

Start of a New World War

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

By John Pilger

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

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

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

Standing on the beach, I watched the emerald green of the Pacific fall away into a vast black hole. This was the crater left by the hydrogen bomb they called “Bravo.” The explosion poisoned people and their environment for hundreds of miles, perhaps forever.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What he is referring to is China building airstrips in the Spratly Islands, which are the subject of a dispute with the Philippines – a dispute without

priority until Washington pressured and bribed the government in Manila and the Pentagon launched a propaganda campaign called “freedom of navigation.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

According to one prodigious liberal commentator, Trump is “unleashing the dark

forces of violence" in the United States. *Unleashing* them?

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

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

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

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

As presidential Election Day draws near, Clinton will be hailed as the first female president, regardless of her crimes and lies – just as Barack Obama was lauded as the first black president and liberals swallowed his nonsense about "hope." And the drool goes on.

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

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

One of Clinton's closest allies is Madeleine Albright, the former Secretary of

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

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

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

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

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

In Britain last week, Jeremy Corbyn’s closest ally, his shadow treasurer John McDonnell, committed a Labour government to pay off the debts of piratical banks and, in effect, to continue so-called austerity.

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

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

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

Where are those who will shatter the silence? Or do we wait until the first

nuclear missile is fired?

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

Obama's Break with the Establishment

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

By Gareth Porter

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

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

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

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

which more costly. <http://nyti.ms/1oEOfjm> “

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Over the past week, in the mainstream media’s denunciations of Obama’s comments in The Atlantic, this passage about Clapper’s uncertainty about who had launched

the Sarin attack is ignored, although it would seem to be a key point. (See, for instance, Washington Post deputy editorial page editor Jackson Diehl's [op-ed](#) on Monday or last Friday's New York Times [op-ed](#) by columnist Roger Cohen.)

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

Questions about 'Credibility'

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

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

Obama responded to the "credibility" argument by Kerry and Ambassador to the U.N. Samantha Power at a White House meeting by pointing out that "dropping bombs on someone to prove that you're willing to drop bombs on someone is just about the worst reason to use force."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Views on Terrorism

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

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

Nevertheless, Obama has continued to preside over a vast increase in drone strikes in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen and Somalia. The fact that he has voiced a perspective that directly contradicts his own administration’s actual policies on wars in Yemen and Syria as well as on counter-terrorism policy suggests that

he has consistently compromised with senior national security officials, despite his misgivings, for political reasons.

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

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

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

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

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An Ugly Smear Campaign

Exclusive: A Zionist group bought a full-page New York Times ad to demonize Sidney and Max Blumenthal as “anti-Semites” and to demand that Hillary Clinton renounce them, a revival of a crude McCarthyism, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

An ugly feature of life in modern Washington is that anyone who dares criticize Israel's treatment of the Palestinians can expect to be subjected to nasty accusations of "anti-Semitism" and other attacks that are meant to make the target politically untouchable.

For example, The New York Times published a full-page ad on Saturday paid for by a pro-Zionist group called The World Values Network featuring a grainy graphic of Sidney Blumenthal and his son Max Blumenthal along with a demand that "Hillary Clinton must disavow her anti-Israel advisors."

The text accuses Sidney Blumenthal, Clinton's longtime personal friend and adviser, of sending the Secretary of State emails in which "he was obsessed with painting the Jewish state in the most unflattering light."

The ad cites Blumenthal writing on March 20, 2010, that "The policy of the present Israeli government is endangering the lives of American soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan." Blumenthal is also attacked for noting Israeli "settlers' theft of water from Palestinian towns" and, according to the ad, sending Clinton an article "claiming Israel was pursuing goals contrary to U.S. interests, while 'starting a rebellion' against the United States."

Though such comments might seem like no-brainers to anyone who has followed Israel's mistreatment of Palestinians and how that behavior has inspired Islamic extremism, The World Values Network views the comments as evidence of anti-Semitism.

The ad then denounces Blumenthal's son, Max, saying "Even more shocking still were Sid Blumenthal's attempts to feed Hillary Clinton toxic analysis from his son Max, a self-declared 'anti-Zionist' and fanatical Israel-hater. This rotten apple did not fall far from the tree."

The World Values Network is headed by Rabbi Shmuley Boteach, who likes to go by the nickname "America's Rabbi." The group is one of many that has sought to scar any political figure who won't toe the line of Israel's right-wing government as it rejects any reasonable peace agreement with the Palestinians and periodically "mows the grass" by launching bloody attacks on Gaza and the West Bank.

Typically, the way this Zionist political strategy works is to demonize individuals, like Blumenthal or his son, and then demand that an ally must disassociate from them or face political reprisals. The approach is a form of McCarthyism. In this case, The World Values Network makes clear what Clinton must do if she wishes to receive Jewish support in her presidential campaign. She must publicly renounce the Blumenthals.

The ad says: "Hillary Clinton is running for President. She's asking friends of

Israel to count on her support of the always-vulnerable Jewish State. If she won't disassociate herself from her discredited advisor Sid Blumenthal and his rabid, Israel-hating son Max, how can we?"

Pressuring Branson

In a similar attack, the same group has sought to drive a wedge between businessman Richard Branson and both former President Jimmy Carter and South African Bishop Desmond Tutu for their offense of criticizing Israel's abuse of Palestinians.

"But a little known and unfortunate fact about Branson is his strange, anti-Israel opinions and activities that are beneath a man known for having a good and kind heart," The World Values Network states at its Web site. "In 2007, Branson founded an organization called 'The Elders' which was made up of a council of twelve elder statesmen who would serve as 'independent global leaders working together for peace and human rights.' ...

"Unfortunately among the elders that Branson selected for his new group are a Who's who of some of the most tenacious, anti-Israel public figures in the world today. The Elders' anti-Israel statements and press releases condemning the Jewish state are a sad testament to this fact.

"Topping the Elders' list is former President Jimmy Carter, a man dedicated to the disgustingly fraudulent and anti-Semitic proposition that Israel is an apartheid State. Carter's defamatory fabrications about the Jewish State include the lie not only that Israel is like apartheid South Africa but that 'voices from Jerusalem dominate our media.' Last year he claimed [Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu wasn't interested in making peace...

"Other 'elders' in Branson's organization include the notoriously anti-Israel, anti-Semitic Bishop Desmond Tutu, ... Tutu is a supporter of the BDS movement, calling for an economic and cultural boycott of Israel. His bigoted views have surfaced with statements such as, 'The Jewish lobby is powerful – very powerful,' while accusing Jews of 'an arrogance – the arrogance of power because Jews are a powerful lobby in this land and all kinds of people woo their support.'

"Tutu has stated that Zionism has 'very many parallels with racism,' and has accused the Jewish state of subjecting the Palestinians to 'Israeli Apartheid.'"

Again, you might say that little of what Carter and Tutu have said is controversial – at least in the sense of what is empirically true. After all, Netanyahu himself vowed during his last campaign that he would not reach a peace agreement with the Palestinians and there is no doubt that the Israelis

treat the Palestinians as inferior beings who are sharply restricted in where they can and cannot go.

But the goal of attacks like the ones from The World Values Network is to use “guilt by association” to marginalize anyone who criticizes Israel by trying to scare a Clinton or a Branson into renouncing the Blumenthals or Carter or Tutu. If that wedge can be driven, then the repudiation itself can be waved about as an example of what happens to some public figure who dares fault the Israeli government.

As the powerful American Israel Public Affairs Committee holds its annual convention in Washington – and U.S. political leaders from all political persuasions troop across the stage to express their devotion and dedication to Israel – The New York Times ad is a reminder of what’s in store for anyone who deviates.

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](#)).

Censoring Palestinian Maps

When Zionists denounced a text book with maps showing historical Palestine, McGraw-Hill quickly caved, even destroying the copies in inventory, a victory for ideological censorship, writes Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

What is the difference between a textbook publisher giving into pressure from Christian fundamentalists seeking to censor the teaching of evolution, and a publisher giving into Zionists seeking to censor awareness of the ethnic cleansing of Palestine? Neither phenomenon is a matter of opinion or perspective.

One act of censorship denies facts established by scientific research. The other denies the documented violation of international law (for instance, the Fourth Geneva Convention) and multiple United Nations resolutions. So the answer to the question just asked is – there is no difference.

In early March 2016, executives at McGraw-Hill took the extreme step of [withdrawing from the market](#) a published text, *Global Politics: Engaging a*

Complex World, and then proceeded to destroy all the remaining books held in inventory. (Did they burn them?)

Global Politics, which had been on the market since 2012, was a text designed by its authors to “offer students a number of lenses through which to view the world around them.” Why did McGraw-Hill do this?

Apparently the book was obliterated (this seems to be an accurate description of the publisher’s actions) because, like a biology text that describes the established facts of evolution, *Global Politics* offered a “lens to view the world” that was judged blasphemous by a powerful, influential and ideologically driven element of the community.

Of course, that is not how McGraw-Hill rationalized its action. Instead, the publisher claimed that a serious inaccuracy in the text was belatedly discovered. This took the form of a series of four maps that show “Palestinian loss of land from 1946 to 2000.” The maps (see also attachment) are the first set which can be seen at the following link:

<http://www.thetower.org/3027ez-mcgraw-hill-publishes-college-textbook-with-mendacious-anti-israel-maps/>

The maps in question are not new or novel. Nor are they historically inaccurate, despite Zionists’ claims to the contrary. They can be seen individually and in different forms on websites of the BBC and Mondoweiss and are published in a number of history books, such as Mark Tessler’s well-received *A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*. Perhaps what the Zionists can’t abide is lining up the maps together in chronological order.

In truth, the objections reported to have been used by those who pressured McGraw-Hill are historically perverse – the sort of grasping at straws that reflects a biased and strained rewriting of history. For instance, an objection was made to the labeling of public land in pre-1948 Palestine as “Palestinian.” Why? Because the Zionist claim is that Palestine before 1948 was a British mandate and so the land was British and not Palestinian.

As their argument goes, “no one called the Arabs [of this area] Palestinians.” Of course, prior to 1948, no one called the East European Jews pouring in at this time “Israelis.” Further, according to those taking these maps to task, the West Bank at this time was controlled by Jordan and so it too was not Palestinian.

Obviously, no one brought up the fact that in September of 1922 the British had divided Palestine in two in order to artificially create what is now Jordan. The period after World War I was one of territorial transition, however, in

Palestine, the one constant was the persistent presence of the Arab Palestinians.

The Zionists offered many other dubious objections to the maps, which seem to have sent the publisher into something of a panic. It would certainly appear that no one at McGraw-Hill knew enough relevant history to make an accurate judgment on the complaints.

Running Scared

McGraw-Hill's response was to "immediately initiate an academic review," which determined that the maps in question "did not meet our academic standards." Who carried out the review? Well, McGraw-Hill won't say, but insists those who did so were "independent academics." Just what are McGraw-Hill's "academic standards"? Well, those haven't been articulated either. The publisher's reluctance to elaborate its claims makes their actions suspicious at best.

As Rania Khalek noted in an [March 11 article](#) on the incident in *Electronic Intifada*, these particular maps, showing the loss of Palestinian land over decades of Israeli expansion, "have the ability to cut through Israeli propaganda that portrays Palestinian anger and violence as rooted in religious intolerance and irrational hatred rather than a natural reaction to Israel's colonial expansionism, land theft and ethnic cleansing, all of which continue today."

This gives insight into the strenuous efforts made by Zionists to keep the sequenced maps away from any mass market distribution. As it is, they seem to have overlooked this textbook source for some four years. However, once they spotted it, and began "flooding" McGraw-Hill with complaints from "multiple sources," it took the publisher only about a week to suspend sales of the book.

The next obvious question is why didn't McGraw-Hill move to change the maps or just remove them? Why destroy the entire inventory? The extreme nature of the publisher's response remains unexplained but may stand as a testimony to the fact that the Zionist lobby has the same power within the corporate ranks of this textbook publisher as the anti-evolution fundamentalists have over most biology textbooks.

The Zionists' Maps

The Zionists who made the claim that the *Global Politics* maps are "mendacious" do so from a starting assumption that all the land from the Suez Canal to Golan Heights and Jordan River has always been Hebrew-Israeli.

On this basis [they posit their own maps](#) (see also attachment) to make the claim

that modern Israel, at least since 1967 and “in the pursuit of peace,” has voluntarily relinquished land rather than illegally taken it. These maps are the second set seen

at <http://www.thetower.org/3027ez-mcgraw-hill-publishes-college-textbook-with-mendacious-anti-israel-maps/>

It is significant that the Zionist maps begin in 1967, a year of major Israeli expansion through conquest. And, of course, the only land concession of any consequence since then is the Sinai Desert. The Zionist cartographical suggestion that Israel has given up Gaza and West Bank land is just a sleight of hand, given Israel’s use of Gaza as a prison colony and continued military control of every inch of the West Bank.

Finally, it is important to note that Israeli school maps are often pure propaganda. For instance, the Israeli newspaper [Haaretz recently carried a story](#) about a map used to teach seventh graders about the country’s geography. The map omits the “green line,” which is recognized internationally as Israel’s eastern border, as well as the majority of the nation’s Arab-Israeli communities. Maybe the Israeli Ministry of Education used McGraw-Hill’s “academic standards” to create this map.

Within academia there is the belief that textbooks are not to be subject to ideological censorship. This is a rather naive, but important, ideal. If such texts cannot maintain this level of integrity, the entire educational exercise becomes open to propaganda.

Unless McGraw-Hill becomes transparent about its “independent academic review” and offers an explanation as to why it went to the extreme of destroying its inventory of *Global Politics*, one can only assume that the publisher has no objection to censoring its products in the face of pressure from an ideologically driven group.

No doubt the motivation here is fear of controversy and subsequent market losses. In the absence of substantiating information, the whole story of an independent review and academic standards must be dismissed as a cover-up.

The sad truth is that the suborning of textbooks addressing culturally sensitive subjects has become a standard practice. Thus, the process of education is indeed threatened by incessant propaganda. This includes the culture war that swirls around American biology textbooks. It also includes the powerful Zionist drive to literally wipe the Palestinians off the map.

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Will We Miss President Obama?

Exclusive: President Obama doesn't take on Official Washington's powerful neocons head-on, but he does drag his heels on some of their crazy schemes, which is better than America can expect from Hillary Clinton, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

From a "realist" perspective, there are plenty of reasons to criticize President Barack Obama's foreign policy, particularly his timidity in facing down Official Washington's dominant neoconservatives and liberal interventionists on Afghanistan, Libya, Ukraine and even Syria – but he also has done more to steer the country away from additional military disasters than other establishment politicians would have.

That is especially true as the Democratic Party prepares to nominate former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton as its choice to replace Obama. Throughout her public life, Clinton has demonstrated a pedestrian understanding of foreign policy and has consistently bowed to neocon/liberal-hawk orthodoxy, seeming to learn nothing from the Iraq War and other failures of military interventions.

In a recent interview with MSNBC's Chris Matthews, Clinton scolded him for "conflating" her support for the catastrophic "regime change" war in Iraq with her insistence on the disastrous "regime change" war in Libya. In effect, she was saying that just because both decisions led to significant loss of life, failed states and terrorist control of large swaths of territory, the wars shouldn't be viewed as her failure to apply the lessons of Iraq to a similar situation in Libya. No "conflating" allowed.

By contrast, at several key moments, Obama has risen to the occasion, challenging some of the most dangerous "group thinks" of the foreign policy establishment, such as when he resisted the rush to judgment blaming Syrian President Bashar al-Assad for the Aug. 21, 2013 sarin gas attack outside Damascus. Obama rejected neocon/liberal-hawk demands for a punitive military assault on Assad's troops for supposedly crossing Obama's "red line."

Nearly all the Smart People of Washington wanted that bombing campaign even though the U.S. intelligence community did not have the evidence of Assad's guilt. The "group think" was that even if it wasn't clear that Assad and his military were responsible – even if the attack was a provocation by jihadist rebels trying to trick the United States into joining the war on their side – Obama should have hit Assad's forces anyway to maintain U.S. "credibility."

Bashing Obama

This know-nothingism of the Smart People – this disdain for empiricism and realism – was expressed on Friday by New York Times columnist Roger Cohen who castigated Obama for failing to launch U.S. airstrikes against the Syrian military in August 2013. Citing a series of interviews that Obama gave The Atlantic's Jeffrey Goldberg, Cohen suggested that nearly every bad thing since then can be blamed on Obama's inaction in Syria:

"Above all, did his decision in August 2013 not to uphold with force his 'red line' on the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons sound the death knell of American credibility, consolidate President Bashar al-Assad and empower [Russian] President [Vladimir] Putin? 'I'm very proud of this moment,' Obama insists. Proud?

"It is possible to believe that the situation in Syria would be worse if Obama had followed through with punitive strikes. It is possible to believe that ISIS would have emerged, seized vast territory, beheaded Americans, rattled Paris and struck through sympathizers in San Bernardino anyway. It is possible to believe that Putin would have annexed Crimea anyway. It is possible to believe that Putin would have started a war in eastern Ukraine anyway. It is possible to believe that Assad would be stronger as a result of Russia's military intervention anyway. It is possible to believe that Saudi 'Obama-is-a-Shiite-in-the-pocket-of-Iran' derangement syndrome and Saudi war in Yemen would have occurred anyway. It is possible to believe that more than a million Syrian refugees would have shaken Europe anyway.

"It is possible to believe the moon is a balloon."

Ha-ha! "The moon is a balloon!" How clever! In other words, Cohen, someone so esteemed that he is awarded regular space on The New York Times op-ed page, someone who has suffered not one iota for supporting the Iraq War which arguably contributed much more to the world's disorders than anything Obama has or hasn't done, is pretending that all would have been set right if only Obama had ordered airstrikes on the Syrian military despite the lack of U.S. evidence that Assad and his forces were actually guilty.

Cohen must have missed – or ignored – the section of Goldberg’s article citing how Obama was told by Director of National Intelligence James Clapper that the U.S. intelligence community lacked “slam dunk” evidence confirming Assad’s guilt, with Clapper choosing the phrase “slam dunk” to remind Obama of CIA Director George Tenet’s “slam dunk” assurance to President George W. Bush that the intelligence community could back up his claims about Iraq’s WMD, which, of course, turned out not to exist.

In other words, Clapper told Obama that the U.S. intelligence community didn’t know who had carried out the sarin attack – and subsequent evidence has pointed to a “false-flag” operation by rebel jihadists – but the Smart People of Washington all wanted to launch a military strike anyway. It doesn’t even matter to them that we now know that Obama’s destruction of Assad’s military could have opened the gates of Damascus to the forces of Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front and/or the Islamic State.

And now that Obama says he is “proud” of his decision not to bomb first and get the facts later – or as the President put it, to break with the “Washington playbook” of always relying on military force – Cohen and other members of the foreign policy elite berate and ridicule him.

An Insane Asylum?

Based on their cavalier view that facts don’t matter even on life-and-death issues like war or peace, one might argue that people like Cohen should be dispatched to the International Criminal Court or committed to an insane asylum instead of being treated as “Wise Men” and “Wise Women” whose pearls of wisdom fill the pages of The New York Times, The Washington Post and other establishment publications – and are thus read by millions of Americans.

Has it reached the point that mainstream journalists and policymakers in Washington care not one hoot for the truth? Do they simply push propaganda to enforce public support for their ideological fantasies, the bloodier the better? Or do they actually believe their own propaganda and have crossed over into complete madness?

This disdain for empirical evidence has become a hallmark of the American political-media establishment, most notoriously displayed in the overwhelming support for the WMD lies that justified the invasion of Iraq but now present in almost every major international crisis, such as the unsupported charges that Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi planned genocide in 2011 and the wildly one-sided coverage of Ukraine, which ignores the U.S. hand in the 2014 coup that ousted an elected president.

Regarding Syria, Cohen is far from alone in reporting as flat fact that Assad crossed Obama's "red line" against using chemical weapons and that the "feckless" Obama blinked – just as in 2002-03, many of the same Smart People reported as flat fact that Iraq was hiding stockpiles of WMD. In neither case are these brilliant know-nothings punished for getting the facts wrong, even if lots of people die.

In "the old days," when I was working at The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1970s and 1980s, there was much more professional pride among journalists about getting the facts right, even if that meant challenging the spin coming from the White House and State Department.

Sure, back then, there were already signs of the profession's decline but it was nothing like it is today when the most "esteemed" journalists and columnists are contemptuous of anyone who shows skepticism toward the official line or the conventional wisdom. Today's goal for the Smart People is to establish your "credibility" by writing what Everyone Knows to Be True.

Goldberg's Contradiction

Goldberg's opus is schizophrenic in its own right because it makes no effort to reconcile Clapper's warning to Obama about the lack of evidence against Assad and Goldberg's matter-of-fact acceptance of Assad's guilt. Goldberg, a neocon himself who supported the Iraq War, simply can't break from the "group think" even when it conflicts with his own reporting.

Shouldn't Goldberg, Cohen and others first try to determine what the reality actually was or at least acknowledge the evidence raising doubts about the conventional wisdom? Since August 2013, there has been substantial investigative work showing that the sarin attack was most likely carried out by radical jihadists possibly with the support of Turkish intelligence, including reporting by legendary investigative journalist Seymour Hersh. [See Consortiumnews.com's "Was Turkey Behind Syrian Sarin Attack."]

In addition, the only rocket that United Nations inspectors recovered, which was found to carry sarin, was a home-made contraption that aeronautical experts calculated could travel only about two kilometers, not the nine kilometers that the "bomb-bomb-bomb Assad" advocates were citing as the Syrian military's launch point for the attack.

It also had made no sense for Assad to have launched the sarin attack outside Damascus just as U.N. inspectors were unpacking their bags at a Damascus hotel to begin investigating chemical attacks that Assad was blaming on the rebels. Assad would have known that a chemical attack would have diverted the inspectors

(as it did) and would force President Obama to declare that his “red line” had been crossed, possibly prompting a massive U.S. retaliatory strike (as it almost did). [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“The Collapsing Syria-Sarin Case.”](#)]

But facts and logic no longer matter to Official Washington’s foreign-policy elite. What matters is what the latest “group think” is and – since Assad has been so thoroughly demonized – virtually no one dares contradict the “group think” because to do so you would risk being deemed an “Assad apologist.”

However, to Obama’s credit, he pulled back at the last minute after hearing from the U.S. intelligence community that the case against Assad was dubious at best. Inside the U.S. foreign-policy establishment, Obama was almost alone in resisting demands for “action.”

Chickening Out

As for Goldberg, he conveniently forgot what he had just reported about Clapper’s “no slam dunk” warning to Obama. Instead, Goldberg simply reverted to the “group think,” which holds that Assad did it and that Obama chickened out.

Goldberg wrote, “The moment Obama decided not to enforce his red line and bomb Syria, he broke with what he calls, derisively, ‘the Washington playbook.’ This was his liberation day.”

Goldberg’s cognitive dissonance can’t seem to reconcile that there was no reason “to enforce his red line and bomb Syria” if Assad’s forces didn’t cross the red line in the first place. You might think that a political leader who demands facts before going to war and killing lots of possibly innocent people would be praised, not treated like a coward and a pariah.

But that is the core contradiction within today’s Official Washington where truth has become fully subordinated to ideological goals of the neocons and their “liberal interventionist” sidekicks. “Facts” are only valued if they can be twisted into generating public support for the neocons’ “regime change” agendas.

To the neocons and liberal hawks, it really didn’t matter that Iraq didn’t possess WMD, nor that Iraq wasn’t sharing its non-existent WMD with Al Qaeda. What mattered was that all the Smart People of Washington had decided that these fantasies were true or at least were needed to scare the American people into line.

If you cared about your career, you ran with the stampeding herd, knowing that there really is safety in numbers. Since all the Smart People were wrong, that meant that almost no one would be punished. The ultimate price for the cowardly

journalism about Iraq's WMD would be paid by the people of Iraq and the U.S. soldiers dispatched to kill and be killed.

In Jeffrey Goldberg's case, he even got rewarded with extraordinary access to President Obama and his inner circle. Roger Cohen, Thomas Friedman, David Ignatius, Fred Hiatt, Charles Krauthammer and a long list of other Iraq War cheerleaders got to pontificate on and on in elite publications as if nothing untoward had happened.

Although Obama deserves credit for resisting "the Washington playbook" on bombing Syria, he can fairly be criticized for ceding to other neocon/liberal-hawk schemes, such as escalating the Afghan War in 2009, recklessly supporting "regime change" in Libya in 2011, and turning another "regime change" in Ukraine in 2014 into the start of a new Cold War with Russia.

Accepting Disinformation

Obama also has allowed neocon/liberal-hawk disinformation to continue cycling and recycling through the American political belief system without challenge. For instance, even though he was told by U.S. intelligence analysts that the Syria-sarin case was weak or bogus, he didn't share that information with the American people.

If he had, Obama could have underscored the dangerous delusions of the neocons and liberal hawks. Obama could have enlisted the American people on his side by arming them with facts. But there is something in Obama's personality that prevents him from engaging in that kind of democratic populism.

As either an elitist himself or a guy who wants approval of the elites, Obama acts as if he must protect the secrets even when his own interests – as well as the public interest – would be served by sharing the facts with the people.

Similarly, Obama knows how distorted much of the case against Russia is regarding Ukraine. He knows the reality about the U.S.-backed coup overthrowing Ukraine's elected government; he knows that the infamous sniper attacks on Feb. 20, 2014, leading to the putsch two days later were probably a provocation by extremist anti-government operatives; he knows that the Crimean referendum on leaving Ukraine and rejoining Russia was a legitimate expression of popular will, not the "sham" that his foreign policy officials still assert; he received intelligence briefings on who was really at fault for the shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over eastern Ukraine on July 17, 2014; and he knows about the pervasive corruption and the neo-Nazi taint inside the U.S.-backed post-coup regime.

But Obama won't share those facts with the American people, either. Despite his

early promises of running a transparent administration, he has instead operated one of the most opaque and propagandistic in modern times. What is particularly strange is that he does so often to his own disadvantage. By hiding the reality, he plays into the hands of neocons and liberal hawks who rely on propaganda to manipulate the public – as they make him appear “feckless.”

If the Smart People had had their way in Syria – and if Obama had ordered a severe bombing campaign against Assad’s military – it would have possibly and perhaps probably cleared the path for an Al Qaeda and/or Islamic State victory, since they represented the most effective elements of the Syrian rebel movement.

Similarly, if Obama had followed Official Washington’s “group think” about establishing the sweet-sounding “no-fly zones” or “safe zones” inside Syria, the U.S. military would have had to destroy Syria’s air force and air defenses, again creating a security vacuum that Al Qaeda and/or the Islamic State could have filled.

It should be noted that Hillary Clinton has been a top advocate for these neocon/liberal-hawk “regime change” schemes, as she was in pushing Obama into the military intervention in Libya in 2011, overthrowing Muammar Gaddafi’s regime and leaving behind a failed state where the Islamic State now operates, including its mass beheading of Coptic Christians.

But none of this ugly reality impacts the Smart People of Washington. Instead, the likes of Roger Cohen blame everything on Obama’s failure to bomb Assad.

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](#)).

Behind the Crimea/Russia Reunion

Exclusive: Official Washington marches in propaganda lockstep about Crimea’s decision to rejoin Russia two years ago, with references to a Russian “invasion” and a “sham” referendum of Crimea’s voters, but the reality is different, says ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

With high symbolism Russian President Vladimir Putin is visiting Crimea “to check on the construction of the Kerch Strait Bridge, which will link the

Crimean peninsula and continental Russia,” the Kremlin announced on Thursday.

As the Russians like to say, “It is no accident” that he chose today – marking the second anniversary of Russia’s annexation of Crimea three weeks after the U.S.-sponsored coup in Kiev on Feb. 22, 2014, and just days after a referendum in which Crimean voters approved leaving Ukraine and rejoining Russia by a 96 percent majority.

The 12-mile bridge is a concrete metaphor, so to speak, for the re-joining of Crimea and Russia. When completed (the target is December 2018), it will be the longest bridge in Russia.

Yet, the Obama administration continues to decry the political reunion between Crimea and Russia, a relationship that dates back to the Eighteenth Century. Instead, the West has accused Russia of violating its pledge in the 1994 Budapest agreement – signed by Ukraine, Russia, Great Britain and the U.S. – “to respect the independence and sovereignty and existing borders of Ukraine,” in exchange for Ukraine surrendering its Soviet-era nuclear weapons.

Did Moscow violate the Budapest agreement when it annexed Crimea? A fair reading of the text yields a Yes to that question. Of course, there were extenuating circumstances, including alarm among Crimeans over what the unconstitutional ouster of Ukraine’s president might mean for them, as well as Moscow’s not unfounded nightmare of NATO taking over Russia’s major, and only warm-water, naval base at Sevastopol in Crimea.

But what is seldom pointed out is that the other parties, including the United States, seem to have been guilty, too, in promoting a coup d’etat removing the democratically elected president and essentially disenfranchising millions of ethnic Russian Ukrainians who had voted for President Viktor Yanukovich. In such a context, it takes a markedly one-dimensional view to place blame solely on Russia for violating the Budapest agreement.

Did the Western-orchestrated coup in Kiev violate the undertaking “to respect the independence and sovereignty” of Ukraine? How about the pledge in the Budapest agreement “to refrain from economic coercion designed to subordinate to their own interest the exercise by the Ukraine of the rights inherent in its sovereignty.” Political and economic interference were rife in the months before the February 2014 coup. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“Who Violated Ukraine’s Sovereignty?”](#)]

Did Ukrainian President Yanukovich expect to be overthrown if he opted for Moscow’s economic offer, and not Europe’s? Hard to tell. But if the putsch came as a total surprise, he sorely underestimated what \$5 billion in “democracy

promotion" by Washington can buy.

After Yanukovich turned down the European Community's blandishments, seeing deep disadvantages for Ukraine, American neoconservatives like National Endowment for Democracy President Carl Gershman and Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland pulled out all the stops to enable Ukraine to fulfill what Nuland called its "European aspirations."

"The revolution will not be televised," or so the saying goes. But the Feb. 22, 2014 putsch in Kiev was YouTube-ized two-and-a-half weeks in advance. Recall Nuland's amateurish, boorish – not to mention irresponsible – use of an open telephone line to plot regime change in Ukraine with fellow neocon, U.S. Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt, during an intercepted conversation posted on YouTube on Feb. 4.

Nuland tells Pyatt, "Yats is the guy. He's got the economic experience, the governing experience. He's the guy you know. ... He has warned there is an urgent need for unpopular cutting of subsidies and social payments before Ukraine can improve."

Arseniy Yatsenyuk (aka "Yats") was quickly named prime minister of the coup regime, which was immediately given diplomatic recognition by Washington. Since then, he has made a royal mess of things. Ukraine is an economic basket case, and "Yats" barely survived a parliamentary vote of no confidence and is widely believed to be on his way out.

Did Moscow's strong reaction to the coup, to the danger of NATO setting up shop next door in Ukraine come as a surprise to Nuland and other advisers? If so, she ought to get new advisers, and quickly. That Russia would not let Crimea become a NATO base should have been a no-brainer.

Nuland may have seen the coup as creating a win-win situation. If Putin acted decisively, it would be all the easier to demonize him, denounce "Russian aggression," and put a halt to the kind of rapprochement between President Barack Obama and Putin that thwarted neocon plans for shock and awe against Syria in late summer 2013. However, if Putin acquiesced to the Ukrainian coup and accepted the dangers it posed to Russia, eventual membership for Ukraine in NATO might become more than a pipedream.

Plus, if Putin swallowed the humiliation, think of how politically weakened he would have become inside Russia. As NED's Gershman made clear, not only did American neocons see Ukraine as "the biggest prize" but as a steppingstone to ultimately achieve "regime change" in Moscow, or as Gershman wrote, "Putin may find himself on the losing end not just in the near abroad but within Russia

itself.”

Russian Equities

In a formal address in the Kremlin on March 18, 2014, the day Crimea was re-incorporated into Russia, Putin went from dead serious to somewhat jocular in discussing the general issue:

“We have already heard declarations from Kiev about Ukraine soon joining NATO. What would this have meant for Crimea and Sevastopol in the future? It would have meant that NATO’s navy would be right there in this city of Russia’s military glory, and this would create not an illusory but a perfectly real threat to the whole of southern Russia. ...

“We are not opposed to cooperation with NATO ... [but] NATO remains a military alliance, and we are against having a military alliance making itself at home right in our backyard or in our historic territory. I simply cannot imagine that we would travel to Sevastopol to visit NATO sailors. Of course, most of them are wonderful guys, but it would be better to have them come and visit us, be our guests, rather than the other way around.”

A little-known remark by Putin a month later (on April 17, 2014) was unusually blunt in focusing on one of the main reasons behind Moscow’s strong reaction – namely, Russia’s felt need to thwart Washington’s plan to incorporate Ukraine and Crimea into the U.S. anti-ballistic missile deployment encircling Russia. Putin was quite direct:

“This issue is no less, and probably even more important, than NATO’s eastward expansion. Incidentally, our decision on Crimea was partially prompted by this.”

This is a serious bone of contention, with far reaching implications. In short, if the Russian military becomes convinced that the Pentagon thinks it has the capability to carry out a strategic strike without fear of significant retaliation, the strategic tripwire for a nuclear exchange will regress more than four decades to the extremely dangerous procedure of “launch on warning,” allowing mere minutes to “use ‘em, or lose ‘em.”

Russia has been repeatedly rebuffed – or diddled – when it has suggested bilateral talks on this key issue. Four years ago, for example, at the March 2012 summit in Seoul, Russia’s then-President Dmitry Medvedev asked Obama when the U.S. would be prepared to address Russian concerns over European missile defense.

In remarks picked up by camera crews, Obama asked for some “space” until after the U.S. election. Obama can be heard saying, “This is my last election. After

my election, I have more flexibility.” Putin claims to have seen no flexibility on this strategic question.

What Coup?

The Obama administration and its stenographers in the mainstream U.S. media would like the relevant Ukrainian history to start on Feb. 23, 2014 with “Yats” and his coup cronies deemed the “legitimate” authorities. To that end, there was a need to airbrush what George Friedman, president of the think-tank STRATFOR, publicly called “the most blatant coup in history” – the one plotted by Nuland and Pyatt in early February 2014 and carried out on Feb. 22.

As for Russia’s alleged designs on Crimea, one searches in vain for evidence that, before the coup, the Kremlin had given much thought to the vulnerability of the peninsula and a possible need to annex it. According to the public record, Putin first focused on Crimea at a strategy meeting on Feb. 23, the day after the coup.

Yet, given the U.S. mainstream media’s propagandistic reporting on the Ukraine crisis, it is small wonder that the American people forgot about (or never heard of) the putsch in Kiev. The word “coup” was essentially banished from the U.S. media’s lexicon regarding Ukraine.

The New York Times went so far as to publish what it deemed an investigative article in early 2015 announcing that there was no coup in Ukraine, just President Yanukovich mysteriously disappearing off to Russia. In reaching its no-coup conclusion, the Times ignored any evidence that there was a coup, including the Nuland-Pyatt phone call. In regards to Ukraine, “coup” became just another unutterable four-letter word.

Last year, when Sen. John McCain continued the “no coup” fiction, I placed the following letter in the *Washington Post* on July 1, 2015 (the censors apparently being away at the beach):

“In his June 28 Sunday Opinion essay, ‘The Ukraine cease-fire fiction,’ Sen. John McCain was wrong to write that Russian President Vladimir Putin annexed Crimea without provocation. What about the coup in Kiev on Feb. 22, 2014, that replaced President Viktor Yanukovich with pro-Western leaders favoring membership in NATO? Was that not provocation enough?

“This glaring omission is common in The Post. The March 10 World Digest item ‘Putin had early plan to annex Crimea’ described a ‘secret meeting’ Mr. Putin held on Feb. 23, 2014, during which ‘Russia decided it would take the Crimean Peninsula.’ **No mention was made of the coup the previous day. ...**” (emphasis added)

And so it goes. More recently, in Jeffrey Goldberg's lengthy *magnum opus* in *The Atlantic* on Obama's foreign policy, there were two mentions of how Russia "invaded" Crimea, two allusions to Russia's "invasion" of Ukraine, but not a word about the coup in Kiev.

Invincible Ignorance

In Catholic theology, the theory that some people can be "invincibly ignorant" can lessen or even erase their guilt. Many Americans are so malnourished on accurate news – and so busy trying to make ends meet – that they would seem to qualify for this dispensation, with pardon for not knowing about things like the coup in Kiev and other key happenings abroad.

The following, unnerving example brings this to mind: A meeting of progressives that I attended last year was keynoted by a professor from a local Washington university. Discussing what she called the Russian "invasion" of Crimea, the professor bragged about her 9-year-old son for creating a large poster in Sunday School saying, "Mr. Putin, What about the commandment 'Thou Shall Not Kill?'" The audience nodded approvingly.

This picnic, thought I, needed a skunk. So I asked the professor what her little boy was alluding to. My question was met by a condescending smirk of disbelief: "Crimea, of course." I asked how many people had been killed in Crimea. "Oh, hundreds, probably thousands," was her answer. I told her that there were, in fact, no reports of anyone having been killed.

I continued, explaining that, with respect to Russia's "invasion," what you don't see in the "mainstream media" is that, a treaty between Ukraine and Russia from the late 1990s allowed Russia to station up to 25,000 Russian troops on the Crimean peninsula. There were 16,000 there, when a U.S.-led coup ousted the democratically elected government in Kiev on Feb. 22, 2014. (I had grabbed the attention of the audience; yet stares of incredulity persisted.)

In contrast to Crimea's bloodless political secession from Ukraine, the Ukrainian government's "anti-terror operation" against ethnic Russians in the east who resisted the coup authorities in Kiev has killed an estimated 10,000 people, many of them civilians. Yet, in the mainstream U.S. media, this carnage is typically blamed on Putin, not on the Ukrainian military which sent to the front neo-Nazi and other right-wing militias (such as the Azov battalion) contemptuous of ethnic Russians. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Ukraine Merges Nazis and Islamists.](#)"]

A few weeks before the professor's remarks, after a speaking engagement in Moscow, I had a chance to do a little souvenir shopping on the Arbat. The

behavior of the sales people brought me up short. It was decades since I had served as a CIA officer in the Soviet Union; the shopkeepers then were usually taciturn, allergic to discussing politics, and not at all given to bragging about their leaders.

This time it was different. The sales people wanted to know what I thought of President Putin. They were eager to thrust two coffee cups into the shopping bag that I had filled with small gifts for our grandchildren. On one was emblazoned the Russian words for “polite people” under an image of two men with insignia-less green uniforms – depicting the troops that surrounded and eventually took over Ukrainian installations and government buildings in Crimea without a shot being fired. The other cup bore a photo of Putin over the Russian words for “the most polite of people.”

The short conversation that ensued made it immediately clear that Russian salespeople in Moscow – unlike many “sophisticated” Americans – were well aware that the troubles in Ukraine and Crimea began in Kiev on Feb 22, 2014, with “the most blatant coup in history.” And, not least, they were proud of the way Putin used the “polite green men” to ensure that Crimea was not lost to NATO.

Ray McGovern works for Tell the Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. During his 27-year career as a CIA analyst he headed the Soviet Foreign Policy Branch. In retirement, he helped create Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS).

Obama's Plea for Validation

President Obama's lengthy interviews with a neocon journalist from an establishment magazine suggest Obama is still searching futilely for Official Washington's blessings on his somewhat “realist” foreign policy, writes Michael Brenner.

By Michael Brenner

The Atlantic has just published a long essay, *The Obama Doctrine*, by their Washington national correspondent, Jeffrey Goldberg. Based in most part on wide-ranging reflective interviews with President Barack Obama, the article makes extensive use of direct quotes from that interview. Considerable space is devoted to the various American engagements in the Middle East along with Obama's views on prospects for the region.

It is a remarkable journalistic event insofar as it represents a preemptive attempt by a sitting president to shape the discourse about his record and his legacy. What he says is revealing – less as analysis and interpretation of actions taken, though, than as an “exhibit” of all that is peculiar about Obama’s policy-making style – and what the implications for American diplomacy have been.

Obama’s overall stance is one of dissociation from his own administration and its conduct. Throughout, he appears to be referring to himself in the third person. This can be seen as the soon-to-be-memoir writer’s attempt to cast himself as detached statesman while distancing himself from errors made.

However, this degree of dissociation by a still incumbent president is odd. It suggests that he has been playing the role of participant-observer while in the Oval Office. Moreover, it conveys his sense that somehow the words he utters are equivalent to actions. Indeed, a feature of his presidency has been a frequent mismatch of words and deeds which never get reconciled. Nor do they in this seemingly candid interview. That raises a cardinal question: is this honest reflection or a characteristic flight from accountability?

Two, this strange attitude is most pronounced in his remarks about the Middle East. For example, he inveighs against allowing the United States to be placed in a position of picking sides in Islam’s Sunni-Shi’ite civil war. He is especially adamant about the dangers of American power being used as a tool of the Saudis to advance their cause.

Yet, this is exactly what he has been doing in Yemen, Iraq, Syria and Bahrain. Moreover, he never has confronted the Saudi leaders about the promotion of wahabbism or their concrete support for the Islamic State and Al Qaeda (in Syria and Yemen – where they fight side-by-side with Saudi troops) – either in private or in public.

Let’s step back and reflect on this. Barack Obama, President of the United States, in telling a journalist that his most important “ally” in the Middle East has been aiding and abetting America’s mortal enemies – and that they should stop. Yet, three years after those hostile actions began he has yet to voice his displeasure directly in numerous meetings.

Instead, he gets an interview published in a magazine that the Saudi leaders might pick up in the waiting room at the Mayo Clinic on their next medical visit. If there is any sense or logic to this, it must conform to a mental process never before encountered.

Obama urges that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Iran learn to co-exist, “to

share space,” in the region. Yet, in the wake of the nuclear accord, he’s gone overboard in denouncing the Islamic Republic of Iran as the primary source of instability in the Middle East and insists that until they cease and desist, no normalization is possible.

As Goldberg quotes Susan Rice in seconding the President: “The Iran deal was never primarily about trying to open a new era of relations between the U.S. and Iran.” In other words, if the U.S. refuses adamantly to “share space” – as in Iraq – on what grounds does he here encourage the Saudis to do so? On Turkey, Obama is similarly mealy-mouthed as regards their tangible contributions to both the Islamic State and Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front – although he refrains from the same direct criticism of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Finally, Obama strongly criticizes Washington’s foreign policy Establishment as being overly rigid in their thinking and imposing their views on American leaders. This is baffling – is not the President the head of the Establishment? Has Obama not stocked his two administrations – to a man and to a woman – with members of the Establishment? Robert Gates, David Petraeus and John Brennan were his appointees.

Gates boasts in his memoir of the scheme he orchestrated to force Obama’s hand in escalating in Afghanistan in 2009. With his allies Petraeus and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Gates planned to expand it further and to make its duration indefinite. Only Gen. Stanley McChrystal’s inopportune public insults of the President prevented its success.

Does he not invite Robert Kagan and Thomas Friedman to intimate Camp David deep think sessions? Did Obama not put Victoria Nuland, Dick Cheney’s principal deputy foreign policy adviser (and Kagan’s wife), in charge of European policy where she helped foment the Ukrainian coup – and from which post she aggressively runs a belligerent policy toward Russia?

Hasn’t he bowed the knee before the Israeli lobby – going so far as to allow himself to be humiliated by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu before Congress without any rejoinder? Does he not have the authority to address the country directly and to instruct them about world realities?

Yet, he whines to Goldberg that he is somehow caught in a web spun by “the Establishment.” What is a reasonable interpretation of this illogic? Election politics? – but nothing has changed since his 2012 re-election. (Anyway, is starting a new war in the Middle East a sure-fire vote-getter?) Was the President fantasizing for seven years, was he blackmailed, did he lack the conviction to take different paths, or was he simply weak and feckless?

Here is the Obama view of where he fits in Washington's power map of foreign policy-makers/thinkers: "There's a playbook in Washington that presidents are supposed to follow. It's a playbook that comes out of the foreign-policy establishment. And the playbook prescribes responses to different events, and these responses tend to be militarized responses.

"Where America is directly threatened, the playbook works. But the playbook can also be a trap that can lead to bad decisions. In the midst of an international challenge like Syria, you get judged harshly if you don't follow the playbook, even if there are good reasons why it does not apply."

The deference and passivity accorded the upholders of the conventional wisdom exposes the critical flaw in Obama's interpretation of his authority as Chief Executive and Commander-in-Chief. He is not a constrained Doge of Venice under strict surveillance by the Great Council of aristocrats. He is not just the custodian of some Holy Grail in the sacred custody of a vestal priesthood. He is not the prize student being tested in a simulation exercise by masters of the guild.

The Washington Consensus embodied by the head-nodders of the think tanks and op-ed pages is nothing more than the calcified corpus of failed ideas which have brought the United States nothing but wrack and ruin for (at least) the past 15 years. The Iraq debacle cut the ground from under it – thereby helping to clear the way for Obama's entry into the White House. His historic task was reformation. Instead, he decided that acceptance into the ranks of the Establishment was worth a ritualized surrender.

All of this is baffling. Part of the explanation lies in the President's singular personality. Despite his high intelligence, he seems to live with a great number of unreconciled contradictions. Some have to do with his background and upbringing. Some are intellectual. The title of The Atlantic article is misleading. There is no "Obama Doctrine." Incoherence is the hallmark of American actions in the Middle East and elsewhere. The interview with Goldberg confirms that.

Seeking Validation

Barack Obama gave Goldberg many, many hours of his time. The President allowed the writer to accompany him on international jaunts, and accorded him entry to his inner circle. Goldberg has thanked the President by concentrating on the supposed historic error of not bombing Syria when Assad allegedly (if factually mistakenly) was accused of crossing the notorious "red line" by using sarin gas.

That is the pivot of the article; it is returned to time after time in positing

the hard-line critique of the Obama foreign policy as the one authoritative perspective. That was predictable. Goldberg is an Israeli who started his career at the Likud megaphone *The Jerusalem Post*. Why does a President afford such liberties to a tendentious journalist?

European monarchs of old had court portraitists. American presidencies have Boswells like Bob Woodward and now Jeff Goldberg. Boswells who are not friends but on assignment. The purpose seems similar: to immortalize the ruler at the height of his powers. To show a forceful leader mastering a daunting problem with resolve, sobriety and dedication to the interests of his fellow citizens.

This being America, the subject matter has to be one of action and suspense. Bush the Younger seeking retribution for 9/11. Now Barack Obama in a titanic struggle to escape the coils of stifling dogma.

A narrative account that covers a long span of time, though, does have a few drawbacks. It cannot fix the image at a single moment that will last for eternity. However laudatory, the written account is liable to be viewed differently as time goes by. And Goldberg's portrait is not very becoming.

A picture wings the flying hour; a story is part of the flow of events. There is the further drawback that the chronicler may depict persons and things in ways that are not entirely complimentary to the main protagonist in the drama.

Journalistic talents may be available for lease but they do not come with a money back guarantee. For the exchange currency is not hard cash but access. The White House gets surefire blockbuster publicity – and, in this case, the chance to set in place the first sketch of his Presidential record.

A complication is that while the President is the patron, the commission is loosely written to allow the artist unmonitored access to other members of the court. Their vanities and ambitions are not identical with his. See the quoted remarks of John Kerry and Pentagon officials.

In the light of the ensuing risks, why does Barack Obama enter into such a pact? Our celebrity culture provides part of the answer. Publicity is what it is all about. A public figure whose meteoric rise is a testament to star power must be acutely sensitive to the imperative of how vital to success is mythic imagery and turns in the limelight. The stage lights have the special glow when energized by a graphic account of star performance.

Then there is the simple truth that presidents want to celebrate themselves. They are the ultimate celebrity in a celebrity culture. They in fact feel proud of what they do and how they do it. Reality is clay in my hands. A successful leader must never allow the future to be hostage to history – even

yesterday's history. Except where history can be bent better to serve fresh exigencies – or a post-presidency career of 30-35 years.

The selection of a hawk like Goldberg to be his interlocutor demonstrates another truth that also can be inferred from the Obama discourse. Authority on matters of foreign policy is understood to rest with the guardians of the very Establishment that constrains him.

It is the neocons and their hard-line companions in arms who, he believes, are the cynosure of core American beliefs about the world and our place in it. So it ultimately is from them that he must seek validation. This conviction of Obama's, of course, becomes self-confirming – as we have observed for seven years.

Obama is a man of reflection, at least as concerns his own identity and self-image. Maybe, the serial interviews with Goldberg were the first try at coming to terms with himself as director of American foreign policy. So he invited Goldberg to join him in an excursion through the presidential mind – a Virgil exploring his own psyche.

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How Propaganda Feeds War on Syria

Western propaganda against countries targeted for “regime change” can be especially insidious because mainstream journalists abandon skepticism and go with the flow, such as the case of Syrian “torture” photos, writes Rick Sterling.

There has been a pattern of sensational but untrue reports that lead to public acceptance of U.S. and Western military intervention in countries around the world.

For instance, in Gulf War 1 (1990-91), there were reports of Iraqi troops stealing incubators from Kuwait, leaving babies to die on the cold floor. Relying on the testimony of a Red Crescent doctor, Amnesty International 'verified' the false claims.

Ten years later, there were reports of yellow cake uranium going to Iraq for development of weapons of mass destruction.

One decade later, there were reports of Libyan soldiers drugged on viagra and raping women as they advanced.

In 2012, NBC broadcaster Richard Engel was supposedly kidnapped by a pro-Assad Syrian militia but luckily freed by Syrian opposition fighters, the “Free Syrian Army.”

All these reports were later confirmed to be fabrications and lies. They all had the goal of manipulating public opinion and they all succeeded in one way or another. Despite the consequences, which were often disastrous, none of the perpetrators were punished or paid any price.

It has been famously said, “Those who do not learn from the past are doomed to repeat it.” This report is a critical review of the so-called “Caesar Torture Photos” story. As will be shown, there is strong evidence the accusations are entirely or substantially false.

Overview of ‘Caesar Torture Photos’

On Jan. 20, 2014, two days before negotiations about the Syrian conflict were scheduled to begin in Switzerland, a sensational report burst onto television and front pages around the world. The story was that a former Syrian army photographer had 55,000 photographs documenting the torture and killing of 11,000 detainees by the Syrian security establishment.

The Syrian photographer was given the code-name “Caesar.” The story became known as the “Caesar Torture Photos.” A team of lawyers plus digital and forensic experts were hired by the Carter-Ruck law firm, on contract to Qatar, to go to the Middle East and check the veracity of “Caesar” and his story. They concluded that “Caesar” was truthful and the photographs indicated “industrial scale killing.”

CNN, London’s Guardian and LeMonde broke the story which was subsequently broadcast in news reports around the world. The Caesar photo accusations were announced as negotiations began in Switzerland. With the opposition demanding the resignation of the Syrian government, negotiations quickly broke down.

For the past two years the story has been preserved with occasional bursts of publicity and supposedly corroborating reports. Most recently, in December 2015 Human Rights Watch (HRW) released a report titled “If the Dead Could Speak” with significant focus on the Caesar accusations.

Following are 12 significant problems with the “Caesar torture photos” story:

- 1. Almost half the photos show the opposite of the allegations.**

The Carter Ruck Inquiry Team claimed there were about 55,000 photos total with about half of them taken by "Caesar" and the other half by other photographers. The Carter Ruck team claimed the photos were all "similar." Together they are all known as "Caesar's Torture Photos."

The photographs are in the custody of an opposition organization called the Syrian Association for Missing and Conscience Detainees (SAFMCD). In 2015, they allowed Human Rights Watch (HRW) to study all the photographs which have otherwise been secret. In December 2015, HRW released their report titled "If the Dead Could Speak."

The biggest revelation is that over 46 percent of the photographs (24,568) do not show people "tortured to death" by the Syrian government. On the contrary, they show dead Syrian soldiers and victims of car bombs and other violence (HRW pp 2-3). Thus, nearly half the photos show the opposite of what was alleged. These photos, never revealed to the public, confirm that the opposition is violent and has killed large numbers of Syrian security forces and civilians.

2. The claim that other photos only show "tortured detainees" is exaggerated or false.

The Carter Ruck report says "Caesar" only photographed bodies brought from Syrian government detention centers. In its December 2015 report, HRW said, "The largest category of photographs, 28,707 images, are photographs Human Rights Watch understands to have died in government custody, either in one of several detention facilities or after being transferred to a military hospital." They estimate 6,786 dead individuals in the set.

The photos and the deceased are real, but how they died and the circumstances are unclear. There is strong evidence some died in conflict. Others died in the hospital. Others died and their bodies were decomposing before they were picked up. These photographs seem to document a war-time situation where many combatants and civilians are killed.

It seems the military hospital was doing what it had always done: maintaining a photographic and documentary record of the deceased. Bodies were picked up by different military or intelligence branches. While some may have died in detention; the big majority probably died in the conflict zones. The accusations by "Caesar." the Carter Ruck report and HRW that these are all victims of "death in detention" or "death by torture" or death in "government custody" are almost certainly false.

3. The true identity of "Caesar" is probably not as claimed.

The Carter Ruck Report says "This witness who defected from Syria and who had

been working for the Syrian government was given the code-name 'Caesar' by the inquiry team to protect the witness and members of his family." (CRR p12)

However if his story is true, it would be easy for the Syrian government to determine who he really is. After all, how many military photographers took photos at Tishreen and Military 601 Hospitals during those years and then disappeared? According to the Carter Ruck report, Caesar's family left Syria around the same time. Considering this, why is "Caesar" keeping his identity secret from the Western audience? Why does "Caesar" refuse to meet even with highly sympathetic journalists or researchers?

The fact that 46 percent of the total photographic set is substantially the opposite of what was claimed indicates two possibilities: Caesar and his promoters knew the contents but lied about them expecting nobody to look. Or, Caesar and his promoters did not know the contents and falsely assumed they were like the others. The latter seems more likely which supports the theory that Caesar is not who he claims to be.

4. The Carter Ruck Inquiry was faulty, rushed and politically biased.

The credibility of the "Caesar" story has been substantially based on the Carter-Ruck Inquiry Team which "verified" the defecting photographer and his photographs. The following facts suggest the team was biased with a political motive:

–The investigation was financed by the government of Qatar which is a major supporter of the armed opposition.

–The contracted law firm, Carter Ruck and Co, has previously represented Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, also known for his avid support of the armed opposition.

–The American on the legal inquiry team, Professor David M. Crane, has a long history working for the U.S. Defense Department and Defense Intelligence Agency. The U.S. government has been deeply involved in the attempt at "regime change" with demands that President Bashar "Assad must go" beginning in summer 2011 and continuing until recently.

–Crane is personally partisan in the conflict. He has campaigned for a Syrian War Crimes Tribunal and testified before Congress in October 2013, three months before the Caesar revelations.

–By their own admission, the inquiry team was under "time constraints" (CRR, p11).

-By their own admission, the inquiry team did not even survey most of the photographs

-The inquiry team was either ignorant of the content or intentionally lied about the 46 percent showing dead Syrian soldiers and attack victims.

-The inquiry team did its last interview with "Caesar" on Jan. 18, 2014, quickly finalized a report and rushed it into the media on Jan. 20, two days prior to the start of United Nations-sponsored negotiations.

The self-proclaimed "rigor" of the Carter Ruck investigation is without foundation. The claims to a "scientific" investigation are similarly without substance and verging on the ludicrous.

5. The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) is involved.

In an interview on France24, David Crane of the inquiry team describes how "Caesar" was brought to meet them by "his handler, his case officer." The expression "case officer" usually refers to the CIA. This would be a common expression for Professor Crane who previously worked in the Defense Intelligence Agency. The involvement of the CIA additionally makes sense since there was a CIA budget of \$1 billion for Syria operations in 2013. Crane's "Syria Accountability Project" is based at Syracuse University where the CIA actively recruits new officers despite student resistance.

Why does it matter if the CIA is connected to the "Caesar" story? Because the CIA has a long history of disinformation campaigns. In 2011, false reports of viagra fueled rape by Libyan soldiers were widely broadcast in Western media as the U.S. pushed for a military mandate. Decades earlier, the world was shocked to hear about Cuban troops fighting in Angola raping Angolan women. The CIA chief of station for Angola, John Stockwell, later described how they invented the false report and spread it around the world. The CIA was very proud of that disinformation achievement. Stockwell's book, *In Search of Enemies*, is still relevant.

6. The accusers portray simple administrative procedures as mysterious and sinister.

The Carter Ruck inquiry team falsely claimed there were about 11,000 tortured and killed detainees. They then posed the question: Why would the Syrian government photograph and document the people they just killed? The Carter Ruck Report speculates that the military hospital photographed the dead to prove that the "orders to kill" had been followed. The "orders to kill" are assumed.

A more logical explanation is that dead bodies were photographed as part of

normal hospital / morgue procedure to maintain a file of the deceased who were received or treated at the hospital. The same applies to the body labeling / numbering system. The Carter Ruck report suggests there is something mysterious and possibly sinister in the coded tagging system. But all morgues need to have a tagging and identification system.

7. The photos have been manipulated.

Many of the photos at the SAFMCD website have been manipulated. The information card and tape identity are covered over and sections of documents are obscured. It must have been very time-consuming to do this for thousands of photos. The explanation that they are doing this to “protect identity” is not credible since the faces of victims are visible. What are they hiding?

8. The Photo Catalog has duplicates and other errors.

There are numerous errors and anomalies in the photo catalog as presented at the SAFMCD website. For example, some deceased persons are shown twice with different case numbers and dates. There are other errors where different individuals are given the same identity number.

Researcher Adam Larson at A Closer Look at Syria website has done detailed investigation which reveals more errors and curious error patterns in the SAFMCD photo catalog.

9. With few exceptions, Western media uncritically accepted and promoted the story.

The Carter Ruck report was labeled “Confidential” but distributed to CNN, the Guardian and LeMonde. CNN’s Christiane Amanpour gushed over the story as she interviewed three of the inquiry team under the headline “EXCLUSIVE: Gruesome Syria photos may prove torture by Assad regime.” Critical journalism was replaced by leading questions and affirmation. David Crane said “This is a smoking gun.” Desmond de Silva “likened the images to those of holocaust survivors.”

The Guardian report was titled “Syrian regime document trove shows evidence of ‘industrial scale’ killing of detainees” with the subtitle, “Senior war crimes prosecutors say photographs and documents provide ‘clear evidence’ of systematic killing of 11,000 detainees”

One of the very few skeptical reports was by Dan Murphy in the Christian Science Monitor. Murphy echoed standard accusations about Syria but went on to say incisively, “the report itself is nowhere near as credible as it makes out and should be viewed for what it is: A well-timed propaganda exercise funded by

Qatar, a regime opponent who has funded rebels fighting Assad who have committed war crimes of their own.”

Unfortunately that was one of very few critical reports in the mainstream media. In 2012, foreign affairs journalist Jonathan Steele wrote an article describing the overall media bias on Syria. His article was titled “Most Syrians back Assad but you’d never know from western media.” The media campaign and propaganda has continued without stop. It was in this context that the Carter Ruck Report was delivered and widely accepted without question.

10. Politicians have used the Caesar story to push for more US/NATO aggression.

Politicians seeking direct U.S. intervention for “regime change” in Syria were quick to accept and broadcast the “Caesar” story. They used it to demonize the Assad government and argue that the U.S. must act so as to prevent “another holocaust,” “another Rwanda,” “another Cambodia.”

When Caesar’s photos were displayed at the House Foreign Affairs Committee in Congress, Chairman Ed Royce said “It is far past time that the world act... It is far past time for the United States to say there is going to be a safe zone across this area in northern Syria.”

The top-ranking Democrat on the House Foreign Affairs Committee is Eliot Engel. In November 2015 he said, “We’re reminded of the photographer, known as Caesar, who sat in this room a year ago, showing us in searing, graphic detail what Assad has done to his own people.” Engel went on to advocate for a new authorization for the use of military force.

Rep. Adam Kinzinger is another advocate for aggression against Syria. At an event at the Holocaust Memorial Museum in July 2015, he said, “If we want to destroy ISIS we have to destroy the incubator of ISIS, Bashar al-Assad.”

The irony and hypocrisy is doubly profound since Rep. Kinzinger has met and coordinated with opposition leader Okaidi who is a confirmed ally of ISIS. In contrast with Kinzinger’s false claims, it is widely known that ISIS ideology and initial funding came from Saudi Arabia and much of its recent wealth from oil sales via Turkey. The Syrian Army has fought huge battles against ISIS, winning some but losing others with horrific scenes of mass beheading carried out by ISIS.

11. The Human Rights Watch assessment is biased.

HRW has been very active around Syria. After the chemical attacks in greater Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013, HRW rushed a report which concluded that, based on a

vector analysis of incoming projectiles, the source of the sarin carrying rockets must have been Syrian government territory. This analysis was later debunked as a "junk heap of bad evidence" by highly respected investigative journalist Robert Parry.

HRW's assumption about the chemical weapon rocket flight distance was faulty. Additionally it was unrealistic to think you could determine rocket trajectory with 1 percent accuracy from a canister on the ground, especially from a canister on the ground that had deflected off a building wall.

In spite of this, HRW stuck by its analysis which blamed the Assad government. HRW Director Ken Roth publicly indicated dissatisfaction when an agreement to remove Syrian chemical weapons was reached. Roth wanted more than a "symbolic" attack on Syrian government forces.

Regarding the claims of "Caesar," HRW seems to be the only non-governmental organization to receive the full set of photo files from the custodian. To its credit, HRW acknowledged that nearly half the photos do not show what has been claimed for two years: they show dead Syrian soldiers and militia along with scenes from crime scenes, car bombings, etc.

But HRW's bias is clearly shown in how it handles this huge contradiction. Amazingly, HRW suggests the incorrectly identified photographs support the overall claim. They say, "This report focuses on deaths in detention. However other types of photographs are also important. From an evidentiary perspective, they reinforce the credibility of the claims of Caesar about his role as a forensic photographer of the Syrian security forces or at least with someone who has access to their photographs." (HRW, p31) This seems like saying if someone lies to you half the time that proves they are truthful.

The files disprove the assertion that the files all show people who were tortured and killed. The photographs show a wide range of deceased persons, from Syrian soldiers to Syrian militia members to opposition fighters to civilians trapped in conflict zones to regular deaths in the military hospital. There may be some photos of detainees who died in custody after being tortured, or who were simply executed. We know that this happened in Iraqi detention centers under U.S. occupation. Ugly and brutal things happen in war times. But the facts strongly suggest that the "Caesar" account is basically untrue or a gross exaggeration.

It is striking that the HRW report has no acknowledgment of the war conditions and circumstances in Syria. There is no acknowledgment that the government and Syrian Arab Army have been under attack by tens of thousands of weaponized fighters openly funded and supported by many of the wealthiest countries in the

world.

There is no hint at the huge loss of life suffered by the Syrian army and supporters defending their country. The current estimates indicate from 80,000 to 120,000 Syrian soldiers, militia and allies having died in the conflict. During the three years 2011-2013, including the period covered by the “Caesar” photos, it is estimated that over 52,000 Syrian soldiers and civilian militia died versus 29,000 anti-government forces.

HRW had access to the full set of photographs including the Syrian army and civilian militia members killed in the conflict. Why did they not list the number of Syrian soldiers and security forces they identified? Why did they not show a single image of those victims?

HRW goes beyond endorsing the falsehoods in the “Caesar story”; HRW suggests the cataloguing is only a partial listing. On page 5, the report says, “Therefore, the number of bodies from detention facilities that appear in the Caesar photographs represent only a part of those who died in detention in Damascus.”

On the contrary, the Caesar photographs seem to mostly show victims who died in a variety of ways in the armed conflict. The HRW assertions seem to be biased and inaccurate.

12. The legal accusations are biased and ignore the supreme crime of aggression.

The Christian Science Monitor journalist Dan Murphy gave an apt warning in his article on the Carter Ruck report about “Caesar.” While many journalists treated the prosecutors with uncritical deference, he said, “Association with war crime prosecutions is no guarantor of credibility – far from it. Just consider Luis Moreno Ocampo’s absurd claims about Viagra and mass rape in Muammar Qaddafi’s Libya in 2011. War crimes prosecutors have, unsurprisingly, a bias towards wanting to bolster cases against people they consider war criminals (like Assad or Qaddafi) and so should be treated with caution. They also frequently favor, as a class, humanitarian interventions.”

The Carter Ruck legal team demonstrated how accurate Murphy’s cautions could be. The legal team was eager to accuse the Syrian government of “crimes against humanity” but the evidence of “industrial killing,” “mass killing,” “torturing to kill” is dubious and much of the hard evidence shows something else.

In contrast, there is clear and solid evidence that a “Crime against Peace” is being committed against Syria. It is public knowledge that the “armed opposition” in Syria has been funded, supplied and supported in myriad ways by various outside governments. Most of the fighters, both Syrian and foreign,

receive salaries from one or another outside power. Their supplies, weapons and necessary equipment are all supplied to them. Like the “Contras” in Nicaragua in the 1980’s, the use of such proxy armies is a violation of customary international law.

It is also a violation of the UN Charter which says “All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other matter inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations”.

The government of Qatar has been a major supporter of the mercenaries and fanatics attacking the sovereign state of Syria. Given that fact, isn’t it hugely ironic to hear the legal contractors for Qatar accusing the Syrian government of “crimes against humanity”?

Isn’t it time for the United Nations to make reforms so that it can start living up to its purposes? That will require demanding and enforcing compliance with the UN Charter and International Law.

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The Ever-Curiously MH-17 Case

Exclusive: The shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over Ukraine has served as a potent propaganda club against Russia but the U.S. government is hiding key evidence that could solve the mystery, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The curious mystery surrounding the shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over eastern Ukraine on July 17, 2014, gets more curious and more curious as the U.S. government and Dutch investigators balk at giving straightforward answers to the simplest of questions even when asked by the families of the victims.

Adding to the mystery Dutch investigators have indicated that the Dutch Safety Board did not request radar information from the United States, even though Secretary of State John Kerry indicated just three days after the crash that the U.S. government possessed data that pinpointed the location of the suspected missile launch that allegedly downed the airliner, killing all 298 people

onboard.

Although Kerry claimed that the U.S. government knew the location almost immediately, Dutch investigators now say they hope to identify the spot sometime “in the second half of the year,” meaning that something as basic as the missile-launch site might remain unknown to the public more than two years after the tragedy.

The families of the Dutch victims, including the father of a Dutch-American citizen, have been pressing for an explanation about the slow pace of the investigation and the apparent failure to obtain relevant data from the U.S. and other governments.

I spent time with the family members in early February at the Dutch parliament in The Hague as opposition parliamentarians, led by Christian Democrat Pieter Omtzigt, unsuccessfully sought answers from the government about the absence of radar data and other basic facts.

When answers have been provided to the families and the public, they are often hard to understand, as if to obfuscate what information the investigation possesses or doesn't possess. For instance, when I asked the U.S. State Department whether the U.S. government had supplied the Dutch with radar data and satellite images, I received the following response, attributable to “a State Department spokesperson”: “While I won't go into the details of our law enforcement cooperation in the investigation, I would note that Dutch officials said March 8 that all information asked of the United States has been shared.”

I wrote back thanking the spokesperson for the response, but adding: “I must say it seems unnecessarily fuzzy. Why can't you just say that the U.S. government has provided the radar data cited by Secretary Kerry immediately after the tragedy? Or the U.S. government has provided satellite imagery before and after the shutdown? Why the indirect and imprecise phrasing? ...

“I've spent time with the Dutch families of the victims, including the father of a U.S.-Dutch citizen, and I can tell you that they are quite disturbed by what they regard as double-talk and stalling. I would like to tell them that my government has provided all relevant data in a cooperative and timely fashion. But all I get is this indirect and imprecise word-smithing.”

The State Department spokesperson wrote back, “I understand your questions, and also the importance of the view of these families so devastated by this tragedy. However, I am going to have to leave our comments as below.”

Propaganda Value

This lack of transparency, of course, has a propaganda value since it leaves in place the widespread public impression that ethnic Russian rebels and Russian President Vladimir Putin were responsible for the 298 deaths, a rush to judgment that Secretary Kerry and other senior U.S. officials (and the Western news media) encouraged in July 2014.

Once that impression took hold there has been little interest in Official Washington to clarify the mystery especially as evidence has emerged implicating elements of the Ukrainian military. For instance, Dutch intelligence has reported (and U.S. intelligence has implicitly confirmed) that the only operational Buk anti-aircraft missile systems in eastern Ukraine on July 17, 2014, were under the control of the Ukrainian military.

In a Dutch report released last October, the Netherlands' Military Intelligence and Security Service (MIVD) reported that the only anti-aircraft weapons in eastern Ukraine capable of bringing down MH-17 at 33,000 feet belonged to the Ukrainian government.

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

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

One could infer a similar finding by reading a U.S. "Government Assessment" released by the Director of National Intelligence on July 22, 2014, five days after the crash, seeking to cast suspicion on the ethnic Russian rebels and Putin by noting military equipment that Moscow had provided the rebels. But most tellingly the list did not include Buk anti-aircraft missiles. In other words, in the context of trying to blame the rebels and Putin, U.S. intelligence could not put an operational Buk system in the rebels' hands.

So, perhaps the most logical suspicion would be that the Ukrainian military, then engaged in an offensive in the east and fearing a possible Russian invasion, moved its Buk missile systems up to the front and an undisciplined crew fired a missile at a suspected Russian aircraft, bringing down MH-17 by

accident.

That was essentially what I was told by a source who had been briefed by U.S. intelligence analysts in July and August 2014. [See, for instance, Consortiumnews.com's "[Flight 17 Shoot-Down Scenario Shifts](#)" and "[The Danger of an MH-17 Cold Case.](#)"]

But Ukraine is a principal participant in the Dutch-led Joint Investigation Team (JIT), which has been probing the MH-17 case, and thus the investigation suffers from a possible conflict of interest since Ukraine would prefer that the world's public perception of the MH-17 case continue to blame Putin. Under the JIT's terms, any of the five key participants (The Netherlands, Ukraine, Australia, Belgium and Malaysia) can block release of information.

The interest in keeping Putin on the propaganda defensive is shared by the Obama administration which used the furor over the MH-17 deaths to spur the European Union into imposing economic sanctions on Russia.

In contrast, clearing the Russians and blaming the Ukrainians would destroy a carefully constructed propaganda narrative which has stuck black hats on Putin and the ethnic Russian rebels and white hats on the U.S.-backed government of Ukraine, which seized power after a putsch that overthrew elected pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich on Feb. 22, 2014.

Accusations against Russia have also been fanned by propaganda outlets, such as the British-based Bellingcat site, which has collaborated with Western mainstream media to continue pointing the finger of blame at Moscow and Putin – as the Dutch investigators drag their heels and refuse to divulge any information that would clarify the case.

Letter to the Families

Perhaps the most detailed – although still hazy – status report on the investigation came in a recent letter from JIT chief prosecutor Fred Westerbeke to the Dutch family members. The letter acknowledged that the investigators lacked “primary raw radar images” which could have revealed a missile or a military aircraft in the vicinity of MH-17.

Ukrainian authorities said all their primary radar facilities were shut down for maintenance and only secondary radar, which would show commercial aircraft, was available. Russian officials have said their radar data suggest that a Ukrainian warplane might have fired on MH-17 with an air-to-air missile, a possibility that is difficult to rule out without examining primary radar which has so far not been available. Primary radar data also might have picked up a ground-fired missile, Westerbeke wrote.

“Raw primary radar data could provide information on the rocket trajectory,” Westerbeke’s letter said. “The JIT does not have that information yet. JIT has questioned a member of the Ukrainian air traffic control and a Ukrainian radar specialist. They explained why no primary radar images were saved in Ukraine.” Westerbeke said investigators are also asking Russia about its data.

Westerbeke added that the JIT had “no video or film of the launch or the trajectory of the rocket.” Nor, he said, do the investigators have satellite photos of the rocket launch.

“The clouds on the part of the day of the downing of MH17 prevented usable pictures of the launch site from being available,” he wrote. “There are pictures from just before and just after July 17th and they are an asset in the investigation.” According to intelligence sources, the satellite photos show several Ukrainian military Buk missile systems in the area.

Why the investigation’s data is so uncertain has become a secondary mystery in the MH-17 whodunit. During an appearance on NBC’s “Meet the Press” on July 20, 2014, three days after the crash, Secretary Kerry declared, “we picked up the imagery of this launch. We know the trajectory. We know where it came from. We know the timing. And it was exactly at the time that this aircraft disappeared from the radar.”

But this U.S. data has never been made public. In the letter, Westerbeke wrote, “The American authorities have data, that come from their own secret services, which could provide information on the trajectory of the rocket. This information was shared in secret with the [Dutch] MIVD.” Westerbeke added that the information may be made available as proof in a criminal case as an “amtsbericht” or “official statement.”

Yet, despite the U.S. data, Westerbeke said the location of the launch site remains uncertain. Last October, the Dutch Safety Board placed the likely firing location within a 320-square-kilometer area that covered territory both under government and rebel control. (The safety board did not seek to identify which side fired the fateful missile.)

By contrast, Almaz-Antey, the Russian arms manufacturer of the Buk systems, conducted its own experiments to determine the likely firing location and placed it in a much smaller area near the village of Zaroshchenskoye, about 20 kilometers west of the Dutch Safety Board’s zone and in an area under Ukrainian government control.

Westerbeke wrote, “Raw primary radar data and the American secret information are only two sources of information for the determination of the launch site.

There is more. JIT collects evidence on the basis of telephone taps, locations of telephones, pictures, witness statements and technical calculations of the trajectory of the rocket. The calculations are made by the national air and space laboratory on the basis of the location of MH17, the damage pattern on the wreckage and the special characteristics of the rockets. JIT does extra research on top of the [Dutch Safety Board] research. On the basis of these sources, JIT gets ever more clarity on the exact launch site. In the second half of the year we expect exact results.”

Meanwhile, the U.S. government continues to stonewall a request from Thomas J. Schansman, the father of Quinn Schansman, the only American citizen to die aboard MH-17, to Secretary Kerry to release the U.S. data that Kerry has publicly cited.

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

In [a letter](#) to Kerry dated Jan. 5, 2016, Thomas J. Schansman noted Kerry’s remarks at a press conference on Aug. 12, 2014, when the Secretary of State said about the Buk anti-aircraft missile suspected of downing the plane: “We saw the take-off. We saw the trajectory. We saw the hit. We saw this aeroplane disappear from the radar screens. So there is really no mystery about where it came from and where these weapons have come from.”

Although U.S. consular officials in the Netherlands indicated that Kerry would respond personally to the request, Schansman told me this week that he had not yet received a reply from Kerry.

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](#))

Trump and a Clash of Values

Donald Trump’s harsh rhetoric, including threats against Muslims for their religious affiliation, has prompted clashes at his rallies and raised freedom of speech issues, writes Nat Parry.

By Nat Parry

Election 2016 has taken a turn into territory unfamiliar and perhaps mildly terrifying to many Americans, potentially heading down a dark road characterized by political violence and what social scientists call “authoritarian aggression,” defined by retired Professor of Psychology Robert Altemeyer as “a general aggressiveness directed against deviants, outgroups, and other people that are perceived to be targets according to established authorities.”

The divisive rhetoric of Republican frontrunner Donald Trump, who has called for a complete ban on Muslims entering the United States – not to mention his penchant for calling Mexican immigrants “rapists” and “criminals” and referring to African-Americans as “the blacks” – is having predictable effects, with protesters growing increasingly vocal in countering this bigotry, culminating last week in the cancellation of a planned rally in Chicago.

Hundreds of anti-Trump protesters gained access to an event scheduled for Friday night at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) and rather than face this hostile crowd, Trump decided to “postpone” the event.

“Mr. Trump just arrived in Chicago, and after meeting with law enforcement, has determined that for the safety of all of the tens of thousands of people that have gathered in and around the arena, tonight’s rally will be postponed to another date,” a campaign spokesperson announced half an hour after the rally was slated to begin.

Following this announcement, chaos ensued in the arena, with protesters breaking into cheers and chanting slogans such as “we stopped Trump.” A number of fistfights between protesters and Trump supporters also reportedly broke out.

The protest had been announced in advance on a Facebook page called “Stop Trump – Chicago,” listing several reasons for organizing against the billionaire’s presence at UIC.

“Trump has called for the complete and total shutdown of all Muslims entering the United States,” the organizers pointed out. Further, he has “generalized the entire Mexican immigrant community as criminals and rapists,” and “calls for the mass deportation of 11 million adults and children alike regardless of how long they have lived in the United States.”

The organizers also noted Trump’s public advocacy of war crimes including torture, murdering the families of suspected terrorists, and indiscriminate bombing of countries in the Middle East. Also, according to organizers, Trump’s “nativist, nationalist, and fascist stances parallel the most evil leaders this world has seen such as Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini.”

With these grievances in mind, the protesters wanted “to show Donald Trump that

his bigotry and racism is not welcome here," a message that seemed to be conveyed. Considering the protest's success in disrupting the event, the tactic was certainly effective in this regard, but the effect that the protest had in allegedly curtailing freedom of speech and assembly is seemingly weighing heavily on some people's minds.

Following the cancellation of the Chicago event, commentators have claimed that the protesters violated the First Amendment rights of Trump and his supporters.

"Even the most ardent anti-Trump among us should lament that a political speech was canceled due to fears of violence," bemoaned First Amendment attorney Marc Randazza. "Standing up for the rights of those who would not do it for us is perhaps the noblest expression of a commitment to liberty."

Similarly, Megyn Kelly – who has publicly sparred with Trump over misogynist comments he has made – regretted that "His First Amendment free speech rights have been shut down." Trump also weighed in, of course, claiming that "Our First Amendment rights have been violated."

But the irony of Trump and his sympathizers complaining about First Amendment violations should not be lost on anyone. Trump himself has trampled First Amendment principles, including those protecting freedom of religion and the press, and can hardly be considered a victim here.

Among the real estate mogul's more controversial comments was one that he made back in September which seemed to indicate that he would be open to looking at ways to get rid of all the 3.3 million Muslims currently living in the United States.

At a town hall event in New Hampshire, a Trump supporter asked the candidate a meandering question about "a problem in this country ... called Muslims." After mentioning something about terrorist training camps that Muslims are allegedly operating in the United States, the man asked, "When can we get rid of them?"

"We're going to be looking at a lot of different things," Trump said. "A lot of people are saying that, and a lot of people are saying that bad things are happening out there. We're going to be looking at that and plenty of other things."

When later asked to explain these remarks, Trump failed to retract them or even to clarify them in any meaningful way, issuing a statement that implied that the real issue is not discrimination against Muslims but an alleged war that is being waged against Christianity.

"The bigger issue is that Obama is waging a war against Christians," the

statement said without any indication of what this war against Christians might entail. (Perhaps it was a reference to the bogus “War on Christmas” controversy? Trump has said, “If I’m president, you’re going to see ‘Merry Christmas’ in department stores, believe me.”) “Christians need support in this country,” the statement continued. “Their religious liberty is at stake.”

So, after just insinuating that he would be looking at ways to purge the United States of millions of practicing Muslims, Trump then flipped the issue on its head and claimed that it is somehow the Christians who are under threat and “need support.”

Of course, the very notion that there are “a lot of different things” that should be “looked at” to “get rid of” Muslims in the U.S. flies in the face of the very first clause of the First Amendment, which clearly states that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” The open anti-Muslim bigotry espoused by Trump and his supporters is a direct challenge to this core constitutional principle.

Other clauses of the First Amendment, including the protection of a free press, have also been openly challenged by Trump, who has pledged to “open up our libel laws, so when [newspapers] write purposely negative and horrible and false articles, we can sue them and win lots of money.”

“When The New York Times writes a hit piece which is a total disgrace or when The Washington Post, which is there for other reasons, writes a hit piece, we can sue them and win money instead of having no chance of winning because they’re totally protected,” he said last month. “We’re going to open up libel laws,” he continued, “and we’re going to have people sue you like you’ve never got sued before.”

There is also some irony in this threat, since Trump has enjoyed some of the most extensive media coverage of a presidential candidate in recent memory. There isn’t a day that goes by that Trump doesn’t seem to be dominating the headlines and claiming an inordinate amount of airtime on the broadcast news. And this observation is not just a matter of perception – the data backs it up.

Late last year a broadcast analysis by the Tyndall Report found that Trump accounted for 43 percent of all GOP coverage on network news in 2015. Trump dominated the campaign coverage on ABC, NBC and CBS evening news broadcasts, accounting for nearly double the number of minutes as Hillary Clinton, and more than three times as much as Jeb Bush.

Between January and November 2015, according to Tyndall’s data, Trump’s campaign

was covered for 234 minutes on the three newscasts, compared to just ten minutes for Bernie Sanders. And this data doesn't even count all of Trump's appearances on weekday morning programs and Sunday morning talk shows, which would increase his airtime exponentially.

In short, there is probably no human being alive who currently has greater access to the media and a bigger megaphone than "The Donald" – with the possible exception of President Obama or Pope Francis. And while not all of this coverage might be considered positive, there is good reason to believe that even the "negative" coverage is generally orchestrated by Trump and his surrogates.

Back in 1987, Trump wrote in his book "The Art of the Deal" that he had essentially figured out how to play the media to his advantage by being "a little outrageous."

"One thing I've learned about the press is that they're always hungry for a good story, and the more sensational the better," he wrote. "If you are a little different, or a little outrageous, or if you do things that are bold or controversial, the press is going to write about you."

This seems to be the same playbook that he is using today, issuing outrageous statements and whipping his crowds up into a hateful frenzy, increasingly leading to physical violence being perpetrated against demonstrators, meanwhile dominating the news cycle day after day. And then of course when people challenge him on it and manage to shut down one of his rallies, he is the first one to claim victimhood and cry out about freedom of speech.

While freedom of speech is of course vital to democracy and should generally be considered sacrosanct in a free and pluralistic society, it also would be fair to say at this point that Trump has had more than his fair share of "free speech" in recent months, and if people continue to challenge his divisive rhetoric through disruptive protests at his rallies, it should hardly be considered a tragedy – especially considering that much of his own speech openly disparages First Amendment principles of freedom of religion and of the press.

Nat Parry is the co-author of *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush.*
