

US Journalism's New 'Golden Age'?

Exclusive: The Washington Post and other big media are hailing a new journalistic “golden age” as they punish President Trump for disparaging them, but is this media bias a sign of good journalism or itself a scandal, asks Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The mainstream U.S. media is congratulating itself on its courageous defiance of President Trump and its hard-hitting condemnations of Russia, but the press seems to have forgotten that its proper role within the U.S. democratic structure is not to slant stories one way or another but to provide objective information for the American people.

By that standard – of respecting that the people are the nation’s true sovereigns – the mainstream media is failing again. Indeed, the chasm between what America’s elites are thinking these days and what many working-class Americans are feeling is underscored by the high-fiving that’s going on inside the elite mainstream news media, which is celebrating its Trump- and Russia-bashing as the “new golden age of American journalism.”

The New York Times and The Washington Post, in particular, view themselves as embattled victims of a tyrannical abuser. The Times presents itself as the brave guardian of “truth” and the Post added a new slogan: “Democracy dies in darkness.” In doing so, they have moved beyond the normal constraints of professional, objective journalism into political advocacy – and they are deeply proud of themselves.

In a Sunday column entitled “How Trump inspired a golden age,” Washington Post columnist Dana Milbank wrote that Trump “took on the institution of a free press – and it fought back. Trump came to office after intimidating publishers, barring journalists from covering him and threatening to rewrite press laws, and he has sought to discredit the ‘fake news’ media at every chance. Instead, he wound up inspiring a new golden age in American journalism.

“Trump provoked the extraordinary work of reporters on the intelligence, justice and national security beats, who blew wide open the Russia election scandal, the contacts between Russia and top Trump officials, and interference by Trump in the FBI investigation. Last week’s appointment of a special prosecutor – a crucial check on a president who lacks self-restraint – is a direct result of their work.”

Journalism or Hatchet Job?

But has this journalism been professional or has it been a hatchet job? Are we seeing a new “golden age” of journalism or a McCarthyistic lynch mob operating on behalf of elites who disdain the U.S. constitutional process for electing American presidents?

For one thing, you might have thought that professional journalists would have demanded proof about the predicate for this burgeoning “scandal” – whether the Russians really did “hack” into emails of the Democratic National Committee and Hillary Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta and then slip the information to WikiLeaks to influence the outcome of the 2016 election.

You have surely heard and read endlessly that this conclusion about Russia’s skulduggery was the “consensus view of the 17 U.S. intelligence agencies” and thus only some crazy conspiracy theorist would doubt its accuracy even if no specific evidence was evinced to support the accusation.

But that repeated assertion is not true. There was no National Intelligence Estimate (or NIE) that would compile the views of the 17 intelligence agencies. Instead, as President Obama’s Director of National Intelligence James Clapper testified before a Senate Judiciary subcommittee on May 8, the Russia-hacking claim came from a “special intelligence community assessment” (or ICA) produced by selected analysts from the Central Intelligence Agency, National Security Agency and Federal Bureau of Investigation, or as Clapper put it, “a coordinated product from three agencies – CIA, NSA, and the FBI – not all 17 components of the intelligence community.”

Further, as Clapper explained, the “ICA” was something of a rush job beginning on President Obama’s instructions “in early December” and completed by Jan. 6, in other words, a month or less.

Clapper continued: “The two dozen or so analysts for this task were hand-picked, seasoned experts from each of the contributing agencies.” However, as any intelligence expert will tell you, if you “hand-pick” the analysts, you are really hand-picking the conclusion.

You can say the analysts worked independently but their selection, as advocates for one position or another, could itself dictate the outcome. If the analysts were hardliners on Russia or hated Trump, they could be expected to deliver the conclusion that Obama and Clapper wanted, i.e., challenging the legitimacy of Trump’s election and blaming Russia.

The point of having a more substantive NIE is that it taps into a much broader network of U.S. intelligence analysts who have the right to insert dissents to

the dominant opinions. So, for instance, when President George W. Bush belatedly ordered an NIE regarding Iraq's WMD in 2002, some analysts – especially at the State Department – inserted dissents (although they were expunged from the declassified version given to the American people to justify the 2003 invasion of Iraq).

An Embarrassing Product

Obama's "ICA," which was released on Jan. 6, was a piece of work that embarrassed many former U.S. intelligence analysts. It was a one-sided argument that lacked any specific evidence to support its findings. Its key point was that Russian President Vladimir Putin had a motive to authorize an information operation to help Hillary Clinton's rival, Donald Trump, because Putin disdained her work as Secretary of State.

But the Jan. 6 report failed to include the counter-argument to that *cui bono* assertion, that it would be an extraordinary risk for Putin to release information to hurt Clinton when she was the overwhelming favorite to win the presidency. Given the NSA's electronic-interception capabilities, Putin would have to assume that any such undertaking would be picked up by U.S. intelligence and that he would likely be facing a vengeful new U.S. president on Jan. 20.

While it's possible that Putin still took the risk – despite the daunting odds against a Trump victory – a balanced intelligence assessment would have included such contrary arguments. Instead, the report had the look of a prosecutor's brief albeit without actual evidence pointing to the guilt of the accused.

Further, the report repeatedly used the word "assesses" – rather than "proves" or "establishes" – and the terminology is important because, in intelligence-world-speak, "assesses" often means "guesses." The report admits as much, saying, "Judgments are not intended to imply that we have proof that shows something to be a fact. Assessments are based on collected information, which is often incomplete or fragmentary, as well as logic, argumentation, and precedents."

In other words, the predicate for the entire Russia-gate scandal, which may now lead to the impeachment of a U.S. president and thus the negation of the Constitution's electoral process, is based partly on a lie – i.e., the claim that the assessment comes from all 17 U.S. intelligence agencies – and partly on evidence-free speculation by a group of "hand-picked" analysts, chosen by Obama's intelligence chiefs.

Yet, the mainstream U.S. news media has neither corrected the false assertion about the 17 intelligence agencies nor demanded that actual evidence be made

public to support the key allegation that Russia was the source of WikiLeaks' email dumps.

By the way, both Russia and WikiLeaks deny that Russia was the source, although it is certainly possible that the Russian government would lie and that WikiLeaks might not know where the two batches of Democratic emails originated.

A True 'Golden Age'?

Yet, one might think that the new "golden age of American journalism" would want to establish a firm foundation for its self-admiring reporting on Russia-gate. You might think, too, that these esteemed MSM reporters would show some professional skepticism toward dubious claims being fed to them by the Obama administration's intelligence appointees.

That is unless, of course, the major U.S. news organizations are not abiding by journalistic principles, but rather see themselves as combatants in the anti-Trump "resistance." In other words, if they are behaving less as a Fourth Estate and more as a well-dressed mob determined to drag the interloper, Trump, from the White House.

The mainstream U.S. media's bias against Putin and Russia also oozes from every pore of the Times' and Post's reporting from Moscow. For instance, the Times' [article](#) on Putin's comments about supposed secrets that Trump shared with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at the White House had the headline in the print editions: "Putin Butts In to Claim There Were No Secrets..." The article by Andrew Higgins then describes Putin "asserting himself with his customary disruptive panache" and "seizing on foreign crises to make Russia's voice heard."

Clearly, we are all supposed to hate and ridicule Vladimir Putin. He is being demonized as the new "enemy" in much the way that George Orwell foresaw in his dystopian novel, *1984*. Yet, what is perhaps most troubling is that the major U.S. news outlets, which played instrumental roles in demonizing leaders of Iraq, Syria and Libya, believe they are engaged in some "golden age" journalism, rather than writing propaganda.

Contempt for Trump

Yes, I realize that many good people want to see Trump removed from office because of his destructive policies and his buffoonish behavior – and many are eager to use the new *bête noire*, Russia, as the excuse to do it. But that still does not make it right for the U.S. news media to abandon its professional responsibilities in favor of a political agenda.

On a political level, it may not even be a good idea for Democrats and progressives who seem to be following the failed strategy of Hillary Clinton's campaign in seeking to demonize Trump rather than figuring out how to speak to the white working-class people who voted for him, many out of fear over their economic vulnerability and others out of anger over how Clinton dismissed many of them as "deplorables."

And, by the way, if anyone thinks that whatever the Russians may have done damaged Clinton's chances more than her colorful phrase disdaining millions of working-class people who understandably feel left behind by neo-liberal economics, you may want to enroll in a Politics 101 course. The last thing a competent politician does is utter a memorable insult that will rally the opposition.

In conversations that I've had recently with Trump voters, they complain that Clinton and the Democrats weren't even bothering to listen to them or to talk to them. These voters were less enamored of Trump than they were conceded to Trump by the Clinton campaign. These voters also are not impressed by the endless Trump- and Russia-bashing from The New York Times, The Washington Post, CNN and MSNBC, which they see as instruments of the elites.

The political danger for national Democrats and many progressives is that mocking Trump and thus further insulting his supporters only extends the losing Clinton strategy and cements the image of Democrats as know-it-all elitists. Thus, the Democrats risk losing a key segment of the U.S. electorate for a generation.

Not only could that deny the Democrats a congressional majority for the foreseeable future, but it might even get Trump a second term.

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](#)).

Saudis Win Hearts by Lining Pockets

Exclusive: By achieving an odd-couple alliance with Israel, Saudi Arabia has cleared away U.S. political resistance to the massive arms build-up that President Trump just embraced, reports Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall (This is the fourth in a series on foreign lobbying.)

Families of the victims and survivors of the 9/11 terrorist attacks have asked the Department of Justice to open “an immediate national security investigation” into a “massive Saudi-funded foreign agent offensive” to “delude Congress” into “shield[ing] the Kingdom from any inquiry into the involvement of its agents in supporting the September 11th attacks.”

The complaint marks what is perhaps the most frontal public assault on Saudi influence peddling in Washington since 1981, when pro-Israel critics blasted Riyadh’s successful campaign to win congressional approval for its controversial purchase of AWACS surveillance planes.

The families’ complaint targets Saudi Arabia’s lavishly funded attempts to water down the Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act (JASTA). Passed into law last fall, against opposition from the Obama administration, the act gives Americans the right to sue foreign governments that provide “material support” to terrorist groups.

The complaint asserts that after the law passed, “the Kingdom went on a foreign agent spending spree, hiring . . . more than 100 foreign agents to work on its behalf to wage an assault on JASTA. No expense has been spared in the Kingdom’s unparalleled campaign to build a state of the art and nationwide lobbying and propaganda apparatus for the sole purpose of bending U.S. legislative process to its will.”

It also claims that Saudi Arabia and its lobbyists have potentially committed “widespread criminal violations of the Foreign Agents Registration Act” by, among other things, concealing their role in mobilizing veterans under false pretenses to back repeal of the law.

According to *The Hill*, the Saudi government now employs 14 lobbying firms, at an estimated cost of well over \$1.3 million a month, more than it spent in all of 2000. Their hired guns include Podesta Group, co-founded by Tony Podesta, one of the Democratic Party’s top fundraisers, and his brother John Podesta, who was Hillary Clinton’s national campaign chairman in 2016; BGR Group, whose name partners include the former head of the Republican Party; and former Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, R-Mississippi.

Besides supporting specific legislative goals like rolling back JASTA, Saudi Arabia cultivates allies in Washington to “keep the focus on what a great ally it is in the Middle East, not on issues like what women are and aren’t allowed to do there,” said a spokeswoman the Center for Responsive Politics in Washington, D.C.

Saudi Arabia's agents go to great lengths to play down the country's human rights abuses, including its many beheadings and cruel floggings of dissidents. According to Lee Fang,

"When Nimr al-Nimr, a peaceful government critic, was executed in January (2016), the Podesta Group helped the regime shape media coverage, providing a quote to the *New York Times* to smear Nimr as a 'terrorist.' Other American consultants working for the Saudi Embassy used social media and other efforts to attack Nimr and justify the execution. . . .

"The influence also extends to promotion of Saudi Arabia's controversial role in the Middle East, including the Saudi-led invasion of Yemen and the country's failure to address private financiers of radical Islamic groups such as ISIS."

Taking Care of Friends

Saudi Arabia manages to exert influence, particularly over the Executive Branch, for a number of economic and geopolitical reasons apart from lobbying. No president can afford to overlook its immense importance as a market for U.S. arms makers or its ability to influence the world price of oil.

Successive administrations have curried favor with the monarchy to reward its conservative influence in a region that has long been rocked by fiery ideologues like Nasser, Arafat and Khomeini. Saudi Arabia is also valued as an ally in other regions, for example its off-the-books financial support for the Afghan mujahedeen and Nicaraguan Contras in the 1980s.

More recently, Saudi Arabia has won strong support from the Obama and Trump administrations for organizing a coalition of Sunni Arab states to oppose the expansion of Iran's influence in the Middle East. In the name of containing Iran, Washington has kept quiet about Saudi responsibility for killing thousands of civilians in Yemen, and putting millions there at risk of starvation.

In its quest for influence, however, Saudi Arabia takes no chances and spares no expense. Since the 1940s, when their country became an oil superpower, the Saudis have handed out vast sums of cash on a bipartisan basis to powerful and soon-to-be powerful Americans.

When Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton was nominated for president in 1992, Saudi business tycoons donated \$3.5 million to endow the King Fahd Center for Middle East and Islamic Studies at the University of Arkansas. That November, the King of Saudi Arabia called to congratulate President-elect Clinton – and gave another \$20 million to the university.

Years later, as Hillary Clinton was mulling her future campaign for president,

the Saudi kingdom donated more than \$10 million to the Clinton Foundation. Kuwait and other Gulf interests chipped in many millions on top, no doubt solely because of their shared commitment to fighting AIDS.

Republicans have fared even better. Rich Saudis close to the royal family reportedly invested \$80 million in Carlyle Group, the world's largest private equity firm, after it hired former President H. W. Bush and former Secretary of State James Baker as senior advisers.

Earlier, a billionaire Saudi banker raised eyebrows by rescuing Harken Energy after it appointed George W. Bush to its board of directors. Deals like these made the relationship between the Bush family and the royal family almost legendary, particularly after George W. Bush turned a blind eye to Saudi Arabia's support for radical Islamists, even after 9/11.

The Bushes and the Clintons were far from unique. In the words of former CIA officer Robert Baer, "finding a high-ranking former U.S. government official who isn't at least tangentially bound to Saudi Arabia is like searching for a teetotaler at a Phi Gam toga party. . . . Aware that government bureaucrats can't retire comfortably on a federal pension, the Saudis put out the message: You play the game – keep your mouth shut about the kingdom – and we'll take care of you, find you a job, fund a chair at a university for you, maybe even present you with a Lexus and a town house in Georgetown."

One of Saudi Arabia's most influential ambassadors to the United States, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, reportedly told an associate, "If the reputation . . . builds that the Saudis take care of friends when they leave office, you'd be surprised how much better friends you have who are just coming into office."

The Arab Lobby vs. the Israel Lobby

Recalling that quote, Alan Dershowitz, the pugnacious Harvard law professor and champion of Israel, once commented, "Yes Virginia, there is a big bad lobby that distorts U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East way out of proportion to its actual support by the American public. . . . But the offending lobby is not AIPAC, which supports Israel, but rather the Arab lobby, which opposes the Jewish state."

Yet for all its funding, the Saudi (or broader Arab) Lobby doesn't compare in clout to the Israel Lobby. Its most significant victory – narrowly winning congressional support for Riyadh's purchase of AWACS surveillance planes in 1981 – was achieved more by lobbying from President Reagan and aerospace contractors than from the desert kingdom's hired help.

Saudi Arabia's failure to head off passage of JASTA last year highlights its

limited ability to defeat grassroots coalitions that threaten its interests. For all its funding, the pro-Arab lobby has no significant public support in the United States. Arab-Americans are politically much less well organized – or focused on Mideast issues – than their counterparts (including Christian Zionists) in the pro-Israel lobby.

In addition, Americans are much less sympathetic to the Saudi national story of desert Bedouins striking it rich with oil, than to the Israeli story of Holocaust survivors establishing the Middle East's "only democracy" and making the desert bloom.

However, the old game of comparing the clout of these rival lobbies is no longer relevant. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states today enjoy relatively strong support from Democratic and Republican legislators alike because they have become de facto allies of Israel, pursuing a common campaign of isolating Iran and destabilizing the Assad regime in Syria.

In October 2013, during the height of the impassioned debate over Iran's nuclear program, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu told the U.N. General Assembly, "The dangers of a nuclear-armed Iran and the emergence of other threats in our region have led many of our Arab neighbors to recognize, finally recognize, that Israel is not their enemy. And this affords us the opportunity to overcome the historic animosities and build new relationships, new friendships, new hopes."

Reports soon emerged of *sub rosa* meetings between Israeli security officials and the powerful Saudi princes Bandar bin Sultan and Turki al-Faisal, both former heads of Saudi intelligence and ambassadors to the United States. Such meetings reportedly produced secret strategic agreements between Israel, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, as well as joint propaganda campaigns in the United States.

Israel's staunch supporters in the United States quickly followed Netanyahu's lead and applauded Saudi Arabia as a great friend.

Soon after the Prime Minister's U.N. speech, for instance, journalist Robert Parry observed that "American neocons are rallying to the new Israeli-Saudi alliance by demanding that President Barack Obama engage more aggressively against the two countries' foes in the Middle East, thus 'bolstering Israeli and Saudi confidence,' as the *Washington Post's* deputy editorial-page editor Jackson Diehl declared."

Neoconservatives ranging from Max Boot to the *Wall Street Journal's* editorial board hammered away at that theme, publishing a steady stream of articles calling on the United States to join Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states to "stop the new Persian Empire."

One manifestation of the new alliance is the fact that U.S. arms deliveries to Saudi Arabia soared 280 percent from the five-year period 2005-10 to 2011-16. Such massive arming of Riyadh simply would not have been possible without the support of pro-Israel members of Congress.

Defenders of the Israel and Saudi lobbies will claim that they are not subverting the U.S. political system but rather supporting U.S. national interests by promoting the containment of Iran, which they misleadingly brand the world's "chief sponsor of terrorism."

In truth, however, the policies they endorse have little genuine public support and have proven dangerous and fabulously expensive to Americans.

The failure to press for a lasting solution to the plight of Palestinians continues to fuel anti-Americanism in the Middle East and other parts of the world. The destabilization of Syria has produced millions of desperate refugees and provided haven for thousands of hardened Islamist fighters. The war in Yemen, supported by Washington in the name of resisting Iran, has become one of the world's great humanitarian crises.

The Israeli-Saudi ongoing proxy wars with Iran create obstacles to achieving peaceful settlements in the theaters of America two biggest recent wars, Iraq and Afghanistan. Washington's silence on the human rights violations of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states makes a mockery of its universal moral claims. And the failure to squarely address Saudi Arabia's contributions to the growth of Islamist militancy heightens the insecurity of all nations threatened by misguided jihadists.

Reversing these disastrous policies will require years of continued debate and political organizing. But it will also require public exposure and genuine discussion of the malign influence of foreign money and propaganda on the U.S. political system, not just the current focus on alleged Russian activities.

[This is the fourth in a series on foreign lobbying. The previous installments were "The Open Secret of Foreign Lobbying"; "How China Lobby Shaped America"; and "Israel Pays the Political Piper." Next: The Turkish Lobby.]

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Trump Panders to the Saudi Royals

President Trump's speech to the Islamic world amounted to a pander to his regal

Saudi hosts and a blindness toward the realities of Mideast terrorism, explains ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

The bar for Donald Trump's speech in Riyadh had been set so low that it was scraping the sand. How much could be expected from a notorious exploiter of Islamophobia speaking to a gathering of leaders of majority Muslim countries? Getting through the experience without causing major new damage should perhaps be considered a success. Perhaps Trump and his speechwriters were wise not to attempt anything more. The Hippocratic principle applies: first do no (more) harm.

Most Muslims hearing the speech, especially the more knowledgeable ones who have followed Trump's candidacy and presidency, know his qualities, know he is capable of delivering a scripted speech without falling on his face, and are unlikely to have had the speech change any of their perceptions of Trump, his administration, or the United States. They will not be surprised, once Trump is back in Washington, to hear of more exploitation of Islamophobia regarding travel bans or something else.

Trump's speech evidently was crafted to appeal to a very narrow audience: the Saudi regime, along with some similar ruling brethren in places such as the United Arab Emirates, while coloring the appeal with some distinctively Trumpian touches.

The kind of compliments that had pride of place in the speech – up near the front, along with Trump's usual and inevitable assertions about how back home he had “created almost a million new jobs” and “lifted the burdens on American industry” – focused on glitz: the “grandeur” of the conference hall, the Saudis' “soaring achievements in architecture,” and the UAE's having reached “incredible heights with glass and steel.”

A Narrow Appeal

These are not the sorts of observations likely to have much resonance with the man in the street in Riyadh, let alone the streets of countless other majority Muslim cities. The narrowness of the appeal in the speech exacerbated the narrowness in the selection of Saudi Arabia as the place for a first presidential visit that was supposedly representative of an entire religion. Certainly there will be little positive resonance among the whole Shia branch of Islam.

Speaking of Shia, the speech had, of course, the obligatory excoriation of

Iran. That passage reads like the response to a “cue the anti-Iran invective” direction given to the speechwriters; it is awkwardly divorced from the context of both the surrounding parts of the speech itself and what has been transpiring in the real world. After talking about violent extremism that is mostly the extremist Sunni variety spearheaded by ISIS, the anti-Iran passage asserts that Iran is “the government” that gives “terrorists” everything they need to do their evil deeds, assertions oblivious to how Iran is on the opposite side from ISIS and Al Qaeda throughout the region, including Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.

In the same passage, Trump said that “until the Iranian regime is willing to be a partner for peace, all nations of conscience must work together to isolate it.” There was no mention anywhere in the speech of the laboriously negotiated multilateral agreement that limits Iran’s nuclear program. Participation in that negotiation doesn’t count as willingness to be a partner for peace? The nuclear program was the one thing Iran was doing that, before negotiation of the agreement, the anti-Iran rhetoricians were most vehement about highlighting as a supposed threat to peace.

Trump also said everyone should “pray for the day when the Iranian people have the just and righteous government they so richly deserve” while saying nothing that suggested any awareness or acknowledgement of how, just two days earlier, Iranians had voted in a presidential election, re-elected the reformist candidate, and rejected by a landslide margin the leading hardline candidate. Trump was exhibiting a kind of diplomatic autism that takes no heed of the sentiments, objectives, and even actions of the other party.

Music to Saudi Ears

All this, especially the anti-Iran part, was music to the ears of the Saudi rulers. But besides acting like a guest who is pleasing to the hosts, what else did this speech accomplish? What else, that is, besides avoiding any new Trumpian disasters? A major speech by a U.S. president to foreign audiences should do more than suck up to the rulers of whatever is the speech’s venue.

The ideal speech should deftly convey messages to the multiple audiences who will be listening, to address questions that are meaningful and important to each of the audiences in a way that indicates understanding of their problems, and to use persuasion to move those audiences in a direction conducive to U.S. interests and international peace and security and in which they would not otherwise have moved, or moved as much.

The most useful lines in Trump’s speech acknowledged that Muslims are the most numerous victims of terrorism, noted the need for religious leaders to counter extremist exploitation of their religions, and appealed for religious

tolerance. But by throwing himself so fully into the arms of the Saudi regime, it is hard to identify how the speech is likely to move the needle in a positive direction as far as the behavior of either that regime or other regimes is concerned.

The speech conveyed a very crude and simplistic explanation of terrorism and political violence in the Middle East. As Trump describes it, terrorism is all just a matter of good versus evil. And his exhortation to his audience of rulers was: "A better future is only possible if your nations drive out the terrorists and drive out the extremists. Drive them out. Drive them out of your places of worship. Drive them out of your communities. Drive them out of your holy land. And drive them out of this earth."

Ignoring Saudi Complicity

There was barely any hint of awareness about political, economic, and social conditions that have much to do with how much terrorism there will be in the years ahead and how many drivable terrorists there will be in the first place. But it is in affecting those conditions that regimes such as the Saudi regime could do the most good. They don't need exhortations about "driving out." The Saudis used to have a policy of driving extremists out of the kingdom, which was just a way of sloughing the problem off on someone else and did nothing to solve the problem.

The speech's approach to interstate relations was similarly crude and similarly unlikely to shape behavior in a favorable direction. The Saudis and other Gulf Arab regimes don't need any encouragement to be staunchly anti-Iran. What is needed, in the interests of regional peace and security and thus in U.S. interests, is greater efforts at reconciling competing interests in nonviolent ways.

If we or they do not like something Iran is doing and that we regard as irregular and illegitimate, then it behooves us and our partners, as well as the Iranians, to promote peaceful, legitimate diplomacy as a means of reconciliation – rather than exhortations that promote more hostility and isolation.

Trump got through his speech without adding to self-inflicted damage of the sort that awaits him back in Washington. But the speech does more to divide than to unite, and it does more to stoke conflict in the Middle East than to reduce it.

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Israel Lobby Pays the Political Piper

Exclusive: The Israel Lobby is so powerful that for years it insisted it didn't exist – and Official Washington went along with the lie. Today, President Trump scrambles to secure the lobby's blessings, Jonathan Marshall observes.

By Jonathan Marshall (This is the third part of a series on foreign lobbying.)

In this age of rancorous hyper-partisanship, getting members of Congress to agree on anything beyond the naming of a post office is a challenge. Yet in late April, all 100 members of the U.S. Senate signed a tough letter to the U.N. Secretary General, demanding that the organization end its “unwarranted attacks” on Israel's human rights record.

Three months earlier, members of the House voted overwhelmingly to condemn a U.N. Security Council resolution critical of Israel's relentless expansion of settlements on occupied lands. Like dozens of other Democrats, House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer of Maryland blasted President Obama for abstaining from the U.N. vote, saying it “sent the wrong signal to our ally Israel.” In the Senate, leading progressives like Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders offered no support for President Obama, either.

Their votes and rhetoric did not simply reflect public opinion. Although Americans sympathize with Israel far more than the Palestinians, two-thirds of adults surveyed in in 2015 said the United States should not take sides in the Middle East conflict. Fewer than half say they consider Israel an ally.

Those congressional actions instead illustrated the power of the pro-Israel Lobby, a highly organized and well-funded coalition that works to give Israeli leaders freedom to operate with unquestioned U.S. diplomatic, economic and military support. Its influence helps account for the quarter trillion dollars in aid (adjusted for inflation) that the United States has given Israel since 1948.

When it comes to influencing American politics, Russia runs far behind highly motivated supporters of Israel. President Obama experienced that first hand when Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, representing a state of just 8.6 million people, received rousing, bipartisan acclaim in no fewer than three addresses before Congress and nearly blocked approval of the Iran nuclear deal, perhaps the signature foreign policy initiative of Obama's administration.

The pro-Israel Lobby has been the subject of much informal comment and a critical academic study by two of America's most distinguished political scientists, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt. Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz, an ardent disparager of their work, recently offered a backhanded acknowledgement of its thesis during a talk to an Orthodox synagogue in affluent Scarsdale, New York:

"People write a book called the Israel lobby and complain that AIPAC [American Israel Public Affairs Committee] is one of the most powerful lobbies in Washington. My response to that is, that's not good enough. We should be the most powerful lobby in Washington. . . . We are entitled to use our power. We have contributed disproportionately to the success of this country. . . . We are a very influential community. We deserve our influence."

Contrary to the implication of his remarks, however, AIPAC and similar organizations do not comprise an ethnic Jewish lobby, though major Jewish organizations are primary constituents. Many U.S. Jews either question Israeli government policies or have little interest in promoting them.

A 2013 Pew survey found that only 30 percent of American Jews were "very attached" emotionally to Israel, and a substantial plurality believed that continued building of Jewish settlements hurts Israel's security. A large majority of Jews voted for President Obama, despite his strained relations with the Israeli government. Most American Jews also supported his nuclear deal with Iran, in defiance of most pro-Israel organizations.

Further reflecting the pro-Israel lobby's political rather than ethnic focus, it derives much support from Christian Zionists, some of them outright anti-Semites, who believe that the return of Jews to Israel foreshadows the Second Coming of Christ.

The pro-Israel camp today features even the likes of White House counterterrorism adviser Sebastian Gorka, "despite his controversial ties to allies of the Nazis," and Austria's Freedom Party, "a movement of anti-immigrant, right-wing nationalists founded in part by former Nazis."

Follow the Money

Unlike most other foreign lobbies, the pro-Israel lobby draws much of its strength from grass-roots support. With little organized opposition, it can influence Congress more readily than better-funded business lobbies that face stiff competition. However, the single biggest source of its power is not voters – only a tiny percentage make Israel their top political priority – but campaign funds.

In a revealing comment, Stephanie Schriock of Emily's List confessed last year, "the money ... is a big piece of this story and cannot be overlooked at all."

"I have written more Israel papers that you can imagine," she explained. "I'm from Montana. I barely knew where Israel was until I looked at a map, and the poor campaign manager would come in, or the policy director, and I'd be like, 'Here is your paper on Israel. This is our policy.' We've sent it all over the country because this is how we raise money. ... This means that these candidates who were farmers, school teachers, or businesswomen, ended up having an Israel position without having any significant conversations with anybody."

Hillary Clinton's pandering to the pro-Israel lobby during the 2016 election – promising AIPAC that she would take relations with Israel "to the next level" and that she would meet with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during her first month in office – reflected her financial dependence on pro-Israel funders. Chief among them was billionaire donor Haim Saban, a hawkish Israeli-American who famously said, "I'm a one-issue guy, and my issue is Israel."

New Yorker correspondent Connie Bruck reported that Saban, speaking at a 2009 conference in Israel, described the "three ways to be influential in American politics" as donating to political parties, creating think tanks, and buying up influential media.

"In 2002," she observed, "he contributed seven million dollars toward the cost of a new building for the Democratic National Committee – one of the largest known donations ever made to an American political party. That year, he also founded the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, in Washington, D.C. He . . . tried to buy *Time* and *Newsweek*, . . . acquired Univision in 2007, and he has made repeated bids for the Los Angeles *Times*."

Mother Jones reported that "After the launch of the Saban Center, the billionaire began pouring more and more of his fortune into Israeli causes. He donated \$10 million to support the Friends of the Israel Defense Forces. . . . He also made seven-figure gifts to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the hawkish Israeli lobbying group."

Saban, who was invited to stay overnight in the Lincoln bedroom at the White House during Bill Clinton's presidency, takes credit for helping launch Hillary Clinton's run for that office as early as 2004. Over the years he hosted several lavish fundraisers for her, including a dinner in 2016. With an entry price of \$100,000 per couple, it raised more than \$5 million for Clinton's campaign. Saban and his wife gave more than \$10 million to a super-PAC that supported her as well.

And those donations don't include the \$7 million paid by the Saban Family Foundation to the Clinton Foundation during Hillary's four-year stint in the Obama administration, the \$30 million more that it pledged, the \$5 million donation to the Clinton Library, or the \$250,000 fee paid to Bill Clinton for a 15-minute promotional event in 2015.

The Republican Purse

As Israel pursues ever more extreme policies grounded in ethnic and religious nationalism, the pro-Israel lobby has become increasingly aligned with the Republican Party.

A recent national poll showed sympathy for Israel falling 10 points among Democrats to 33 percent from April 2016 to January 2017. In contrast, a near-record 74 percent of Republican now support Israel. Similarly, a Brookings poll last fall found that just over half of Democrats think that "the Israeli government has too much influence" in the United States, compared to just over a quarter of Republicans.

Republicans, who traditionally looked mainly to big oil, finance, real estate and other business sectors for campaign cash, increasingly rely on billionaires with a passion for Israel, such as Wall Street hedge fund owner Paul Singer, Florida auto dealer Norman Braman, casino mogul Sheldon Adelson, and Hobby Lobby founder David Green (a Christian Zionist).

South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham, mulling over a potential presidential run in 2015, crassly told a reporter, "If I put together a finance team that will make me financially competitive enough to stay in this thing . . . I may have the first all-Jewish cabinet in America because of the pro-Israel funding. [Chuckles.] Bottom line is, I've got a lot of support from the pro-Israel funding."

Graham earned that support the usual way – by promising to put Israel first. During an obligatory visit to Jerusalem the previous December, Graham, the ranking Republican on the Foreign Appropriations Subcommittee, promised Netanyahu that "Congress will follow your lead" on imposing economic sanctions against Iran.

The most notable among the pro-Israel GOP mega-donors is Sheldon Adelson. Blurring the lines between American supporters and Israeli leaders, Adelson also spent millions to buy an election for the American-educated Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, head of the right-wing Likud party.

Adelson, an ideological ally of Netanyahu, reportedly called the Palestinians "an invented people" whose "purpose ... is to destroy Israel," and advocated

vaporizing Tehran if necessary to prevent it from developing nuclear weapons. Adelson captured the Republican Party's attention in 2012 by contributing an astonishing \$150 million to conservative candidates in that election, including Newt Gingrich and Mitt Romney.

Romney, who promised to move the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem "if Israel's leaders thought that a move of that nature would be helpful to their efforts," also won the favor of Netanyahu's closest political adviser, the American-born Ron Dermer.

Dermer also liked Gingrich. As a young man, before taking Israeli citizenship, Dermer helped the House Speaker promote his 1994 "Contract With America."

Dermer became Israel's ambassador to Washington in 2013. The following year, in a blatant violation of diplomatic protocol, he attended a series of GOP candidate screening sessions held by Adelson in Las Vegas, which became known as the "Adelson primary."

The same year, Ambassador Dermer publicly endorsed Netanyahu's reelection as prime minister, for which he was reprimanded by Israel's Civil Service Commission. He then went on in 2015 to arrange the infamous invitation from Republican leaders to Netanyahu to address Congress on the perils of dealing with Iran, a speech that was arranged without consulting the White House.

Onward with Donald Trump

Through Donald Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner, a major contributor to AIPAC, Dermer influenced the Republican candidate's tough speech to that organization during the 2016 campaign. AIPAC attendees cheered when Trump applauded the end of President Obama's administration and called him "maybe the worst thing to ever happen to Israel."

Adelson soon endorsed Trump in an email to dozens of Republican Jewish donors, saying "he will be a tremendous president when it comes to the safety and security of Israel." Playing the odds shrewdly, Adelson donated \$35 million or more to the Trump campaign.

Israel and its U.S. supporters have since discovered, like everyone else, that Trump is mercurial and not easily managed. After swearing fealty to the Jewish state during the campaign, he has put the brakes on his promise to move the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, called for restraint on further building of settlements, and met with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.

On the other hand, he appointed the most right-wing, pro-settlements ambassador in history, and will make Israel the second foreign visit of his presidency,

just after Saudi Arabia.

Far more important to the Netanyahu government, and to its neoconservative supporters in the United States, is the fact that Trump has surrounded himself with anti-Iran hardliners. He himself has falsely called into question Iran's compliance with the nuclear agreement, contrary to the State Department's own certification.

As Brookings analyst Suzanne Maloney commented recently, "Donald Trump has the Islamic Republic of Iran in his sights . . . neither restraint nor continuity on Iran is really in the offing. . . . Trump has elevated a national security team that shares an Iran-centric interpretation of the problems that plague the Middle East and threaten vital American interests there. . . . The Trump administration has begun to replace accommodation with confrontation as the guiding principle of U.S. policy toward Tehran, seeking to counter Iran through a multi-front campaign of diplomatic, economic, and military pressure."

No one, presumably including Trump himself, can predict where this hostility will lead. But the hard-liners in Israel and the United States who lost out to President Obama on Iran – their first significant defeat in many years – are back in the saddle. Never count the pro-Israel lobby out.

[This is the third in a series on foreign lobbying. The previous installments were "The Open Secret of Foreign Lobbying" and "How China Lobby Shaped America." Next: The Saudi Lobby.]

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Saudis Embrace Embattled Trump

Escaping the tribulations of Washington, President Trump basked in the Saudi monarchy's gilded welcome and promised a flood of U.S. weapons to tilt the region's military balance against Iran, a bad bet on the past, says JP Sottile.

By JP Sottile

While President Trump was ensconced in a tortuous, monarchical and wholly anachronistic ceremony celebrating a \$100 billion arms deal with the royal retinue of Saudi Arabia ... the Iranian people were celebrating the victory of a man targeted for defeat by the hardline, anachronistic forces within Iran.

This juxtaposition says everything you need to know about the fork in the road

Uncle Sam now faces at the trail-head of the next decade.

On one path is Iran. It is trending away from its recent past, which it should be noted was a reaction against American control and interference ... and its brutal lackey ... the Shah.

Iran is young, populous, largely educated, tech-savvy and not beholden to the most retrograde interpretation of Islam. And Iran is the most strategically positioned nation in the region.

Although still repressive in ways we find unacceptable, its repressive policies pale in comparison to the type of extremism the Saudi rulers not only impose on their own people, but have actively exported around the world ... particularly regarding the treatment and the social and professional mobility of women.

Iranian women are not "liberated" by our standards, but they are able to work as doctors, serve as parliamentarians, drive and shop and be out in public. They actually have a place in Iranian society.

On the other path is the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. When it comes to what the West identifies as Islamic-inspired terrorism, they are "the arsonist and the fire brigade" (to quote CNN's Clarissa Ward). They are the primary author of the most repressive treatment of women around the Islamic world. They are also the most hypocritical regarding the teachings of the Quran insofar as they hoard wealth, ignore their duty to the poorest Muslims and are among the least observant Muslims as they jet-set around the world.

And that's to say nothing of the countless Muslims who've died from the wars and terrorism they've either overtly or covertly participated in (with the U.S.) or inspired.

It's About the Oil

As we all know this is because the U.S. has tossed aside all other considerations to sate its maniacal thirst for oil. There is a reason why the Middle East is called "CENTCOM" ... because it is "central" to all Pentagon planning. At least, it has been so thus far because the military has largely functioned as a mercenary army at the disposal of the oil industry. And America has gotten very wealthy from this ... and it also relies on the jobs generated by both oil (hello, Detroit) and by weapons (Military Keynesianism).

Now solar and wind are not just coming ... but they are here and beating hydrocarbons. Hydrogen power is also coming. And a revolution in battery storage is coming.

But Trump is doubling-down on oil, gas and coal. His Secretary of State is Rex Tillerson, the former CEO of Exxon who is sometimes called T. Rexxon, (endorsed by the petro-troika of Condi Rice, James Baker and Dick Cheney). And he is doubling-down on Saudi Arabia ... a nation struggling with the emerging problem of a post-peak demand world that will not pay through the nose for their oil. Nor do they have a functional democracy that could elect someone like Rouhani.

The Saudis don't have the economic fundamentals or the human capital of Iran ... because they've feared those investments as a challenge to their grip on their people. They only have the United States as the guarantor of their regime. That's why they despised President Obama and the Iran Nuclear Deal. It was a signal that the U.S. was at least looking down a different path.

However, today we see in stark comparison that America's own pseudo-monarch and his princeling have decided to run headlong down the Saudi path. It's a path that offers little hope for the future.

JP Sottile is a freelance journalist, radio co-host, documentary filmmaker and former broadcast news producer in Washington, D.C. He blogs at [Newsvandal.com](http://www.newsvandal.com) or you can follow him on Twitter, <http://twitter/newsvandal>.

The Long Ordeal of Julian Assange

For the past decade, WikiLeaks has published groundbreaking evidence of government and corporate abuse while getting targeted for abuse itself, including a seven-year vendetta against founder Julian Assange, says John Pilger.

By John Pilger

Julian Assange has been vindicated because the Swedish case against him was corrupt. The prosecutor, Marianne Ny, obstructed justice and should be prosecuted. Her obsession with Assange not only embarrassed her colleagues and the judiciary but exposed the Swedish state's collusion with the United States in its crimes of war and "rendition."

Had Assange not sought refuge in the Ecuadorean embassy in London, he would have been on his way to the kind of American torture pit Chelsea Manning had to endure.

This prospect was obscured by the grim farce played out in Sweden. "It's a laughing stock," said James Catlin, one of Assange's Australian lawyers. "It is as if they make it up as they go along."

It may have seemed that way, but there was always serious purpose. In 2008, a secret Pentagon document prepared by the "Cyber Counterintelligence Assessments Branch" foretold a detailed plan to discredit WikiLeaks and smear Assange personally.

The "mission" was to destroy the "trust" that was WikiLeaks' "center of gravity." This would be achieved with threats of "exposure [and] criminal prosecution." Silencing and criminalizing such an unpredictable source of truth-telling was the aim.

Perhaps this was understandable. WikiLeaks has exposed the way America dominates much of human affairs, including its epic crimes, especially in Afghanistan and Iraq: the wholesale, often homicidal killing of civilians and the contempt for sovereignty and international law.

These disclosures are protected by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. As a presidential candidate in 2008, Barack Obama, a professor of constitutional law, lauded whistle blowers as "part of a healthy democracy [and they] must be protected from reprisal." In 2012, the Obama campaign boasted on its website that Obama had prosecuted more whistle blowers in his first term than all other US presidents combined. Before Chelsea Manning had even received a trial, Obama had publicly pronounced her guilty.

Few serious observers doubt that should the U.S. get its hands on Assange, a similar fate awaits him. According to documents released by National Security Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden, he is on a "Manhunt target list." Threats of his kidnapping and assassination became almost political and media currency in the U.S. following then Vice-President Joe Biden's preposterous slur that the WikiLeaks founder was a "cyber-terrorist."

Hillary Clinton, the destroyer of Libya and, as WikiLeaks revealed last year, the secret supporter and personal beneficiary of forces underwriting ISIS, proposed her own expedient solution: "Can't we just drone this guy," according to the conservative Web site True Pundit, which cited State Department sources for the quote. [Clinton said she didn't recall making the remark but adding: "It would have been a joke, if it had been said, but I don't recall that."]

According to Australian diplomatic cables, Washington's bid to get Assange is "unprecedented in scale and nature." In Alexandria, Virginia, a secret grand jury has sought for almost seven years to contrive a crime for which Assange can

be prosecuted. This is not easy.

The First Amendment Obstacle

The First Amendment protects publishers, journalists and whistleblowers, whether it is the editor of the New York Times or the editor of WikiLeaks. The very notion of free speech is described as America's "founding virtue" or, as Thomas Jefferson called it, "our currency."

Faced with this hurdle, the U.S. Justice Department has contrived charges of "espionage," "conspiracy to commit espionage," "conversion" (theft of government property), "computer fraud and abuse" (computer hacking) and general "conspiracy." The favored Espionage Act, which was meant to deter pacifists and conscientious objectors during World War One, has provisions for life imprisonment and the death penalty.

Assange's ability to defend himself in such a Kafkaesque world has been severely limited by the U.S. declaring his case a state secret. In 2015, a federal court in Washington blocked the release of all information about the "national security" investigation against WikiLeaks, because it was "active and ongoing" and would harm the "pending prosecution" of Assange. The judge, Barbara J. Rothstein, said it was necessary to show "appropriate deference to the executive in matters of national security." This is a kangaroo court.

For Assange, his trial has been trial by media. On August 20, 2010, when the Swedish police opened a "rape investigation," they coordinated it, unlawfully, with the Stockholm tabloids. The front pages said Assange had been accused of the "rape of two women." The word "rape" can have a very different legal meaning in Sweden than in Britain [or elsewhere]; a pernicious false reality became the news that went round the world.

Less than 24 hours later, the Stockholm Chief Prosecutor, Eva Finne, took over the investigation. She wasted no time in cancelling the arrest warrant, saying, "I don't believe there is any reason to suspect that he has committed rape." Four days later, she dismissed the rape investigation altogether, saying, "There is no suspicion of any crime whatsoever."

Enter Claes Borgstrom, a highly contentious figure in the Social Democratic Party then standing as a candidate in Sweden's imminent general election. Within days of the chief prosecutor's dismissal of the case, Borgstrom, a lawyer, announced to the media that he was representing the two women and had sought a different prosecutor in Gothenberg. This was Marianne Ny, whom Borgstrom knew well, personally and politically.

On August 30, Assange attended a police station in Stockholm voluntarily and

answered the questions put to him. He understood that was the end of the matter. Two days later, Ny announced she was re-opening the case.

At a press conference, Borgstrom was asked by a Swedish reporter why the case was proceeding when it had already been dismissed. The reporter cited one of the women as saying she had not been raped. He replied, "Ah, but she is not a lawyer."

On the day that Marianne Ny reactivated the case, the head of Sweden's military intelligence service – which has the acronym MUST – publicly denounced WikiLeaks in an article entitled "WikiLeaks [is] a threat to our soldiers [under US command in Afghanistan]."

Both the Swedish prime minister and foreign minister attacked Assange, who had been charged with no crime. Assange was warned that the Swedish intelligence service, SAP0, had been told by its U.S. counterparts that U.S.-Sweden intelligence-sharing arrangements would be "cut off" if Sweden sheltered him.

For five weeks, Assange waited in Sweden for the renewed "rape investigation" to take its course. The Guardian was then on the brink of publishing the Iraq "War Logs," based on WikiLeaks' disclosures, which Assange was to oversee in London.

Finally, he was allowed to leave. As soon as he had left, Marianne Ny issued a European Arrest Warrant and an Interpol "red alert" normally used for terrorists and dangerous criminals.

Stuck in London

Assange attended a police station in London, was duly arrested and spent ten days in Wandsworth Prison, in solitary confinement. Released on £340,000 bail, he was electronically tagged, required to report to police daily and placed under virtual house arrest while his case began its long journey to the U.K. Supreme Court.

He still had not been charged with any offense. His lawyers repeated his offer to be questioned in London, by video or personally, pointing out that Marianne Ny had given him permission to leave Sweden. They suggested a special facility at Scotland Yard commonly used by the Swedish and other European authorities for that purpose. She refused.

For almost seven years, while Sweden has questioned 44 people in the U.K. in connection with police investigations, Ny refused to question Assange and so advance her case.

Writing in the Swedish press, a former Swedish prosecutor, Rolf Hillegren,

accused Ny of losing all impartiality. He described her personal investment in the case as “abnormal” and demanded she be replaced.

Assange asked the Swedish authorities for a guarantee that he would not be “rendered” to the U.S. if he was extradited to Sweden. This was refused. In December 2010, The Independent revealed that the two governments had discussed his onward extradition to the U.S.

Contrary to its reputation as a bastion of liberal enlightenment, Sweden has drawn so close to Washington that it has allowed secret CIA “renditions” – including the illegal deportation of refugees. The rendition and subsequent torture of two Egyptian political refugees in 2001 was condemned by the U.N. Committee against Torture, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch; the complicity and duplicity of the Swedish state are documented in successful civil litigation and in WikiLeaks cables.

“Documents released by WikiLeaks since Assange moved to England,” wrote Al Burke, editor of the online Nordic News Network, an authority on the multiple twists and dangers that faced Assange, “clearly indicate that Sweden has consistently submitted to pressure from the United States in matters relating to civil rights. There is every reason for concern that if Assange were to be taken into custody by Swedish authorities, he could be turned over to the United States without due consideration of his legal rights.”

A Faltering Case

The war on Assange now intensified. Marianne Ny refused to allow his Swedish lawyers, and the Swedish courts, access to hundreds of SMS messages that the police had extracted from the phone of one of the two women involved in the “rape” allegations.

Ny said she was not legally required to reveal this critical evidence until a formal charge was laid and she had questioned him. Then, why wouldn’t she question him? Catch-22.

When she announced last week that she was dropping the Assange case, she made no mention of the evidence that would destroy it. One of the SMS messages makes clear that one of the women did not want any charges brought against Assange, “but the police were keen on getting a hold on him.” She was “shocked” when they arrested him because she only “wanted him to take [an HIV] test.” She “did not want to accuse JA of anything” and “it was the police who made up the charges.” In a witness statement, she is quoted as saying that she had been “railroaded by police and others around her.”

Neither woman claimed she had been raped. Indeed, both denied they were raped

and one of them has since tweeted, "I have not been raped." The women were manipulated by police – whatever their lawyers might say now. Certainly, they, too, are the victims of this sinister saga.

The Politics of 'Rape'

Katrin Axelsson and Lisa Longstaff of Women Against Rape wrote: "The allegations against [Assange] are a smokescreen behind which a number of governments are trying to clamp down on WikiLeaks for having audaciously revealed to the public their secret planning of wars and occupations with their attendant rape, murder and destruction. ... The authorities care so little about violence against women that they manipulate rape allegations at will. [Assange] has made it clear he is available for questioning by the Swedish authorities, in Britain or via Skype. Why are they refusing this essential step in their investigation? What are they afraid of?"

Assange's choice was stark: extradition to a country that had refused to say whether or not it would send him on to the U.S., or to seek what seemed his last opportunity for refuge and safety.

Supported by most of Latin America, the government of tiny Ecuador granted him refugee status on the basis of documented evidence that he faced the prospect of cruel and unusual punishment in the U.S.; that this threat violated his basic human rights; and that his own government in Australia had abandoned him and colluded with Washington.

Australia's Labor government of then Prime Minister Julia Gillard had even threatened to take away his Australian passport – until it was pointed out to her that this would be unlawful.

The renowned human rights lawyer, Gareth Peirce, who represents Assange in London, wrote to then Australian Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd: "Given the extent of the public discussion, frequently on the basis of entirely false assumptions... it is very hard to attempt to preserve for him any presumption of innocence. Mr. Assange has now hanging over him not one but two Damocles swords, of potential extradition to two different jurisdictions in turn for two different alleged crimes, neither of which are crimes in his own country, and that his personal safety has become at risk in circumstances that are highly politically charged."

It was not until she contacted the Australian High Commission in London that Peirce received a response, which answered none of the pressing points she raised. In a meeting I attended with her, Australian Consul-General Ken Pascoe made the astonishing claim that he knew "only what I read in the newspapers" about the details of the case.

In 2011, in Sydney, I spent several hours with a conservative Member of Australia's Federal Parliament, Malcolm Turnbull. We discussed the threats to Assange and their wider implications for freedom of speech and justice, and why Australia was obliged to stand by him. Turnbull then had a reputation as a free speech advocate. He is now the Prime Minister of Australia.

I gave him Gareth Peirce's letter about the threat to Assange's rights and life. He said the situation was clearly appalling and promised to take it up with the Gillard government. Only his silence followed.

A Vituperative Campaign

For almost seven years, this epic miscarriage of justice has been drowned in a vituperative campaign against the WikiLeaks founder. There are few precedents. Deeply personal, petty, vicious and inhuman attacks have been aimed at a man not charged with any crime yet subjected to treatment not even meted out to a defendant facing extradition on a charge of murdering his wife. That the U.S. threat to Assange was a threat to all journalists, and to the principle of free speech, was lost in the sordid and the ambitious. I would call it anti-journalism.

Books were published, movie deals struck and media careers launched or kick-started on the back of WikiLeaks and an assumption that attacking Assange was fair game and he was too poor to sue. People have made money, often big money, while WikiLeaks has struggled to survive.

The previous editor of the Guardian, Alan Rusbridger, called the WikiLeaks disclosures, which his newspaper published, "one of the greatest journalistic scoops of the last 30 years." Yet no attempt was made to protect the Guardian's provider and source. Instead, the "scoop" became part of a marketing plan to raise the newspaper's cover price.

With not a penny going to Assange or to WikiLeaks, a hyped Guardian book led to a lucrative Hollywood movie. The book's authors, Luke Harding and David Leigh, gratuitously described Assange as a "damaged personality" and "callous." They also revealed the secret password he had given the paper in confidence, which was designed to protect a digital file containing the U.S. embassy cables. With Assange now trapped in the Ecuadorean embassy, Harding, standing among the police outside, gloated on his blog that "Scotland Yard may get the last laugh."

Journalism students might well study this period to understand the most ubiquitous source of "fake news" – as from within a media self-ordained with a false respectability and as an extension of the authority and power it courts and protects.

The presumption of innocence was not a consideration in Kirsty Wark's memorable live-on-air interrogation in 2010. "Why don't you just apologize to the women?" she demanded of Assange, followed by: "Do we have your word of honor that you won't abscond?"

On the BBC's Today program, John Humphrys bellowed: "Are you a sexual predator?" Assange replied that the suggestion was ridiculous, to which Humphrys demanded to know how many women he had slept with.

"Would even Fox News have descended to that level?" wondered the American historian William Blum. "I wish Assange had been raised in the streets of Brooklyn, as I was. He then would have known precisely how to reply to such a question: 'You mean including your mother?'"

Last week, on BBC World News, on the day Sweden announced it was dropping the case, I was interviewed by Greta Guru-Murthy, who seemed to have little knowledge of the Assange case. She persisted in referring to the "charges" against him. She accused him of putting Trump in the White House; and she drew my attention to the "fact" that "leaders around the world" had condemned him. Among these "leaders" she included Trump's CIA director. I asked her, "Are you a journalist?"

The injustice meted out to Assange is one of the reasons Parliament reformed the Extradition Act in 2014. "His case has been won lock, stock and barrel," Gareth Peirce told me, "these changes in the law mean that the UK now recognizes as correct everything that was argued in his case. Yet he does not benefit." In other words, he would have won his case in the British courts and would not have been forced to take refuge.

Ecuador's decision to protect Assange in 2012 was immensely brave. Even though the granting of asylum is a humanitarian act, and the power to do so is enjoyed by all states under international law, both Sweden and the United Kingdom refused to recognize the legitimacy of Ecuador's decision.

Police Siege

Ecuador's embassy in London was placed under police siege and its government abused. When William Hague's Foreign Office threatened to violate the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, warning that it would remove the diplomatic inviolability of the embassy and send the police in to get Assange, outrage across the world forced the government to back down.

During one night, police appeared at the windows of the embassy in an obvious attempt to intimidate Assange and his protectors.

Since then, Assange has been confined to a small room without sunlight. He has been ill from time to time and refused safe passage to the diagnostic facilities of hospital. Yet, his resilience and dark humor remain quite remarkable in the circumstances. When asked how he put up with the confinement, he replied, "Sure beats a supermax."

It is not over, but the campaign against him is unraveling. The United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention – the tribunal that adjudicates and decides whether governments comply with their human rights obligations – last year ruled that Assange had been detained unlawfully by Britain and Sweden. This is international law at its apex.

Both Britain and Sweden participated in the 16-month long U.N. investigation and submitted evidence and defended their position before the tribunal. In previous cases ruled upon by the Working Group – Aung Sang Suu Kyi in Burma, imprisoned opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim in Malaysia, detained Washington Post journalist Jason Rezaian in Iran – both Britain and Sweden gave full support to the tribunal. The difference now is that Assange's persecution endures in the heart of London.

The Metropolitan Police say they still intend to arrest Assange for bail infringement should he leave the embassy. What then? A few months in prison while the U.S. delivers its extradition request to the British courts?

If the British Government allows this to happen it will, in the eyes of the world, be shamed comprehensively and historically as an accessory to the crime of a war waged by rampant power against justice and freedom, and all of us.

John Pilger is an Australian-British journalist based in London. Pilger's Web site is: www.johnpilger.com. His new film, "The Coming War on China," is available in the U.S. from www.bullfrogfilms.com

The Gaping Holes of Russia-gate

Between Russia-gate and President Trump's potential impeachment, Washington is blending the thrill of McCarthyism and the excitement of Watergate, as ex-U.S. intelligence officials Ray McGovern and William Binney explain.

By Ray McGovern and William Binney

Official Washington got to relive the excitement of Watergate in a "gotcha"

moment after President Trump fired FBI Director James Comey. There were fond recollections of how righteous the major newspapers felt when condemning President Nixon over his “Saturday Night Massacre” firing of special prosecutor Archibald Cox.

But the overriding question from “this Russia thing, with Trump and Russia” – as President Trump calls it – is whether there is any there there. The President labeled it a “made-up story” and, by all appearances from what is known at this time, he is mostly correct.

A few days before Comey’s firing, the FBI Director reportedly had asked for still more resources to hunt the Russian bear for supposedly “interfering” with last year’s election to hurt Hillary Clinton and help Donald Trump. And so the firing allowed the Watergate-recalling news outlets to trot out the old trope that “the cover-up is worse than the crime.”

But can that argument bear close scrutiny, or is it the “phony narrative” that Senate Republican Whip John Cornyn of Texas claims it to be? Cornyn quipped that, if impeding the investigation was Trump’s aim, “This strikes me as a lousy way to do it. All it does is heighten the attention given to the issue.”

Truth is, President Trump had ample reason to be fed up with Comey, in part for his lack of enthusiasm toward investigating actual, provable crimes related to “Russia-gate” – like the flood of sensitive national security leaks, such as the highly sensitive intercepted communications used to precipitate the demise of Trump aide Michael Flynn.

The retired Army lieutenant general was “caught” talking with Russia’s ambassador last December, a normal undertaking for a person designated as the incoming National Security Adviser. But Obama administration holdovers twisted that into a supposed violation of the archaic 1799 Logan Act and then used a transcript of the phone call to trip up Flynn because he didn’t have perfect recollection of the conversation.

So, a trumped-up federal case was used to help get Flynn fired, but an apparent criminal act – the Flynn leak among many other leaks – was apparently ignored. We suspect that one reason for Comey’s disinterest was that he already knows who was responsible.

In contrast to Comey’s see-no-evil reaction to criminal leaking, the FBI Director evinced strong determination to chase after ties between Russia and the Trump campaign until the cows came home. The investigation (already underway for 10 months) had the decided advantage of casting doubt on the legitimacy of Trump’s presidency and putting the kibosh on

his plans to forge a more workable relationship with Russia, a win-win for the Establishment, the Military-Industrial Complex, and the FBI/CIA/NSA “Deep State”; a lose-lose for the President – and arguably the American people and the world, both of whom might benefit from fewer big-power tensions and lower spending on an arms race.

An Evidence Shortage

What has been particularly noteworthy about this “scandal” is how much spooky music we’ve heard and how many sinister suspicions have been raised versus actual “evidence” of the core allegations. So far, it has been smoke and mirrors with no chargeable offenses and not a scintilla of convincing proof of Russian “meddling” in the election.

The oft-cited, but evidence-free, CIA/FBI/NSA report of Jan. 6 – crafted by selected senior analysts, according to then-Director of National Intelligence James Clapper – is of a piece with the “high-confidence,” but fraudulent, National Intelligence Estimate 15 years ago about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

But what about the “Russian hacking,” the centerpiece of the accusations about Kremlin “interference” to help Trump? Surely, we know that happened. Or do we?

On March 31, 2017, WikiLeaks released original CIA documents – almost completely ignored by the mainstream media – showing that the agency had created a program allowing it to break into computers and servers and make it look like others did it by leaving telltale signs (like Cyrillic markings, for example). The capabilities shown in what WikiLeaks calls the “Vault 7” trove of CIA documents required the creation of hundreds of millions of lines of source code. At \$25 per line of code, that amounts to about \$2.5 billion for each 100 million code lines. But the Deep State has that kind of money and would probably consider the expenditure a good return on investment for “proving” the Russians hacked into Democratic Party emails.

In other words, it is altogether possible that the hacking attributed to Russia was actually one of several “active measures” undertaken by a cabal consisting of the CIA, FBI, NSA and Clapper – the same agencies responsible for the lame, evidence-free report of Jan. 6.

Comey displayed considerable discomfort on March 20, explaining to the House Intelligence Committee why the FBI did not insist on getting physical access to the Democratic National Committee’s computers in order to do its own proper forensics, but chose to rely on the examination done by the DNC’s private contractor, CrowdStrike. The firm itself has conflicts of interests in its links

to the pro-NATO and anti-Russia think tank, the Atlantic Council, through Dmitri Alperovitch, who is an Atlantic Council senior fellow and the co-founder of CrowdStrike.

Given the stakes involved in the Russia-gate investigation – now including a possible impeachment battle over removing the President of the United States – wouldn't it seem logical for the FBI to insist on its own forensics for this fundamental predicate of the case? Or could Comey's hesitancy to demand access to the DNC's computers be explained by a fear that FBI technicians not fully briefed on CIA/NSA/FBI Deep State programs might uncover a lot more than he wanted?

President Trump has entered into a high-stakes gamble in confronting the Deep State and its media allies over the accusations of his colluding with Russia. Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer, a New York Democrat, publicly warned him of the risk earlier this year. "You take on the intelligence community, they have six ways from Sunday at getting back at you," Schumer told MSNBC's Rachel Maddow on Jan. 3.

If Mr. Trump continues to "take on" the Deep State, he will be fighting uphill, whether he's in the right or not. It is far from certain he will prevail.

Ray McGovern (rrmcgovern@gmail.com) was a CIA analyst for 27 years; he briefed the president's daily brief one-on-one to President Reagan's most senior national security officials from 1981-85. William Binney (williambinney0802@comcast.net) worked for NSA for 36 years, retiring in 2001 as the technical director of world military and geopolitical analysis and reporting; he created many of the collection systems still used by NSA.

Donald Trump at a Lonely Crossroads

Battered for months by Russia-gate innuendo, Donald Trump finds his unlikely presidency at a dangerous crossroads with no clear-cut path ahead, writes ex-British diplomat Alastair Crooke.

By Alastair Crooke

It is time to pause, take a deep breath, and reflect. It is very clear that Trump's Presidency is at a crossroads. This is not because there is any evidence of any wrongdoing. To date, there is a torrent of innuendo, but zero "evidence." Rather, events have converged at a point of inflection, not because the

President might be impeached – that is improbable because the bar in terms of evidence, and of Congressional votes required, is very high – but because recent days have unmasked the sheer breadth and visceral animosity of the forces determined to “take down” the President, by whatever means present themselves.

President Trump faces a mainstream media (MSM) that has become hysterical in perceiving collusion with Russia everywhere – even to the extent of querying how Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, the Russian Ambassador, and a Russian photographer could have been allowed access to the Oval Office, thereby compromising American “security.” Trump faces a coalition of Clintonites, “corporate” Republicans, neocons, and more significantly, a fifth column within the intelligence services which regards any attempt at détente with Russia to constitute *prima facie* treason.

In response to a question from Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-South Carolina, who asked FBI Director James Comey in the Senate Judiciary Committee “what kind of threat” Russia presents “to the democratic process” (that is to say Graham’s question was not about Russia’s military capabilities, but on the threat to Western democracies), Comey answered: “Certainly, in my view, the greatest threat of any nation on Earth, given their [Russia’s] intention and their capability.”

One might reasonably conclude then, that Trump inevitably will be overwhelmed by this onslaught. Certainly the noise from the East Coast media bubble is overwhelming. And that, precisely, is the threat to the President: the drip, drip, of innuendo that Professor Stephen Cohen has dubbed “the accusation of treason.”

“And”, Cohen added, “we have a whole array of allegations that Putin helped him [Trump] get in the White House – to his [Trump’s] associates doing wrong things with Russians ... This, [the allegations lacking any solid evidence] is beyond belief now ... This has become a national security threat to us, in and of, itself.”

A Paralyzed Administration

And now a Special Prosecutor has been appointed. One commentator summed it up thus: “That’s how special prosecutors work ... they hobble the president, drain away his political credibility, separate him from his supporters, and paralyze his administration. No legislator is willing to lend his support for fear of what the prosecutor might find. Each one will run for cover rather than work with Trump to get something done. In appointing a prosecutor, [Deputy Attorney General Rod] Rosenstein has killed this Administration’s ability to function. No health care overhaul. No tax cuts. No government reform. All while we await the results of a nothing investigation into a nothing scandal.”

The noise is overwhelming, but it is nearly all emanating from the coastal élites who inevitably speak the loudest. Polls may say that Trump's favorability rating is slipping. That is so; but the polls also speak to the growing polarity between the Republican base, and the coastal Establishment: 81 percent of Clinton voters support impeaching the President, but 83 percent of Trump voters adamantly oppose it. Equally 91 percent of Clinton supporters "disapprove" of Trump, whereas 86 percent of the Trump base "support" him. There is evidence that the "deplorables" have been deeply angered by the impeachment talk.

And here lies the "inflection point": President Trump's base is pretty clear in identifying the "game plan" (it is widely dissected on the New Right, and Alt Right sites): The onslaught is not about finding the "evidence" (which probably doesn't exist): The "Russian interference" meme emerged primarily from the Democratic National Committee email leaks that were originally attributed to a Russian "hack" (rather than a "leak" by Seth Rich, since murdered), via a private company, Crowd Strike, (evidence that experts now contest); from the discredited "dirty dossier" of ex-British spy Christopher Steele; and from unmasked intercepts of Trump aides (which have as yet shown no evidence of electoral collusion).

It is rather the drip, drip of innuendo which is intended – the Trump base avers – to collapse the President's ratings (among his base) to the point at which even the Republican members of Congress will abandon the President, and join the "movement" to remove him, via one or other of the provisions of the U.S. Constitution.

Obstruction of Justice is unlikely to serve: As George Washington University law professor Jonathan Turley has said, former FBI Director James Comey's memo offers "no proof for impeachment" of Trump. Turley noted: "Indeed, it raises as many questions for Comey as it does Trump in terms of the alleged underlying conduct.

"A good place to start would be with the federal law, specifically 18 U.S.C. 1503. The criminal code demands more than what Comey reportedly describes in his memo. There are dozens of different variations of obstruction charges ranging from threatening witnesses to influencing jurors. None would fit this case. That leaves the omnibus provision on attempts to interfere with the 'due administration of justice.'

"However, that still leaves the need to show that the effort was to influence 'corruptly' when Trump could say that he did little but express concern for a longtime associate. The term 'corruptly' is actually defined differently under the various obstruction provisions, but it often involves a showing that someone acted 'with the intent to secure an unlawful benefit for oneself or another.'

Encouraging leniency or advocating for an associate is improper but not necessarily seeking an unlawful benefit for him.”

What the point of inflection calls for (Trump’s supporters’ say), is to insist that the FBI investigation be concluded expeditiously, and that a counter-attack on the leaders of those forces (whomsoever they are), and on their “moles” – “embedded insurgents committed to forcing Trump from office” – who are leaking innuendo to the MSM, be prosecuted.

It is a crossroads. Trump has to halt the drumbeat, or see his Presidency crumble into dust. And the blade of “defamation politics” can be two-edged: Hillary Clinton was no paragon of virtue.

An Elusive Achievement

In this context, Trump now needs a policy achievement more than ever. A legislative success in the domestic arena is – evidently – not in prospect, but rather the political convulsions in D.C. may finally spook a somnolent and supine Wall Street to think about risk again (VIX, a litmus of market volatility, has been at historic lows) – especially as market insiders are warning their clients “not to expect to [be] bailed out by the Fed this time.” Indeed the entire Trump reflation program looks as if will be a long time coming (if it comes at all, this year).

At such times, foreign policy may come to the fore. We have already noted that the Astana Process has witnessed a White House, more ready than Obama’s, to work with Russia, Turkey and Iran, to reach some sort of settlement in Syria. The triumph of the “defeat” of ISIS in Raqa’a and Mosul might constitute just such an achievement to rally Trump’s base.

Trump was politically courageous in inviting Lavrov into the Oval Office (at a time when “the drumbeat” of Russia collusion was reaching a crescendo). It seems that Russia and its allies are ready to concede to Trump the taking of Raqa’a, (the Syrian Foreign Minister has effectively acknowledged this); and in return, Russia and Iran have been put on test by the White House.

The hostile rhetoric from Washington on Iran, has been notably absent since Astana, and the secondary sanctions waiver in connection with the JCPOA (the nuclear agreement) has been renewed. It seems Trump has realized that Generals James Mattis (Defense Secretary) and H.R. McMaster (National Security Adviser) were intent on leading the President back into a series of (unwinnable) wars – at least that seems to be the message of Astana which has put two negotiators, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson firmly in the driver’s seat.

But here too, the onslaught on the President, and on the Astana political process is likely to continue. Recall that President Obama, who was ever more hesitant than Trump – (never fully endorsing) Secretary of State John Kerry’s and FM Lavrov’s negotiating marathons – witnessed those political efforts sabotaged by his own Pentagon (the “accident” at Dier Azor, killing 68 Syrian Army soldiers defending their besieged base against ISIS militants), and Defense Secretary Ashton Carter’s public equivocation about sharing intelligence on ISIS and al-Qae’da with the Russians).

Already the signs of similar sabotage are present: i.e. the Acting Assistant Secretary of State Stuart Jones’s dubious announcement – on the eve of a Geneva round of Syria talks – that the U.S. had found evidence of a crematorium at a Syrian prison, in which the remains of mass executions of prisoners were burned. Two days later Jones resigned from the State Department, with a colleague noting that while Jones was retiring early for personal reasons, his departure was a case of “another senior government official with real competence leaving.” (Or, in other words another anti-Trump dissident leaving the ship.)

Even Anne Barnard of the *New York Times* noted that the timing of the crematorium allegations seemed “political.” Yes, indeed political, but directed at the Russians or at Trump? There are also reports that a contingent of U.S. and British Special Forces are operating in southern Syria to stymie any Syrian army or Hezbollah advance in order to regain control of the Syrian-Iraqi border. On Thursday, a U.S.-led airstrike hit Syrian military forces that were deemed too close to the U.S.-British base.

So President Trump should beware. Peace settlements require huge efforts to assemble, but can be undone in a moment. And Saudi Defense Minister Prince Mohammad bin Salman should note: Trump just might be more interested in defeating ISIS at this moment, than suffering a further Saudi lecture on the misdeeds of Iran. Though President Trump will be happy to receive whatever boodle with which the Saudis may care to shower him. Rumors say up to \$300 billion – \$400 billion in arms deals! “Quite nice,” as the Donald might say.

Alastair Crooke is a former British diplomat who was a senior figure in British intelligence and in European Union diplomacy. He is the founder and director of the Conflicts Forum.

Do High-Level Leaks Suggest a

Conspiracy?

Widespread concern inside Official Washington about President Trump's unfitness for the job is fueling a campaign of high-level leaks that is taking on the look of a "soft coup," says ex-CIA officer Philip Giraldi.

By Philip Giraldi

Back in my time in the CIA, there were two places in the headquarters building one could go that were free speech zones – places where it was safe to vent about senior management without necessarily being admonished or even reported. They were the Historical Intelligence Collection room off the library, where no one ever went to look at the books, and the office supplies storage room in the basement.

The supplies room had a lot of dark corners and concealing shelves where it was possible to be anonymous and it was completely unsupervised in the belief that true-blue CIA officers would never stoop to taking even a single pencil more than was actually needed to get the job done.

I don't know if those rooms still exist, but I sometimes think of them when the subject of government conspiracies come up. I have this vision of two or three conspirators huddled in the corner behind the staplers back in 1975 discussing how one would go about eliminating the likes of Senator Frank Church, who at that time was heading a major congressional investigation into CIA improprieties.

If there had been such a gathering, I would imagine that the *Washington Post* would have found out about it on the next day as intelligence officers are gregarious and like to talk. This has been my principal problem with the debate in some quarters about the 9/11 Commission. Their report did indeed miss many important angles in order to protect certain governmental interests, but if there had been a genuine conspiracy involving what must have been hundreds of people to demolish the Twin Towers with explosives, it surely would have leaked long ago.

Two months ago, I would have dismissed as fantasy any thoughts of a conspiracy based in America's national security agencies to bring down Donald Trump. But now I am not so sure. Many of my friends who are former intelligence officers are increasingly asking questions. It is worth pointing out that none of us are fans of what the White House has been doing and saying – quite the contrary.

Defense of the Constitution

Still, alerting the country to concerns over what might be a developing soft coup orchestrated by the intelligence and law-enforcement agencies to nullify the results of a national election in no way equates to trying to protect Donald Trump and his uncouth and ill-informed behavior. It is rather a defense of the Constitution.

Donald Trump said on Wednesday that “This is the single greatest witch hunt of a politician in American history!” He might be right. He was referring to Deputy Attorney General Rob Rosenstein’s appointment of the highly-respected Robert Mueller as independent counsel to investigate “any links and/or coordination between Russian government and individuals associated with the campaign of President Donald Trump, and any matters that arose or may arise directly from the investigation.”

Trump’s bombast puts everyone but his most tone-deaf supporters on edge, but there are two points that he has been making repeatedly that are essential to any understanding of what is going on.

First, the investigation into Russia and the Trumpsters has been a high priority at FBI and also in Congress for nearly a year. Yet so far no one has produced evidence that anyone broke any law or even that someone did something wrong.

Second, and more importantly, the vilification of Trump and Russia has been driven by a series of leaks that come from the very top of the national security apparatus, leaks that appear not to have been seriously investigated.

This involvement of FBI and CIA in the campaign, whether inadvertently or by design, was particularly evident in the various reports that surfaced and were leaked to the press during the campaign and right up to the inauguration. The leaks of that type of information, to include technical intelligence and Special Access Program “codeword” material, require top-level access as well as the ability to arrange clandestine contacts with major players in the media, something far beyond the reach of most employees at CIA or the FBI.

The Lavrov Leak

Similar leaks have been appearing since that time. I confess to finding Monday’s detailed account of what President Trump discussed with Russian Ambassador Sergey Lavrov, which included corroborating material that likely did more damage than the information that was actually shared, highly suggestive of the possibility that something like a conspiracy is, in fact, functioning.

Given the really tight-security control of that transcript after it was determined that it contained sensitive information, one might reasonably assume that the leaks to the media came directly out of Donald Trump’s own National

Security Council or from the highest levels of the office of the DNI, CIA, or FBI.

On Wednesday, the anonymous sources struck again, revealing that “Michael Flynn and other advisers to Donald Trump’s campaign were in contact with Russian officials and others with Kremlin ties in at least 18 calls and emails during the last seven months of the 2016 presidential race.” That sort of information had to come from the top level of the FBI and would have been accessible to only a few, but even though the leaks of what constitutes highly-classified information have been recurring for many months, no one has been fired or arrested.

The emphasis on Russia derives from the government and media consensus that Moscow was behind the hacking of Democratic National Committee (DNC) computers that led to the exposure of what the DNC was doing to destroy the candidacy of Bernie Sanders. There is also a related consensus that the Russian hacking was intended to damage American democracy and also to help the Trump campaign, a narrative that the President has described as a “made-up thing,” a view that I share. All of these assertions are regarded as unquestionably true as measured by inside-the-beltway groupthink, with even the White House now conceding that there was Russian interference in the election.

Sometimes the hysteria over Russia produces over-the-top stories in the mainstream media, including last week’s completely speculative piece wondering whether the entourage of Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov had sought to sneak a recording device into the White House during his White House visit. It was the type of tale that might have been inspired by a leak from someone in the National Security Council who personally observed the context of the meeting and was able to provide corroborating details.

Where’s the Beef?

Nevertheless, in spite of the overwhelming groupthink, it has been repeated *ad nauseam* by people like myself that no actual evidence has been produced to support any of the claims being made about Russia and Trump. There is more evidence that the White House was penetrated by Ankara – through the good services of Michael Flynn – than by Moscow, but Congress has not called for an investigation into Turkey’s lobbying.

Ray McGovern, a former senior CIA analyst, is even speculating that the Agency might have been the actual hacker into the DNC, leaving a trail behind that would have suggested that it was done by the Russians. His concern arises from the recent WikiLeaks revelation that the CIA had developed cyber-warfare capabilities to do just that.

McGovern, like myself, is also asking why former CIA Director John Brennan has not been summoned by the Senate Committee looking into Russia-gate. Former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper has testified twice, while former FBI Director James Comey, current NSA Director Mike Rogers, and former Justice Department senior official Sally Yates have all appeared once. Brennan's absence is conspicuous as he was the senior national security official most closely tied to the Obama Administration, may have had the tools at hand to fake the Russian connection, and has also been plausibly linked to "encouraging" British Intelligence to provide damaging information on Michael Flynn.

I now suspect that there is indeed a group at the top of the U.S. national security system that wants to remove Donald Trump and has wanted to do so for quite some time. If that is true, I believe that they have been operating with that goal in mind for at least the past year. It is not a traditional conspiracy or cabal in that it does not meet and conspire together, but I suspect the members know what they are doing in a general sense and are intervening whenever they can to keep Trump off balance.

Their program is simple: convince the nation that the President and his team colluded with the Russians to rig the 2016 election in his favor, which, if demonstrable even if not necessarily true, would provide grounds for impeachment. They are motivated by the belief that removing Trump must be done "for the good of the country" and they are willing to do what they consider correcting a mistake made by the American voters. They are assisted in their effort by the mainstream media, which agrees with both the methods employed and the overall objective and is completely on board with the process.

Saving the country from Trump is certainly an attractive notion. I suspect the Comeys, Clappers, and Brennans, together with a host of former senior officers who appear regularly on television, if they were involved, see themselves as great patriots. But they must understand that the blunt instrument they are using is far more dangerous than the current occupant of the White House.

A soft coup engineered by the national security and intelligence agencies would be far more threatening to our democracy than anything Donald Trump or even the Russians can do.

Philip Giraldi, a former CIA officer, is executive director of the Council for the National Interest. [This article is re-posted with the author's permission. It first appeared at The American Conservative at <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/do-high-level-leaks-suggest-a-conspiracy/>]

When the Trump Coup-makers Cometh

Exclusive: As President Trump prepares for his first foreign trip, the turbulent political waters around him are rising and the tidal wave of a “soft coup” may be just over the horizon, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

So what did you think a U.S.-styled “soft coup” would look like? What we’re seeing regarding the intended removal of President Trump is not that much different from what has happened in dozens of other countries, whether Iran in 1953 or Ukraine in 2014 or Brazil in 2016. This one just has a few extra American touches.

Like other coups, there are often vague and unproven accusations leveled against the target and his or her entourage. Even though hard evidence is usually lacking, “process crimes,” such as making misstatements to prosecutors or obstructing justice, are developed as a substitute under the popular saying: “the cover-up is worse than the crime.” Whatever the case, a complicit media then trumpets alleged wrongdoing into grave and impeachable offenses.

And, if you had any doubts about what is looming, you should read Washington Post columnist E.J. Dionne Jr.’s [op-ed](#), entitled in print editions “A quick end would be better,” which states:

“There is really only one issue in American politics at this moment: Will we accelerate our way to the end of the [Trump story](#), or will our government remain mired in scandal, misdirection and paralysis for many more months – or even years? ...

“Nothing could be worse than slow-walking the Trump inquiries. The evidence is already overwhelming that he is temperamentally and intellectually incapable of doing the job he holds. He is indifferent to acquiring the knowledge the presidency demands and apparently of the belief that he can improvise hour to hour. He will violate norms whenever it suits him and cross ethical lines whenever he feels like it.”

The History of Coups

As this American coup against Trump progresses, one commonality of coups around the world – whether “hard coups” of military tanks or “soft coups” of “constitutional” removals – is that the coup’s target is not some perfect human being. He or she has likely made political mistakes or cut some corners or had

associates who lined their pockets.

But the difference between those misdeeds being treated as politics as usual or becoming the stuff of “scandal” has more to do with the interests of powerful interests – a domestic “deep state” or an outside “superpower” – than any evenhanded pursuit of justice.

To say that Trump is an imperfect messenger for whatever populist message he thinks he’s carrying stretches beyond the breaking point any normal definition of the word “imperfect.” Indeed, Trump may be the perfectly imperfect messenger.

Yet, what’s really at stake in any coup is power and the direction that a country will take. In the case of Donald Trump, there appear to be several factors at play: he is regarded by many establishment figures as too incompetent and uncouth to serve as America’s President; he also defies the neoconservative orthodoxy over U.S. foreign policy; and perhaps most significantly, he doesn’t believe in the New Cold War, which will assure the Military-Industrial Complex years of expensive new weapons systems by making Russia the new/old “enemy.”

There is, of course, some truth to all these concerns. Trump is an egotistical buffoon who doesn’t seem to know what he doesn’t know. Often his brain doesn’t connect to his tongue – or his Twitter fingers. He is more a Kardashian “reality star,” saying stuff to get attention and to attract eyeballs, than a sober leader who holds his cards close and chooses his words carefully.

Though many Americans voted for him because they viewed him as a no-nonsense businessman, he was actually someone who ran what amounted to a family business without the kind of accountability that often comes with managing a large public corporation.

Puffing up his own importance, Trump even has bragged about his impunity. During the 2016 campaign, he was revealed as the kind of jerk who boasts about grabbing women by the “pussy” and getting away with it because of his star status and personal power.

So, yes, Trump is both incompetent and uncouth. But he is hardly the first president to bring unseemly personal baggage or an inadequate skill set into the Oval Office. Bill Clinton was known as an insatiable hound dog preying on vulnerable women, and George W. Bush was shockingly unqualified for the demands of the presidency.

While Barack Obama had the intellectual skills and behaved commendably in his personal conduct, he had little experience in managing a complex organization – and it showed in some of his disastrous personnel decisions, such as appointing the hawkish Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State and keeping Bush loyalist

Robert Gates as Secretary of Defense.

In other words, Trump's skill limitations were not by themselves disqualifying. With the proper advice and a modicum of self-control, Trump could have performed acceptably as Chief Executive. But he failed to recruit wise advisers and couldn't discipline either his tongue or his Twitter fingers.

Even staunch Trump supporters whom I've spoken with wish he could have parked his large but fragile ego at the White House gate rather than bringing it into the Oval Office.

Foreign Policy Dissent

Still, Trump's larger vulnerability was his failure to accept the foreign policy parameters prescribed by the neocon-dominated Establishment. He started out insulting powerful neocons by challenging their self-exculpatory narrative of the Iraq War – that it was a great idea sabotaged by poor execution but then salvaged by the “surge” before being betrayed by Obama.

Trump also belittled some of the neocon champions, such as old-lion Sen. John “No Hero” McCain and rising star Sen. Marco “Little Marco” Rubio. It would have been a neocon dream to have the 2016 campaign a match-up between Marco Rubio and Hillary Clinton, but the former fell to Trump in the primaries and the latter lost to Trump in the general election.

But Trump's greatest sin was his refusal to buy into Official Washington's big-ticket Russia-bashing, the goal of making Moscow an implacable enemy that then required massive new spending on both propaganda (supposedly to combat Russian “propaganda”) and military projects (including NATO expansion up to Russia's borders and new weapons systems to deter Russian “aggression”).

Despite his simple-mindedness (or perhaps because of it), Trump couldn't understand why the United States had to demonize Russia when he saw many areas of possible cooperation (such as the fight against terrorism).

Trump and a few of his advisers were so out-of-step on the “Russia thing” that Official Washington developed a new groupthink that the only possible explanation was that Trump and his team must be somehow on the Kremlin's payroll. Any alleged “connection” to Russia – no matter how tenuous or seemingly innocuous – became front-page news.

For instance, retired Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn's speakers bureau negotiated a relatively modest speaking fee of \$45,386 for him to address the tenth anniversary of RT, the Russian network, in December 2015, with RT even whittling down his fee – and that speech became a major cause celebre.

On Dec. 29, 2016, after the election and as the national security adviser-designate, Flynn took a phone call from Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak while Flynn was on vacation in the Dominican Republic, and Flynn later offered an incomplete account of the conversation, which the National Security Agency knew because it had intercepted the phone call.

Instead of people shrugging their shoulders and giving Flynn the benefit of the doubt, Obama's holdovers in the Justice Department literally made a federal case out of it, invoking the archaic and virtually-never-used 1799 Logan Act (which bars private citizens from negotiating with foreigners) and then advancing the absurd argument that somehow the discrepancies in Flynn's recollection made him vulnerable to Russian blackmail to get Trump to fire Flynn.

Then, Trump's alleged suggestion to then-FBI Director James Comey that Flynn was a good guy who had served his country and had suffered enough – and that it might be best to “let it go” – has now become the latest argument for impeaching Trump.

In Deep Water

Whether he knows it or not, Trump is now in very deep water and has no idea how to dog-paddle back to the shore. His aides seem to think that a nine-day foreign trip will do him good, but it is more likely to make him grovel before Saudi King Salman and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, knowing that any offense that those leaders might take would simply expedite Trump's political doom.

Trump is surely in no position to tell the Saudis to cut out their covert funding for Al Qaeda and other Sunni terrorist groups – or to insist that they stop bombing Yemen, the poorest country in the Middle East. Nor could Trump dare challenge Netanyahu on the Israeli abuse of the Palestinians, the Prime Minister's obstruction of the peace process, and his blatant efforts to manipulate U.S. politics in favor of bloody neocon interventions across the region. Trump will be the desperate supplicant hoping for a reassuring pat on the head.

There is one – and perhaps only one – winning move that Trump has left. He could authorize CIA Director Mike Pompeo to prepare for release U.S. intelligence information regarding turning-point moments in recent years, such as the truth about the 2013 sarin incident in Syria and the 2014 Malaysia Airlines shoot-down in eastern Ukraine. [See here and here.]

If – as I'm told – the Obama administration systematically misrepresented the intelligence on those catastrophes to register propaganda gains (against the

Syrian government in 2013 and Russia in 2014), the U.S. government's internal information could shift those key narratives in more peaceful directions.

But whatever the truth is, Trump could shift his own image from a compulsive liar who disdains facts into a champion for transparency and honesty in government. He could turn the tables on The New York Times (which has set itself up as the great hero for Truth) and The Washington Post (which has fashioned a new melodramatic slogan, "Democracy Dies in Darkness"). He could point out their hypocritical lack of aggressiveness in challenging the Obama administration's excessive secrecy.

Trump would also give his dispirited supporters something to rally around. Many blue-collar voters backed Trump because they thought he was at least addressing their economic fears of lost work and lost status, while Hillary Clinton – in their view – treated them with disregard and disdain, even calling many of them "deplorables."

But Trump's promises of recovered jobs were largely hollow. Whatever improvement Americans might be feeling in their pocketbooks, it is more the result of Obama's careful economic management and the normal recovery from Bush's Wall Street crash and the Great Recession than anything Trump can or will do.

So, revealing hidden truths – where the American people may have been misled – would not only be the right thing to do for democracy, it also could be the smart thing to do. When the Establishment coup-makers come for Trump – as they now almost certainly will – he can at least say that he tried to do something to return the U.S. government to the American people.

That might not save his presidency but it would at least elevate his purpose and possibly create some positive legacy to attach to the Trump name. As the situation stands now, Trump appears headed for a humiliating exit that won't just strip him of the presidency but would strip away any luster for the Trump brand.

In other words, his impulsive foray into politics might not just make him one of the most reviled U.S. presidents in history but take down the Trump businesses, too.

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](#)). . .
