiriakou Honored

CIA officer John Kiriakou, the first U.S. official to confirm that waterboarding was used to torture “war on terror” detainees, then faced a retaliatory prosecution and 30 months in prison. Recognizing his sacrifice, the literary group PEN gave Kiriakou its First Amendment Award, observed ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

Editor's Note: On Nov. 16, PEN Center USA, the West Coast branch of PEN International, gave former CIA officer John Kiriakou its First Amendment Award for his role in exposing waterboarding as torture used during President George W. Bush's “war on terror.” Kiriakou then faced retaliation which led to a 30-month prison term for revealing classified information.

PEN International, a human rights and literary arts organization that promotes the written word and freedom of expression, asked former CIA analyst Ray McGovern to write an essay describing Kiriakou's contribution and sacrifice.

McGovern wrote:

John Kiriakou was just a name in the news until early 2012 when I got a call from Jesselyn Radack, mutual friend, whistleblower and intrepid attorney, who suggested I have lunch with him. John had been arrested in January and charged with unauthorized disclosure of classified information. Over lunch I learned how John had transitioned from highly decorated CIA officer to target of a government vendetta.

John, you see, had refused to be trained in how to torture. Even worse, he had the temerity to confirm publicly that our government was implementing a White House-approved program of torture techniques that turned out to be virtually identical to those listed in the Gestapo *Handbuch*.

Those of you who have seen the documentary *Silenced* already know of the key role Jesselyn Radack has been playing in defending whistleblowers like John Kiriakou. What? This is the first you have heard of *Silenced*? Well, there's a subject for another discussion. Suffice it to note here that the powers-that-be in the distribution business simply chickened out, as they so often do.

Silenced chronicles behavior by faux lawyers at the Department of Justice that is anything but just or lawful. But, hey, who, in this day and age, wants to take on a notoriously vindictive DOJ? And so, with supreme irony, *Silenced* has been silenced.

The documentary shows in a poignant way how, after Jesselyn Radack's own ordeal at the hands of DOJ where she had been an adviser on legal ethics, she decided to devote the rest of her professional life to defending other whistle blowers. John Kiriakou and NSA whistleblower Thomas Drake are also featured all three playing their own roles.

The film presents an extraordinary example of how personal involvement with innocent suffering with injustice suffered first hand or by others can move the heart and the will so deeply that experience becomes catalyst for solidarity and action.

And healing. This came second nature to the community that immediately enfolded the Kiriakou family and helped John's wife Heather and their three young children 2, 7, and 9 at the time survive the ordeal of two years with dad stuck in prison. There were lots of us many no strangers to jail or prison for whistleblowing or nonviolent resistance and Code Pink, as usual, stepped up to share leadership.

Making an Example of John

At CIA's urging, DOJ was coming after John Kiriakou big time. And Heather, herself a widely respected CIA analyst, was let go. In effect, government retaliation created a situation of "two-less" replacing the "twofer" that had been serving with such distinction and integrity at CIA.

When John went to prison, I could identify albeit in a very small way with what it means to be away from wife and children for what seems like forever. Decades ago I had spent three months alone in the Soviet Union, away from my wife and three small children. I ached; I missed the hugs so much that I dreamed of finding a way to send my arms home in the diplomatic pouch.

It's harder still, of course, for wives. It always is. It was challenging enough for my wife to cope with our three children all of them under ten for three months. The mind boggles at what it must have been like for Heather with three still younger children.

And in the midst of all this, with zero warning, Heather's mother had a fatal heart attack. She had been an anchor against the wind for Heather and also a large part of her grandchildren's lives. With our own three daughters, I have witnessed first-hand the sanctity of the unique bond between mother and daughter. Maybe only a woman can fully understand the depth of the challenge Heather faced with the sudden death of her treasured soul mate and with no husband nearby to lean on.

The "Dark Side"

John Kiriakou had become CIA's Enemy No. 1 because he was the first insider to disclose that his former colleagues had been suborned into implementing a program of torture. Alarm bells had sounded at CIA: What if some of John's former colleagues retrieved their consciences and followed his example? This could not be allowed to happen. Swift retribution was indicated.

The broader question, of course, is why had it been so easy to get CIA operatives to walk on Dick Cheney's "Dark Side." The context, of course, is 9/11. We keep hearing: "AFTER 9/11 EVERYTHING CHANGED." Really? Everything? Did torture somehow slip out of the moral category it had long inhabited together with rape and slavery the category ethicists call "intrinsic evil?"

No way, said John Kiriakou. And thus began a cruel duel between two unequal adversaries: an exceedingly ruthless, vindictive government and a CIA professional determined not to violate his conscience.

What happened not only to many of John's colleagues but also to Americans at large parallels what happened to Germans after their "9/11," the burning of the Parliament building in Berlin on Feb. 27, 1933. Be afraid, they were told, be

very afraid. It worked. With what a young German lawyer (later a writer with the pen-name Sebastian Haffner) living in Berlin at the time called “sheepish submissiveness,” Germans acquiesced in the most draconian, one might say “Patriot Act”-type, violations of their own Constitution. Haffner wrote:

“The sequence of events ... is wholly within the normal range of psychology, and it helps to explain the inexplicable. The only thing that is missing is what in animals is called ‘breeding.’ This, a solid inner kernel that cannot be shaken by external pressures and forces, something noble and steely, a reserve of pride, principle, and dignity to be drawn on in the hour of trial.”

Missing? Missing in many; anchored in Greek marble in John Kiriakou.

In exposing torture, John found himself in the company of other officials with integrity and guts like Gen. John Kimmons, head of U.S. Army Intelligence. On the very day (Sept. 6, 2006) that President George W. Bush publicly disclosed and bragged about the supposed effectiveness of what he called “an alternative set of procedures” for interrogation (then given the euphemism “enhanced interrogation techniques”), Kimmons arranged his own press conference at the Pentagon and said:

“I am absolutely convinced [that] no good intelligence is going to come from abusive practices. I think history tells us that. I think the empirical evidence of the last five years, hard years, tells us that.”

Actually, Kimmons could have gone back 70 years not just five. It turns out that “enhanced interrogation techniques” is a literal translation of the Gestapo *Handbuch*’s “Verschaerfte Vernehmung.” And most of those Nazi “techniques” are the same ones blessed by the Bush-Cheney administration (with just a few further enhancements).

The award from PEN seems all the more appropriate inasmuch as John is now a writer and speaker of truth as well as a consultant on films and TV shows. And as many of us know only too well, he has his work cut out for him, whether writing about intelligence, torture, or how our prisons must be humanized.

The Challenge

Polling shows that most Americans continue to support brutal methods of interrogation, even in the wake of the Senate Intelligence Committee report made public last December that, using CIA’s own cables, disproved claims that torture “worked.” Trouble is, Americans don’t read Senate reports; they watch TV and movies. That’s how they “know” torture works. Think Fox TV’s series “24.” Think Columbia Pictures’ “Zero Dark Thirty.”

"Jack Bauer, the hero of "24," breaks captives' fingers to elicit information that "keeps us safe." And Americans applaud. Worse still, interrogators are misled and corrupted. Lt. Col. Diane Beaver, a military lawyer at Guantanamo, told British author Philippe Sands that Bauer "gave people lots of ideas. We saw '24' on cable ... It was hugely popular."

Sands wrote, "She [Beaver] believed the series contributed to an environment in which those in Guantanamo were encouraged to see themselves as being on the frontline and to go further than they otherwise might." Sands added that "24" also made it more difficult for those who objected to the abuse to stop it.

In fact, "24" was making torture appear so effective and even glamorous that U.S. military officials appealed to the creators of the show to tone down the torture scenes and give less play to the fiction that torture is "effective."

Some psychological research has shown that fiction is as effective as non-fiction at deeply moving people even when they know that what they are being moved by is a fictional account. People tend to be "transported" by a good story providing "truths" that appear just as powerful (or even more so) as those we encounter in the real world.

'Zero Dark Thirty'

Which brings us to "Zero Dark Thirty." And this, I believe, would be of particular interest to PEN. How in the world will John Kiriakou be able to open minds to the reality that the issue of morality aside torture does not "work," when so many have actually seen it "work" watching "Zero Dark Thirty," as well as "24?"

True, John Kiriakou has an abundance of experience and credibility. But what are these, stacked up against seeing torture work "with your own eyes?" John can cite the following facts until he is blue in the face, but the odds remain high against him.

On Dec. 21, 2012, two days after "Zero Dark Thirty" premiered, CIA's acting director took the unusual step of formally addressing agency employees with these words:

"[T]he film takes significant artistic license, while portraying itself as being historically accurate. ... [It] creates the strong impression that the enhanced interrogation techniques that were part of our former detention and interrogation program were the key to finding Bin Laden. That impression is false. ... I want you to remember that 'Zero Dark Thirty' is not a documentary."

Sen. John McCain, who was tortured as a POW in North Vietnam, said the film left

him sick “because it’s wrong.”

Historian Karen J. Greenberg, Director of Fordham University Law School’s Center for National Security, wrote this about the film’s director: “Bigelow has bought in, hook, line, and sinker, to the ethos of the Bush administration and its apologists.” Greenberg called the film “the perfect piece of propaganda, with all the appeal that naked brutality, fear, and revenge can bring.”

And Peter Maass of *The Atlantic* wrote that the film “represents a troubling new frontier of government-embedded filmmaking.” And Maass, too, is right.

Looking Forward

I’m not sure John Kiriakou would qualify for PEN Center USA’s specific program for “Emerging Voices,” but I am sure that, just the same, this year’s First Amendment Awardee is a very important emerging voice both as writer and as a consultant on films and TV shows. Of this we can also be sure; nothing John gets involved in will glorify torture or otherwise bend to prevailing winds of dishonesty.

With the support of Heather and many others, he has already bucked a powerful system arrayed against him. John Kiriakou will give no quarter in his passion for spreading truth around, no matter how many additional systemic hurdles he may be required to surmount.

Besides, he has “backing.” If you don’t believe me, download *Silenced*.

Ray McGovern was a CIA analyst for 27 years from the administration of John F. Kennedy to that of George H. W. Bush. He is co-founder of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS), which welcomed John Kiriakou into membership from federal prison.

Can Obama Level with the People?

Exclusive: Another terrorist outrage this one in Paris is spreading fear and fury across Europe. Which makes this a key moment for President Obama to finally level with the American people about how U.S. “allies” – such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar – have been aiding and abetting extremists, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The atrocities in Paris, killing more than 120 people, have brought forth the

usual condemnations against terrorism and expressions of sympathy for the victims, but the larger question is whether this latest shock will finally force Western leaders to address the true root causes of the problem.

Will President Barack Obama and other leaders finally level with the American people and the world about what the underlying reasons for this madness are? Will Obama explain how U.S. "allies" in the Middle East, such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar, have been fueling this Sunni extremism for years? Will he dare recognize that Israeli repression of the Palestinians is a major contributing factor, too?

On a practical level, will Obama finally release those 28 pages from the congressional 9/11 report that addressed evidence of Saudi support for the hijackers who attacked New York and Washington in 2001?

Does he have the courage to explain how this scourge of Sunni terrorism can be traced back even further to the late 1970s when President Jimmy Carter started a small-scale covert operation in Afghanistan to destabilize a Moscow-backed secular regime in Kabul and that President Ronald Reagan then vastly expanded the program with the help of the Saudis, pouring in a total of \$1 billion a year and giving rise to Saudi militant Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda?

Can Obama be convinced that telling hard truths to the American people is not only vital to a democratic Republic in a philosophical way but can have the practical effect of creating crucial public support for rational policies? Will he realize that propaganda schemes or "strategic communications" may be clever short-term tricks to manipulate the American people but they are ultimately counterproductive and dangerous?

Will Obama finally take on Official Washington's well-entrenched neoconservatives and their "liberal interventionist" junior varsity by challenging their innumerable false narratives? Will he pointedly blame the neocons and the liberal hawks, including those who run the editorial pages of The Washington Post and The New York Times, for the disastrous Iraq War? Will he take on the "deep state" dug in at the big-name think tanks, not just at neocon havens like the American Enterprise Institute but at the center-left Brookings Institution?

Can the President muster the courage to ally himself with the American people, arming them with real information, so they can act like true citizens in a Republic rather than cattle being herded toward the slaughterhouse? Can he shake his own elitism or his fear of social ostracism to somehow become a true leader in his last year in office, rather than a timid follower of the prevailing "group think"?

Just because the “important people” have fancy credentials and went to the “right” schools, doesn’t mean that they have any monopoly on wisdom. Indeed, in my nearly four decades covering Official Washington, these “smart” folks have been wrong a lot more than they have been right. A leader of historic dimensions recognizes that reality and takes on the know-it-alls. In this case, a leader who enlists the American public by giving them reliable information could change this depressing dynamic.

If Obama could muster such courage and show trust in the people, he could bend the prevailing false narratives in the direction of truth and reality. On a practical level, he could help make the current Syrian peace talks succeed by stopping his endless repeating of the neocon/liberal-hawk mantra blaming President Bashar al-Assad for the entire mess and insisting that “Assad must go.” [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“Hidden Origins of Syria’s Civil War.”](#)]

Twist Some Arms

Instead, Obama could twist the arms of his Saudi, Qatari and Turkish “friends” to get them to halt their financing and military support for Sunni jihadists associated with Al Qaeda and its various spin-offs, like the Islamic State and al-Nusra Front. And he could work cooperatively with Russian President Vladimir Putin to squeeze concessions out of both the Assad regime and the U.S.-financed “moderate” opposition so a unity government can begin to restore order in Syria and isolate the extremists.

Once some security is achieved, the Syrian people could hold elections to decide their own future and pick their own leaders. That should not be the business of either Obama or Putin.

As part of this effort, Obama could finally release the U.S. intelligence analyses on both jihadist funding and the circumstances surrounding the lethal sarin attack outside Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013, which the Obama administration hastily blamed on Assad’s regime although later evidence pointed toward a likely a provocation by Sunni extremists. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“The Collapsing Syria Sarin Case.”](#)]

To create crucial space for cooperating with Putin, Obama also could let the American people in on the reality about the Ukraine crisis in 2014, which was used by the neocons and liberal hawks to drive a wedge between Obama and Putin. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“What Neocons Want from Ukraine Crisis.”](#)]

U.S. intelligence analysts know a lot about key turning points in that conflict, including the Feb. 20, 2014 sniper attacks, which set the stage for ousting elected President Viktor Yanukovich two days later, and the July 17, 2014 shoot-

down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, which was used to build an anti-Putin hysteria. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[MH-17: The Dog Still Not Barking.](#)"]

I'm told that these tragedies became propaganda weapons to deploy against Assad, Yanukovich and Putin rather than horrific crimes that deserved serious investigation and accountability. But whatever the ultimate conclusion about who is to blame for these crimes, why has Obama withheld from the American people what U.S. intelligence analysts know about those three incidents?

It was Obama, after all, who talked so much about "transparency" and trusting the American people as a candidate and during his first days in office. But since then, he has conformed to the elitist Orwellian approach of managing our perceptions rather than giving us the facts.

Yet, if Obama could get his cooperation with Putin back on track recognizing how useful it was in 2013 when Putin helped Obama get Assad to surrender all his chemical weapons and assisted in wresting important concessions from Iran about its nuclear program then the two powers could also weigh in on securing a peace agreement between the Israelis and the Palestinians, another major irritant to peace in the region.

Indeed, it appears that the possibility of Obama and Putin working together to force the Israelis to make meaningful concessions for peace was a factor in the neocon determination to turn an eminently manageable political dispute in Ukraine over the pace of its integration into Europe without rending its ties to Russia into the dangerous frontlines of a new Cold War.

The neocons and liberal hawks outmaneuvered Obama who fell in line with the Putin-bashing, all the better to fit within Official Washington's in-crowd.

Thus, the Syrian crisis was left to fester with Obama acquiescing to neocon/liberal-hawk demands for arming and training "moderate" rebels although the President recognized that the idea was a "fantasy." He also resisted some of the more extreme ideas, like an outright U.S. military invasion of Syria framed as a humanitarian "safe zone."

But the Paris tragedy is another reminder that it is well past time for Obama to resurrect his helpful relationship with Putin and restore the teamwork that held such promise toward settling conflicts through negotiations, along the lines of the Iran nuclear deal.

If Obama were to choose that route which could be implemented through a combination of truth-telling to the American people and pragmatic big-power diplomacy with Russia he could at least start addressing the underlying causes of the violence tearing apart the Middle East and now spreading into Europe.

Or will Obama's reaction to the Paris attacks be just more of the same more tough-guy talk about "resolve," more "targeted" killings that slaughter many innocents as "collateral damage," more tolerance of Saudi-Turkish-Qatari support for Sunni militants in Syria and elsewhere, more acceptance of hard-line Israeli repression of the Palestinians, more giving in to neocon/liberal-hawk demands for "regime change" in the neocons' preferred list of countries?

If the history of the past seven years is any guide, there's little doubt which direction President Obama will choose. He will go with Official Washington's flow; he'll worry about what the editorialists at the Post and Times might think of him; he'll accommodate the neocons and liberal hawks who remain influential inside his own administration. In short, he'll continue down the road toward destruction.

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](#)). You also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America's Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

Carpetbagging 'Crony Capitalism' in Ukraine

Exclusive: Ukraine's Finance Minister Natalie Jaresko and other key officials were given overnight Ukrainian citizenship – with the law requiring them to renounce their old allegiances – but the American-born Jaresko has balked at that mandate, raising questions about her true motives, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Last December, before being named Ukraine's Finance Minister, American-born Natalie Jaresko accepted Ukrainian citizenship as a prerequisite for getting the job, but in almost one year since she has not renounced her U.S. citizenship, according to U.S. records and a Ukrainian official.

The Ukrainian Constitution allows for only "single citizenship," meaning that a foreigner who is granted Ukrainian citizenship must terminate his or her previous citizenship and must submit a document attesting to that renunciation "within two years from the date of granting of Ukrainian citizenship," said

Mariia Budiakova, press secretary of the Ukraine Embassy in Washington.

The U.S. government publishes quarterly the names of Americans who have renounced their U.S. citizenship and those names – printed in the Federal Register since last December – do not include Jaresko, who has chosen to remain a U.S. citizen, a fact confirmed by Budiakova.

Jaresko appears to be exploiting the two-year period for submitting proof of renouncing her prior citizenship so she can hold her powerful Ukrainian position for two years with the option of then dropping her Ukrainian citizenship and keeping her U.S. citizenship.

But that manipulation of the process creates the appearance of a carpetbagger with dual loyalties and reinforces the image, highlighted by Russian media, of a Ukrainian government being run behind the scenes by the United States and other outsiders.

There's also the possibility that Jaresko is exploiting this opportunity to learn all she can about the inner workings of the Ukrainian government to position herself to quit her post after two years, drop her temporary Ukrainian citizenship, and become a well-paid consultant with valuable contacts inside Ukraine's Finance Ministry.

Such opportunism would fit with Jaresko's history. Though hailed as the face of Ukrainian "reform," Jaresko has long used her official connections to enrich herself, an inconvenient truth that undercuts the U.S. government's desired image for the regime in Kiev as committed to the fight against corruption.

Prior to her appointment as Finance Minister, Jaresko, a former U.S. diplomat, headed the U.S.-taxpayer-financed Western NIS Enterprise Fund (WNISEF), created in the 1990s to help jump-start an investment economy for Ukraine and Moldova. WNISEF was overseen by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

WNISEF officials were limited to \$150,000 in compensation a year, but Jaresko maneuvered to exceed that total, ultimately collecting more than \$2 million a year by shifting management of WNISEF to her own private company, Horizon Capital, and arranging to get lucrative bonuses when selling off investments, even as the overall WNISEF fund was losing money, according to official records.

For instance, Jaresko collected \$1.77 million in bonuses in 2013, according to WNISEF's latest available filing with the Internal Revenue Service. In her financial disclosure forms with the Ukrainian government, she reported earning \$2.66 million in 2013 and \$2.05 million in 2014, thus amassing a sizeable personal fortune while investing U.S. taxpayers' money supposedly to benefit the Ukrainian people.

Meanwhile, WNISEF continued to hemorrhage money, shrinking from its original \$150 million to \$89.8 million in the 2013 tax year, according to the IRS filing. WNISEF reported that the bonuses to Jaresko and other corporate officers were based on profitable exits from some investments even if the overall fund was losing money. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[How Ukraine's Finance Minister Got Rich.](#)"]

Hailed as 'Reformer'

Still, Jaresko and other foreigners who were brought in to fill key positions in the current Ukrainian regime were described as "technocrats" whose only interest was to bring good government to Ukraine, a country long saddled with institutionalized corruption. Jaresko was hailed as a Ukrainian "reformer" who in [the words](#) of New York Times' columnist Thomas L. Friedman "shares our values."

But Jaresko's business history offers little reason for optimism about Ukraine rooting out official self-interest. Indeed, Jaresko would seem to fit the bill as a classic "crony capitalist," someone who takes advantage of government connections to line his or her own pockets. Her failure to expeditiously comply with the Ukrainian Constitution and renounce her U.S. citizenship reinforces the view that she is more opportunist than reformer.

According to [recent accounts](#) from Ukraine, official corruption remains a deep-seated problem more than a year-and-a-half after the February 2014 overthrow of President Viktor Yanukovich, who was lambasted by the Western media for having a sauna in his official residence, the sauna becoming emblematic of his alleged abuse of power.

Prior to his ouster, Yanukovich and his government were targeted by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), which is funded by USAID, the same organization that hired Jaresko to run WNISEF, and Open Society, a foundation headed by George Soros, a hedge-fund billionaire who has profited off the financial destabilization of fragile governments.

OCCRP's selective outrage over "corruption" raises questions as to whether it is a genuinely journalistic operation or a propaganda front for the U.S. government and Western business interests targeting regimes that don't play ball. After all, Jaresko's multi-million-dollar profiting off her relationship with the U.S.-taxpayer-funded WNISEF would seem to be a starker example of corruption than Yanukovich's sauna.

The new U.S.-backed regime in Kiev also has enacted "reforms" that slash pensions, energy subsidies and other social programs (reducing the living

standards of average Ukrainians) while moving to privatize Ukraine's economy and encouraging large Western corporations to exploit the country's resources including "fracking" for shale gas in eastern Ukraine.

According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, Ukraine has Europe's third-largest shale gas reserves at 42 trillion cubic feet, an inviting target especially since other European nations, such as Great Britain, Poland, France and Bulgaria, have resisted fracking technology because of environmental concerns. An economically supine Ukraine is presumably less able to say no. [See Consortiumnews.com's "Beneath the Ukraine Crisis: Shale Gas."]

This process in Ukraine also appears to have benefited from some greasing of the skids by hiring well-connected Americans besides Jaresko. Just three months after Yanukovich's ouster, Ukraine's largest private gas firm, Burisma Holdings, appointed Vice President Joe Biden's son, Hunter Biden, to its board of directors. Burisma a shadowy Cyprus-based company also lined up well-connected lobbyists, some with ties to Secretary of State John Kerry, including Kerry's former Senate chief of staff David Leiter, according to lobbying disclosures.

As Time magazine reported, "Leiter's involvement in the firm rounds out a power-packed team of politically-connected Americans that also includes a second new board member, Devon Archer, a Democratic bundler and former adviser to John Kerry's 2004 presidential campaign. Both Archer and Hunter Biden have worked as business partners with Kerry's son-in-law, Christopher Heinz, the founding partner of Rosemont Capital, a private-equity company."

According to investigative journalism inside Ukraine, the ownership of Burisma has been traced to Privat Bank, which is controlled by the thuggish billionaire oligarch Ihor Kolomoisky, who was appointed by the U.S.-backed "reform" regime to be governor of Dnipropetrovsk Oblast, a south-central province of Ukraine (though Kolomoisky was eventually ousted from that post in a power struggle over control of UkrTransNafta, Ukraine's state-owned oil pipeline operator).

Also, regarding Western energy interests, on Dec. 13, 2013, when neocon Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland was pushing for Yanukovich's ouster, she reminded Ukrainian business leaders that the United States had invested \$5 billion in their "European aspirations" at a conference sponsored by Chevron. She even stood next to the company's logo.

The Carpetbaggers

Jaresko was only one of several foreigners recruited by President Petro Poroshenko to fill key positions in the Ukrainian government, with these officials also granted instant Ukrainian citizenship. Along with Jaresko's

appointment last December, Poroshenko brought onboard Lithuanian Aivaras Abromavicius, a partner in investment firm East Capital, as Economy Minister and Georgian Aleksander Kvitashvili, who had served as Georgia's health minister and labor minister, as Health Minister.

Last May, Poroshenko appointed ex-Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili to be governor of Ukraine's restive Odessa region. Saakashvili, who faces charges in Georgia for alleged abuse of power during his presidency, also received overnight Ukrainian citizenship but – unlike Jaresko – he announced that he had dropped his Georgian citizenship, a move that short-circuited his possible extradition back to Georgia.

Another foreigner whose appointment raised eyebrows was the choice of Estonian Jaanika Merilo to be put in charge of attracting foreign investments. Merilo was a Jaresko associate known more for her personal ties to wealthy business tycoons, such as English businessman and investor Richard Branson, and kinky online photos than her skills as a technocrat.

The message from the new regime in Kiev may be that Ukraine is open for Western investment, but a less charitable interpretation is that Ukraine is open for unbridled exploitation led by foreign operatives with a history of self-dealing who are overseeing another – and possibly far grander – era of official corruption.

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). You also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America's Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, click here.
