

# How Many People Has the U.S. Killed in its Post-9/11 Wars? Part 2: Afghanistan and Pakistan

The numbers of casualties of U.S. wars since Sept. 11, 2001 have largely gone uncounted, but coming to terms with the true scale of the crimes committed remains an urgent moral, political and legal imperative, argues Nicolas J.S. Davies, in part two of his series.

**By Nicolas J.S. Davies**

In the first part of this series, I estimated that about 2.4 million Iraqis have been killed as a result of the illegal invasion of their country by the United States and the United Kingdom in 2003. I turn now to Afghan and Pakistani deaths in the ongoing 2001 U.S. intervention in Afghanistan. In part three, I will examine U.S.-caused war deaths in Libya, Somalia, Syria and Yemen. According to Ret. U.S. General Tommy Franks, who led the war against the Taliban in Afghanistan in reaction to 9/11, the U.S. government does not keep track of civilian casualties that it causes. “You know, we don’t do body counts,” Franks once said. Whether that’s true or a count is covered up is difficult to know.

As I explained in part one, the U.S. has attempted to justify its invasions of Afghanistan and several other countries as a legitimate response to the terrorist crimes of 9/11. But the U.S. was not attacked by another country on that day, and no crime, however horrific, can justify 16 years of war – and counting – against a series of countries that did not attack the U.S.

As former Nuremberg prosecutor Benjamin Ferencz told NPR a week after the terrorist attacks, they were crimes against humanity, but not “war crimes,” because the U.S. was not at war. “It is never a legitimate response to punish people who are not responsible for the wrong done.” Ferencz explained. “We must make a distinction between punishing the guilty and punishing others. If you simply retaliate en masse by bombing Afghanistan, let us say, or the Taliban, you will kill many people who don’t believe in what has happened, who don’t approve of what has happened.”

As Ferencz predicted, we have killed “many people” who had nothing to do with the crimes of September 11. How many people? That is the subject of this report.

## **Afghanistan**

In 2011, award-winning investigative journalist Gareth Porter was researching night raids by U.S. special operations forces in Afghanistan for his

article, "How McChrystal and Petraeus Built an Indiscriminate Killing Machine." The expansion of night raids from 2009 to 2011 was a central element in Barack Obama's escalation of the U.S. War in Afghanistan. Porter documented a gradual 50-fold ramping up from 20 raids per month in May 2009 to over 1,000 raids per month by April 2011.

But strangely, the UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA) reported a decrease in the numbers of civilians killed by U.S. forces in Afghanistan in 2010, including a decrease in the numbers of civilians killed in night raids from 135 in 2009 to only 80 in 2010.

UNAMA's reports of civilian deaths are based on investigations by the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), so Noori Shah Noori, an Afghan journalist working with Porter on the article, interviewed Nader Nadery, a Commissioner of the AIHRC, to find out what was going on.

Nadery explained to Noori, "...that that figure represented only the number of civilian deaths from 13 incidents that had been fully investigated. It excluded the deaths from 60 other incidents in which complaints had been received, but had not yet been thoroughly investigated."

"Nadery has since estimated that the total civilian deaths for all 73 night raids about which it had complaints was 420," Porter continued. "But the AIHRC admits that it does not have access to most of the districts dominated by the Taliban and that people in those districts are not aware of the possibility of complaining to the Commission about night raids. So, neither the AIHRC nor the United Nations learns about a significant proportion – and very likely the majority – of night raids that end in civilian deaths."

UNAMA has since updated its count of civilians killed in U.S. night raids in 2010 from 80 to 103, still nowhere close to Nadery's estimate of 420. But as Nadery explained, even that estimate must have been a small fraction of the number of civilian deaths in about 5,000 night raids that year, most of which were probably conducted in areas where people have no contact with UNAMA or the AIHRC.

As senior U.S. military officers admitted to Dana Priest and William Arkin of *The Washington Post*, more than half the raids conducted by U.S. special operations forces target the wrong person or house, so a large increase in civilian deaths was a predictable and expected result of such a massive expansion of these deadly "kill or capture" raids.

The massive escalation of U.S. night raids in 2010 probably made it an exceptional year, so it is unlikely that UNAMA's reports regularly exclude as

many uninvestigated reports of civilian deaths as in 2010. But on the other hand, UNAMA's annual reports never mention that their figures for civilian deaths are based only on investigations completed by the AIHRC, so it is unclear how unusual it was to omit 82 percent of reported incidents of civilian deaths in U.S. night raids from that year's report.

We can only guess how many reported incidents have been omitted from UNAMA's other annual reports since 2007, and, in any case, that would still tell us nothing about civilians killed in areas that have no contact with UNAMA or the AIHRC.

In fact, for the AIHRC, counting the dead is only a by-product of its main function, which is to investigate reports of human rights violations in Afghanistan. But Porter and Noori's research revealed that UNAMA's reliance on investigations completed by the AIHRC as the basis for definitive statements about the number of civilians killed in Afghanistan in its reports has the effect of sweeping an unknown number of incomplete investigations and unreported civilian deaths down a kind of "memory hole," writing them out of virtually all published accounts of the human cost of the war in Afghanistan.

UNAMA's annual reports even include colorful pie-charts to bolster the false impression that these are realistic estimates of the number of civilians killed in a given year, and that pro-government forces and foreign occupation forces are only responsible for a small portion of them.

UNAMA's systematic undercounts and meaningless pie-charts become the basis for headlines and news stories all over the world. But they are all based on numbers that UNAMA and the AIHRC know very well to be a small fraction of civilian deaths in Afghanistan. It is only a rare story like Porter's in 2011 that gives any hint of this shocking reality.

In fact, UNAMA's reports reflect only how many deaths the AIHRC staff have investigated in a given year, and may bear little or no relation to how many people have actually been killed. Seen in this light, the relatively small fluctuations in UNAMA's reports of civilian deaths from year to year in Afghanistan seem just as likely to represent fluctuations in resources and staffing at the AIHRC as actual increases or decreases in the numbers of people killed.

If only one thing is clear about UNAMA's reports of civilian deaths, it is that nobody should ever cite them as estimates of total numbers of civilians killed in Afghanistan – least of all UN and government officials and mainstream journalists who, knowingly or not, mislead millions of people when they repeat them.

## Estimating Afghan Deaths Through the Fog of Official Deception

So the most widely cited figures for civilian deaths in Afghanistan are based, not just on “passive reporting,” but on misleading reports that knowingly ignore many or most of the deaths reported by bereaved families and local officials, while many or most civilian deaths are never reported to UNAMA or the AIHCR in the first place. So how can we come up with an intelligent or remotely accurate estimate of how many civilians have really been killed in Afghanistan?

Body Count: Casualty Figures After 10 Years of the “War On Terror”, published in 2015 by Physicians for Social Responsibility (PSR), a co-winner of the 1985 Nobel Peace Prize, estimated deaths of combatants and civilians in Afghanistan based on UNAMA’s reports and other sources. *Body Count*’s figures for numbers of Afghan combatants killed seem more reliable than UNAMA’s undercounts of civilian deaths.

The Afghan government reported that 15,000 of its soldiers and police were killed through 2013. The authors of *Body Count* took estimates of Taliban and other anti-government forces killed in 2001, 2007 and 2010 from other sources and extrapolated to years for which no estimates were available, based on other measures of the intensity of the conflict (numbers of air strikes, night raids etc.). They estimated that 55,000 “insurgents” were killed by the end of 2013.

The years since 2013 have been increasingly violent for the people of Afghanistan. With reductions in U.S. and NATO occupation forces, Afghan pro-government forces now bear the brunt of combat against their fiercely independent countrymen, and another 25,000 soldiers and police have been killed since 2013, according to my own calculations from news reports and this study by the Watson Institute at Brown University.

If the same number of anti-government fighters have been killed, that would mean that at least 120,000 Afghan combatants have been killed since 2001. But, since pro-government forces are armed with heavier weapons and are still backed by U.S. air support, anti-government losses are likely to be greater than those of government troops. So a more realistic estimate would be that between 130,000 and 150,000 Afghan combatants have been killed.

The more difficult task is to estimate how many civilians have been killed in Afghanistan through the fog of UNAMA’s misinformation. UNAMA’s passive reporting has been deeply flawed, based on completed investigations of as few as 18 percent of reported incidents, as in the case of night raid deaths in 2010, with no reports at all from large parts of the country where the Taliban are most active and most U.S. air strikes and night raids take place. The Taliban appear to have never published any numbers of civilian deaths in areas under its

control, but it has challenged UNAMA's figures.

There has been no attempt to conduct a serious mortality study in Afghanistan like the 2006 Lancet study in Iraq. The world owes the people of Afghanistan that kind of serious accounting for the human cost of the war it has allowed to engulf them. But it seems unlikely that that will happen before the world fulfills the more urgent task of ending the now 16-year-old war.

Body Count took estimates by Neta Crawford and the Costs of War project at Boston University for 2001-6, plus the UN's flawed count since 2007, and multiplied them by a minimum of 5 and a maximum of 8, to produce a range of 106,000 to 170,000 civilians killed from 2001 to 2013. The authors seem to have been unaware of the flaws in UNAMA's reports revealed to Porter and Noori by Nadery in 2011.

But *Body Count* did acknowledge the very conservative nature of its estimate, noting that, "compared to Iraq, where urbanization is more pronounced, and monitoring by local and foreign press is more pronounced than in Afghanistan, the registration of civilian deaths has been much more fragmentary."

In my 2016 article, "Playing Games With War Deaths," I suggested that the ratio of passive reporting to actual civilian deaths in Afghanistan was therefore more likely to fall between the ratios found in Iraq in 2006 (12:1) and Guatemala at the end of its Civil War in 1996 (20:1).

### **Mortality in Guatemala and Afghanistan**

In fact, the geographical and military situation in Afghanistan is more analogous to Guatemala, with many years of war in remote, mountainous areas against an indigenous civilian population who have taken up arms against a corrupt, foreign-backed central government.

The Guatemalan Civil War lasted from 1960 to 1996. The deadliest phase of the war was unleashed when the Reagan administration restored U.S. military aid to Guatemala in 1981, after a meeting between former Deputy CIA Director Vernon Walters and President Romeo Lucas García, in Guatemala.

U.S. military adviser Lieutenant Colonel George Maynes and President Lucas's brother, General Benedicto Lucas, planned a campaign called Operation Ash, in which 15,000 Guatemalan troops swept through the Ixil region massacring indigenous communities and burning hundreds of villages.

CIA documents that Robert Parry unearthed at the Reagan library and in other U.S. archives specifically defined the targets of this campaign to include "the civilian support mechanism" of the guerrillas, in effect the entire

rural indigenous population. A CIA report from February 1982 described how this worked in practice in Ixil:

“The commanding officers of the units involved have been instructed to destroy all towns and villages which are cooperating with the Guerrilla Army of the Poor [the EGP] and eliminate all sources of resistance,” the report said. “Since the operation began, several villages have been burned to the ground, and a large number of guerrillas and collaborators have been killed.”

Guatemalan President Rios Montt, who died on Sunday, seized power in a coup in 1983 and continued the campaign in Ixil. He was prosecuted for genocide, but neither Walters, Mayne nor any other American official have been charged for helping to plan and support the mass killings in Guatemala.

At the time, many villages in Ixil were not even marked on official maps and there were no paved roads in this remote region (there are still very few today). As in Afghanistan, the outside world had no idea of the scale and brutality of the killing and destruction.

One of the demands of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP), the Revolutionary Organization of Armed People (ORPA) and other revolutionary groups in the negotiations that led to the 1996 peace agreement in Guatemala was for a genuine accounting of the reality of the war, including how many people were killed and who killed them.

The UN-sponsored Historical Clarification Commission documented 626 massacres, and found that about 200,000 people had been killed in Guatemala’s civil war. At least 93 percent were killed by U.S.-backed military forces and death squads and only 3 percent by the guerrillas, with 4 percent unknown. The total number of people killed was 20 times previous estimates based on passive reporting.

Mortality studies in other countries (like Angola, Bosnia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Kosovo, Rwanda, Sudan and Uganda) have never found a larger discrepancy between passive reporting and mortality studies than in Guatemala.

Based on the discrepancy between passive reporting in Guatemala and what the U.N. ultimately found there, UNAMA appears to have reported less than 5 percent of actual civilian deaths in Afghanistan, which would be unprecedented.

Costs of War and UNAMA have counted 36,754 civilian deaths up to the end of 2017. If these (extremely) passive reports represent 5 percent of total civilian deaths, as in Guatemala, the actual death toll would be about 735,000. If UNAMA has in fact eclipsed Guatemala’s previously unsurpassed record of

undercounting civilian deaths and only counted 3 or 4 percent of actual deaths, then the real total could be as high as 1.23 million. If the ratio were only the same as originally found in Iraq in 2006 (14:1 – before Iraq Body Count revised its figures), it would be only 515,000.

Adding these figures to my estimate of Afghan combatants killed on both sides, we can make a rough estimate that about 875,000 Afghans have been killed since 2001, with a minimum of 640,000 and a maximum of 1.4 million.

## **Pakistan**

The U.S. expanded its war in Afghanistan into Pakistan in 2004. The CIA began launching drone strikes, and the Pakistani military, under U.S. pressure, launched a military campaign against militants in South Waziristan suspected of links to Al Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban. Since then, the U.S. has conducted at least 430 drone strikes in Pakistan, according to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, and the Pakistani military has conducted several operations in areas bordering Afghanistan.

The beautiful Swat valley (once called “the Switzerland of the East” by the visiting Queen Elizabeth of the U.K.) and three neighboring districts were taken over by the Pakistani Taliban between 2007 and 2009. They were retaken by the Pakistani Army in 2009 in a devastating military campaign that left 3.4 million people as refugees.

The Bureau of Investigative Journalism reports that 2,515 to 4,026 people have been killed in U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan, but that is a small fraction of total war deaths in Pakistan. Crawford and the Costs of War program at Boston University estimated the number of Pakistanis killed at about 61,300 through August 2016, based mainly on reports by the Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) in Islamabad and the South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) in New Delhi. That included 8,200 soldiers and police, 31,000 rebel fighters and 22,100 civilians.

Costs of War’s estimate for rebel fighters killed was an average of 29,000 reported by PIPS and 33,000 reported by SATP, which SATP has since updated to 33,950. SATP has updated its count of civilian deaths to 22,230.

If we accept the higher of these passively reported figures for the numbers of combatants killed on both sides and use historically typical 5:1 to 20:1 ratios to passive reports to generate a minimum and maximum number of civilian deaths, that would mean that between 150,000 and 500,000 Pakistanis have been killed.

A reasonable mid-point estimate would be that about 325,000 people have been killed in Pakistan as a result of the U.S. War in Afghanistan spilling across

its borders.

Combining my estimates for Afghanistan and Pakistan, I estimate that about 1.2 million Afghans and Pakistanis have been killed as a result of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001.

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

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## In Case You Missed...

Some of our special stories in February focused on the release of the so-called “Nunes Memo”, the US system of perpetual warfare, and the growing risk of confrontations in Syria, North Korea and Iran.

**“Outpouring of Support Honors Robert Parry”** Feb. 1, 2018

**“U.S. Media’s Objectivity Questioned Abroad”** by Andrew Spannaus, Feb. 2, 2018

**“Nunes Memo Reports Crimes at Top of FBI and DOJ”** by Ray McGovern, Feb. 2, 2018

**“‘Duck and Cover’ Drills Exacerbate Fears of N. Korea War”** by Ann Wright, Feb. 3, 2018

**“Do We Really Want Nuclear War with Russia?”** by Robert Parry, Feb. 4, 2018

**“Recipe Concocted for Perpetual War is a Bitter One”** by Robert Wing and Coleen Rowley, Feb. 4, 2018

**“WMD Claims in Syria Raise Concerns over U.S. Escalation”** by Rick Sterling, Feb. 4, 2018

**“Connecticut Court Decision Highlights U.S. Educational Failures”** by Dennis J. Bernstein, Feb. 5, 2018

**“Understanding Russia, Un-Demonizing Putin”** by Sharon Tennison, Feb. 6, 2018

**“Did Al Qaeda Dupe Trump on Syrian Attack?”** by Robert Parry, Feb. 6, 2018

**“No Time for Complacency over Korea War Threat”** by Jonathan Marshall, Feb. 7,



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**“‘This is Nuts’: Liberals Launch ‘Largest Mobilization in History’ in Defense of Russiagate Probe”** by Coleen Rowley and Nat Parry, Feb. 9, 2018

**“A Note to Our Readers”** by Nat Parry, Feb. 10, 2018

**“Donald Trump v. the Spooks”** by Annie Machon, Feb.23, 2018

**“How Establishment Propaganda Gaslights Us Into Submission”** by Caitlin Johnstone, Feb. 12, 2018

**“Budget Woes Sign of a Dysfunctional Empire”** by Jonathan Marshall, Feb. 13, 2018

**“The Right’s Second Amendment Lies”** by Robert Parry, Feb. 16, 2018

**“NYT’s ‘Really Weird’ Russiagate Story”** by Daniel Lazare, Feb. 16, 2018

**“Russians Spooked by Nukes-Against-Cyber-Attack Policy”** by Ray McGovern and William Binney, Feb. 16, 2018

**“Nunes: FBI and DOJ Perps Could Be Put on Trial”** by Ray McGovern, Feb. 19, 2018

**“U.S. Empire Still Incoherent After All These Years”** by Nicolas J.S. Davies, Feb. 20, 2018

**“Time to Admit the Afghan War is ‘Nonsense’”** by Jonathan Marshall, Feb. 22, 2018

**“Selective Outrage Undermines Human Rights in Syria”** by Jonathan Marshall, Feb. 23, 2018

**“The Mueller Indictments: The Day the Music Died”** by Daniel Lazare, Feb. 24, 2018

**“Growing Risk of U.S.-Iran Hostilities Based on False Pretexts, Intel Vets Warn”** by Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity, Feb. 26, 2018

**“Who Benefits from Russia’s ‘Peculiar’ Doping Violations?”** by Rick Sterling, Feb. 26, 2018

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## Senate Votes to Continue Yemen Devastation

On Tuesday, the Senate voted down a resolution that would have withdrawn US support for the Saudi-led war on Yemen, choosing instead to continue to illegally assist what the UN has called “the world’s largest humanitarian crisis,” reports Dennis J. Bernstein and Shireen Al-Adeimi in this interview.

By Dennis J. Bernstein

Shireen Al-Adeimi is a doctoral candidate at Harvard University. But she is having a hard time focusing on her studies, when friends and family back home in Yemen are under violent attack by the heavily armed, US-backed Saudi forces, with many going hungry as a result of the Saudi blockade.

Al-Adeimi said on Tuesday, March 20, “This month marks the third anniversary of the U.S.-backed, Saudi-led war on Yemen. Despite the dire humanitarian crisis, however, the United States continues to sell arms to the Saudis and provide them with military support.”

Senators Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.), Mike Lee (R-Ut.), and Chris Murphy (D-Ct.) had introduced a bill that aimed to force a withdrawal of the United States from the Saudi-led war, based on violations of the War Powers Act. But the Bill, [Senate Joint Resolution 54](#), cosponsored by 10 senators, was voted down 55-44 on Tuesday.

Of course it was no surprise, given the amount of lobbying money spent by the Saudis to buy congressional silence and support. The bill also was met with fierce opposition by various Trump administration officials.

The American Conservative Magazine reported that “the media has been laying out the red carpet for Crown Prince bin Salman in Washington. What the establishment press won’t tell you is that no less than 25 American lobbying firms worked for the Saudi Arabian government in 2017 to the tune of \$16 million, to burnish their image, manage the message, and get massive military contracts for the weapons of war that are now being used to kill, maim and slowly starve millions of civilians in Yemen today.”

I spoke with Shireen Al-Adeimi on Tuesday, March 20, directly following the vote

by Congress to continue aid for the US-supported, Saudi-led slaughter.

**Dennis Bernstein:** Shireen, what is your response to the Senate voting to continue aid to the Saudis?

**Shireen Al-Adeimi:** It is very disappointing because it ensures that millions more Yemenis will continue to suffer. On average, 130 children die every day in Yemen due to malnutrition and disease caused by the Saudi-led blockade. Many more will die because of US bombs which are dropped from Saudi jets. People continue to die for no reason at all.

**DB:** Could you give us a little background?

**SAA:** The Saudis began bombing Yemen in March, 2015. Right now, some 80% of a population of 24 million people are in desperate need of humanitarian aid.

Yemen is experiencing the world's worst cholera outbreak in modern history, with over 1 million cases. There is a severe water crisis affecting 15 million people in Yemen.

Hundreds of thousands have died of malnutrition and disease because Saudi Arabia is not only bombing Yemen but is also blockading Yemen by land, sea and air, ensuring that no aid or medicine can come into the country. The Saudis have created what the UN calls "the worst humanitarian crisis on earth today."

**DB:** Could you describe the United States' role in all of this?

**SAA:** In January, the US Army published an article detailing their support for the Saudis, including training Saudi soldiers, advising military personnel, maintaining and upgrading vehicles and aircraft, providing courses on communication and navigation, and providing Saudi jets with mid-air refueling. This is in addition to the billions in weapon sales between the US and Saudi Arabia every year.

The bottom line is that the United States is benefiting from this relationship with the Saudis and it doesn't seem to matter that this has caused such a humanitarian toll in the process. Estimates are that over 75% of the targets in Yemen have been civilian targets.

**DB:** Is there a notable difference between the policies of the last administration and those of the Trump administration?

**SAA:** Absolutely not. This began under the Obama administration, which sold billions in weapons to the Saudis and provided them with the logistical services I just mentioned. The Trump policy in Yemen is basically on autopilot, following blindly what the Obama administration did. This is very much a

bipartisan effort.

**DB:** Tell us more about how this is evolving on the ground.

**SAA:** People have lost their jobs. There is no future to look forward to.

People who were once wealthy or middle-class are now resorting to begging on the streets and selling their possessions. Three million are displaced internally because there is nowhere to go with the blockade in place. People can't find water, they can't find food, they can't find medicine or fuel. They can't decide whether to take a sick child to the hospital or provide them with food. It is as bad as it can get.

**DB:** The Saudi prince was just in D.C. He said that he really feels for the people of Yemen and that he is working on easing the blockade because he understands how devastating it has been. What is your response to that?

**SAA:** It is a complete fabrication. They are the ones imposing the blockade, they are the ones bombing a sovereign country. They have no business in Yemen at all. And then to claim that it is the Houthis who are preventing food and medicine from coming into the country is completely absurd. In fact, the Saudis have acknowledged that they are using starvation as a weapon.

They have already bombed most hospitals in Yemen. Four times they bombed Doctors without Borders hospitals. So far they have caused the death of at least 10,000 civilians through airstrikes and tens of thousands more through disease and malnutrition caused by the blockade.

**DB:** The US media has once again dropped the ball.

**SAA:** MSNBC reported on Yemen once in 2017 and not once since then. There is no reporting on the humanitarian crisis, on the resolutions before Congress. When it comes to the relationship between the US and Saudi Arabia, people just don't want to go there.

**DB:** What are human rights organizations saying about the potential for famine?

**SAA:** The UN has designated Yemen a level 3 for famine out of a range of 1 to 4, but when you have people already dying of starvation it doesn't matter much what level they establish. In 2015, 15,000 children died of hunger and disease in Yemen and a similar number in 2016. We are not at the brink of famine, we are already there. People are dying of starvation every day.

**DB:** Is it possible to get through to folks on the ground there? Is there outreach from the country for support?

**SAA:** Organizations such as Oxfam and Save the Children do have their ships there

and they do bring in aid and food to the 7 million people who depend on it every day. But even that flow is obstructed by the Saudis. The cost of fuel has increased 200%. Family members like myself are sending cash, as are organizations like Doctors without Borders, to keep people employed and afloat. Kids are dying of diseases that are completely preventable. No one has to die from cholera.

**DB:** How do you explain these congress people who support this ongoing war and famine in Yemen? Are they owned by the weapons manufacturers?

**SAA:** Some claim that it protects Saudi interests and prevents Iran from spreading its tentacles in the region. But they undoubtedly have contact to the Saudis and to the weapons manufacturers who want to maintain their interests in Saudi Arabia.

**Dennis J. Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.**

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## Iraq +15: Accumulated Evil of the Whole

Brushing aside warnings that he was about to unleash Armageddon in the Middle East, George W. Bush launched an unprovoked attack on Iraq on March 19-20, 2003, the ramifications of which we are still grappling with today, Nat Parry writes.

By Nat Parry

Robert Jackson, the Chief United States Prosecutor at the Nuremberg Trials of Nazi war criminals, once denounced aggressive war as "the greatest menace of our time." With much of Europe laying in smoldering ruin, he said in 1945 that "to initiate a war of aggression ... is not only an international crime: it is the supreme international crime differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of whole."

When it comes to the U.S. invasion of Iraq 15 years ago today, the accumulated evil of the whole is difficult to fully comprehend. Estimates of the war's costs vary, but commonly cited figures put the financial cost for U.S. taxpayers at upwards of a trillion dollars, the cost in Iraqi lives in the hundreds of thousands, and U.S. soldier deaths at nearly 5,000. Another 100,000 Americans have been wounded and four million Iraqis driven from their homes as refugees.

As staggering as those numbers may be, they don't come close to describing the true cost of the war, or the magnitude of the crime that was committed by launching it on March 19-20, 2003. Besides the cost in blood and treasure, the cost to basic principles of international justice, long-term geopolitical stability, and the impacts on the U.S. political system are equally profound.

### **Lessons Learned and Forgotten**

Although for a time, it seemed that the lessons of the war were widely understood and had tangible effects on American politics – with Democrats, for example, taking control of Congress in the midterm elections of 2006 based primarily on growing antiwar sentiment around the country and Barack Obama defeating Hillary Clinton in the 2008 primaries based largely on the two candidates' opposing views on the Iraq War – the political establishment has, since then, effectively swept these lessons under the rug.

One of those lessons, of course, was that proclamations of the intelligence community should be treated with huge grain of salt. In the build-up to war with Iraq a decade and a half ago, there were those who pushed back on the politicized and “cherry-picked” intelligence that the Bush administration was using to convince the American people of the need to go to war, but for the most part, the media and political establishment parroted these claims without showing the due diligence of independently confirming the claims or even applying basic principles of logic.

For example, even as United Nations weapons inspectors, led by Swedish diplomat Hans Blix, were coming up empty-handed when acting on tips from the U.S. intelligence community, few within the mainstream media were willing to draw the logical conclusion that the intelligence was wrong (or that the Bush administration was lying). Instead, they assumed that the UN inspectors were simply incompetent or that Saddam Hussein was just really good at hiding his weapons of mass destruction.

Yet, despite being misled so thoroughly back in 2002 and 2003, today Americans show the same credulousness to the intelligence community when it claims that “Russia hacked the 2016 election,” without offering proof. Liberals, in particular, have hitched their wagons to the investigation being led by Special Counsel Robert Mueller, who is widely hailed as a paragon of virtue, while the truth is, as FBI Director during the Bush administration, he was a key enabler of the WMD narrative used to launch an illegal war.

Mueller testified to Congress that “Iraq has moved to the top of my list” of threats to the domestic security of the United States. “As we previously briefed this Committee,” Mueller said on February 11, 2003, “Iraq’s WMD program poses a

clear threat to our national security.” He warned that Baghdad might provide WMDs to al-Qaeda to carry out a catastrophic attack in the United States.

Mueller drew criticism at the time, including from FBI whistleblower Coleen Rowley, for conflating Iraq and al-Qaeda, with demands that the FBI produce whatever evidence it had on this supposed connection.

Today, of course, Mueller is celebrated by Democrats as the best hope for bringing down the presidency of Donald Trump. George W. Bush has also enjoyed a revival of his image thanks largely to his public criticisms of Trump, with a majority of Democrats now viewing the 43rd president favorably. Many Democrats have also embraced aggressive war – often couched in the rhetoric of “humanitarian interventionism” – as their preferred option to deal with foreign policy challenges such as the Syrian conflict.

When the Democratic Party chose Clinton as its nominee in 2016, it appeared that Democrats had also embraced her willingness to use military force to achieve “regime change” in countries that are seen as a threat to U.S. interests – whether Iraq, Iran or Syria.

As a senator from New York during the build-up for military action against Iraq, Clinton not only voted to authorize the U.S. invasion, but fervently supported the war – which she backed with or without UN Security Council authorization. Her speech on the floor of the Senate on Oct. 10, 2002 arguing for military action promoted the same falsehoods that were being used by the Bush administration to build support for the war, claiming for example that Saddam Hussein had “given aid, comfort, and sanctuary to terrorists, including al-Qaeda members.”

“If left unchecked,” she said, “Saddam Hussein will continue to increase his capacity to wage biological and chemical warfare, and will keep trying to develop nuclear weapons. Should he succeed in that endeavor, he could alter the political and security landscape of the Middle East, which as we know all too well affects American security.”

Clinton maintained support for the war even as it became obvious that Iraq in fact had no weapons of mass destruction – the primary casus belli for the war – only cooling her enthusiasm in 2006 when it became clear that the Democratic base had turned decisively against the war and her hawkish position endangered her chances for the 2008 presidential nomination. But eight years later, the Democrats had apparently moved on, and her support for the war was no longer considered a disqualification for the presidency.

One of the lessons that should be recalled today, especially as the U.S. gears

up today for possible confrontations with countries including North Korea and Russia, is how easy it was in 2002-2003 for the Bush administration to convince Americans that they were under threat from the regime of Saddam Hussein some 7,000 miles away. The claims about Iraq's WMDs were untrue, with many saying so in real time – including by the newly formed group Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity, which was regularly issuing memoranda to the president and to the American people debunking the falsehoods that were being promoted by the U.S. intelligence community.

But even if the claims about Iraq's alleged stockpiles were true, there was still no reason to assume that Saddam Hussein was on the verge of launching a surprise attack against the United States. Indeed, while Americans were all but convinced that Iraq threatened their safety and security, it was actually the U.S. government that was threatening Iraqis.

Far from posing an imminent threat to the United States, in 2003, Iraq was a country that had already been devastated by a U.S.-led war a decade earlier and crippling economic sanctions that caused the deaths of 1.5 million Iraqis (leading to the resignation of two UN humanitarian coordinators who called the sanctions genocidal).

### **Threats and Bluster**

Although the invasion didn't officially begin until March 20, 2003 (still the 19th in Washington), the United States had been explicitly threatening to attack the country as early as January 2003, with the Pentagon publicizing plans for a so-called "shock and awe" bombing campaign.

"If the Pentagon sticks to its current war plan," CBS News reported on January 24, "one day in March the Air Force and Navy will launch between 300 and 400 cruise missiles at targets in Iraq. ... [T]his is more than the number that were launched during the entire 40 days of the first Gulf War. On the second day, the plan calls for launching another 300 to 400 cruise missiles."

A Pentagon official warned: "There will not be a safe place in Baghdad."

These public threats appeared to be a form of intimidation and psychological warfare, and were almost certainly in violation of the UN Charter, which states: "All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations."

The Pentagon's vaunted "shock and awe" attack began with limited bombing on March 19-20, as U.S. forces unsuccessfully attempted to kill Hussein. Attacks



continued against a small number of targets until March 21, when the main bombing campaign began. U.S.-led forces launched approximately 1,700 air sorties, with 504 using cruise missiles.

During the invasion, the U.S. also dropped some 10,800 cluster bombs on Iraq despite claiming that only a fraction of that number had been used.

“The Pentagon presented a misleading picture during the war of the extent to which cluster weapons were being used and of the civilian casualties they were causing,” reported USA Today in late 2003. Despite claims that only 1,500 cluster weapons had been used resulting in just one civilian casualty, “in fact, the United States used 10,782 cluster weapons,” including many that were fired into urban areas from late March to early April 2003.

The cluster bombs killed hundreds of Iraqi civilians and left behind thousands of unexploded bomblets that continued to kill and injure civilians weeks after the fighting stopped.

(Because of the indiscriminate effect of these weapons, their use is banned by the international Convention on Cluster Munitions, which the United States has refused to sign.)

Attempting to kill Hussein, Bush ordered the bombing of an Iraqi residential restaurant on April 7. A single B-1B bomber dropped four precision-guided 2,000-pound bombs. The four bunker-penetrating bombs destroyed the target building, the al Saa restaurant block and several surrounding structures, leaving a 60-foot crater and unknown casualties.

Diners, including children, were ripped apart by the bombs. One mother found her daughter’s torso and then her severed head. U.S. intelligence later confirmed that Hussein wasn’t there.

## **Resistance and Torture**

It was evident within weeks of the initial invasion that the Bush administration had misjudged the critical question of whether Iraqis would fight. They put up stiffer than expected resistance even in southern Iraqi cities such as Umm Qasr, Basra and Nasiriya where Hussein’s support was considered weak, and soon after the fall of the regime on April 9, when the Bush administration decided to disband the Iraqi army, it helped spark an anti-U.S. insurgency led by many former Iraqi military figures.

Despite Bush’s triumphant May 1 landing on an aircraft carrier and his speech in front of a giant “Mission Accomplished” banner, it looked as though the collapse of the Baathist government had been just the first stage in what would become a

long-running war of attrition. After the Iraqi conventional forces had been disbanded, the U.S. military began to notice in May 2003 a steadily increasing flurry of attacks on U.S. occupiers in various regions of the so-called "Sunni Triangle."

These included groups of insurgents firing assault rifles and rocket-propelled grenades at U.S. occupation troops, as well as increasing use of improvised explosive devices on U.S. convoys.

Possibly anticipating a long, drawn-out occupation and counter-insurgency campaign, in a March 2003 memorandum Bush administration lawyers devised legal doctrines to justify certain torture techniques, offering legal rationales "that could render specific conduct, otherwise criminal, not unlawful."

They argued that the president or anyone acting on the president's orders were not bound by U.S. laws or international treaties prohibiting torture, asserting that the need for "obtaining intelligence vital to the protection of untold thousands of American citizens" superseded any obligations the administration had under domestic or international law.

"In order to respect the President's inherent constitutional authority to manage a military campaign," the memo stated, U.S. prohibitions against torture "must be construed as inapplicable to interrogations undertaken pursuant to his Commander-in-Chief authority."

Over the course of the next year, disclosures emerged that torture had been used extensively in Iraq for "intelligence gathering." Investigative journalist Seymour Hersh disclosed in The New Yorker in May 2004 that a 53-page classified Army report written by Gen. Antonio Taguba concluded that Abu Ghraib prison's military police were urged on by intelligence officers seeking to break down the Iraqis before interrogation.

"Numerous incidents of sadistic, blatant and wanton criminal abuses were inflicted on several detainees," wrote Taguba.

These actions, authorized at the highest levels, constituted serious breaches of international and domestic law, including the Convention Against Torture, the Geneva Convention relative to the treatment of Prisoners of War, as well as the U.S. War Crimes Act and the Torture Statute.

They also may have played a role in the rise of the ISIS terror group, the origins of which were subsequently traced to an American prison in Iraq dubbed Camp Bucca. This camp was the site of rampant abuse of prisoners, one of whom, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, later became the leader of ISIS. Al-Baghdadi spent four years as a prisoner at Bucca, where he started recruiting others to his cause.

## America's Weapons of Mass Destruction

Besides torture and the use of cluster bombs, the crimes against the Iraqi people over the years included wholesale massacres, long-term poisoning and the destruction of cities.

There was the 2004 assault on Fallujah in which white phosphorus – banned under international law – was used against civilians. There was the 2005 Haditha massacre, in which 24 unarmed civilians were systematically murdered by U.S. marines. There was the 2007 “Collateral Murder” massacre revealed by WikiLeaks in 2010, depicting the indiscriminate killing of more than a dozen civilians in the Iraqi suburb of New Baghdad – including two Reuters news staff.

There is also the tragic legacy of cancer and birth defects caused by the U.S. military's extensive use of depleted uranium and white phosphorus. In Fallujah the use of depleted uranium led to birth defects in infants 14 times higher than in the Japanese cities targeted by U.S. atomic bombs at close of World War II, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Noting the birth defects in Fallujah, Al Jazeera journalist Dahr Jamail told Democracy Now in 2013:

“And going on to Fallujah, because I wrote about this a year ago, and then I returned to the city again this trip, we are seeing an absolute crisis of congenital malformations of newborn. ... I mean, these are extremely hard to look at. They're extremely hard to bear witness to. But it's something that we all need to pay attention to, because of the amount of depleted uranium used by the U.S. military during both of their brutal attacks on the city of 2004, as well as other toxic munitions like white phosphorus, among other things.”

A report sent to the UN General Assembly by Dr. Nawal Majeed Al-Sammarai, Iraq's Minister of Women's Affairs, stated that in September 2009, Fallujah General Hospital had 170 babies born, 75 percent of whom were deformed. A quarter of them died within their first week of life.

The military's use of depleted uranium also caused a sharp increase in Leukemia and birth defects in the city of Najaf, which saw one of the most severe military actions during the 2003 invasion, with cancer becoming more common than the flu according to local doctors.

By the end of the war, a number of Iraq's major cities, including Fallujah, Ramadi, and Mosul, had been reduced to rubble and by 2014, a former CIA director conceded that the nation of Iraq had basically been destroyed.

“I think Iraq has pretty much ceased to exist,” said Michael Hayden, noting that it was fragmented into multiple parts which he didn't see “getting back together.” In other words, the United States, using its own extensive arsenal of

actual weapons of mass destruction, had completely destroyed a sovereign nation.

### **Predictable Consequences**

The effects of these policies included the predictable growth of Islamic extremism, with a National Intelligence Estimate – representing the consensus view of the 16 spy services inside the U.S. government – warning in 2006 that a whole new generation of Islamic radicalism was being spawned by the U.S. occupation of Iraq. According to one American intelligence official, the consensus was that “the Iraq war has made the overall terrorism problem worse.”

The assessment noted that several underlying factors were “fueling the spread of the jihadist movement,” including “entrenched grievances, such as corruption, injustice, and fear of Western domination, leading to anger, humiliation, and a sense of powerlessness,” and “pervasive anti-U.S. sentiment among most Muslims all of which jihadists exploit.”

But rather than leading to substantive changes or reversals in U.S. policies, the strategy agreed upon in Washington seemed to be to double down on the failed policies that had given rise to radical jihadist groups. In fact, instead of withdrawing from Iraq, the U.S. decided to send a surge of 20,000 troops in 2007. This is despite the fact that public opinion was decidedly against the war.

A Newsweek poll in early 2007 found that 68 percent of Americans opposed the surge, and in another poll conducted just after Bush’s 2007 State of the Union Address, 64 percent said Congress was not being assertive enough in challenging the Bush administration over its conduct of the war.

An estimated half-million people marched on Washington on Jan. 27, 2007, with messages for the newly sworn in 110th Congress to “Stand up to Bush,” urging Congress to cut the war funding with the slogan, “Not one more dollar, not one more death.” A growing combativeness was also on display in the antiwar movement with this demonstration marked by hundreds of protesters breaking through police lines and charging Capitol Hill.

Although there were additional large-scale protests a couple months later to mark the sixth anniversary of the invasion, including a march on the Pentagon led by Iraq War veterans, over the next year the antiwar movement’s activities steadily declined. While fatigue might explain some of the waning support for mass mobilizations, much of the decline can also surely be explained by the rise of Barack Obama’s candidacy. Millions of people channeled their energies into his campaign, including many motivated by a hope that he represented real change from the Bush years.

One of Obama's advantages over Clinton in the Democratic primary was that he had been an early opponent of the Iraq War while she had been one of its most vocal supporters. This led many American voters to believe in 2008 that they had elected someone who might rein in some of the U.S. military adventurism and quickly end U.S. involvement in Iraq. But this wasn't to be the case. The combat mission dragged on well into President Obama's first term.

### **War, War and More War**

After its well-publicized failures in Iraq, the U.S. turned its attention to Libya, overthrowing the government of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 utilizing armed militias implicated in war crimes and backed with NATO air power. Following Gaddafi's ouster, his caches of weapons ended up being shuttled to rebels in Syria, fueling the civil war there. The Obama administration also took a keen interest in destabilizing the Syrian government and to do so began providing arms that often fell into the hands of extremists.

The CIA trained and armed so-called "moderate" rebel units in Syria, only to watch these groups switch sides by joining forces with Islamist brigades such as ISIS and Al Qaeda's affiliate the Nusra Front. Others surrendered to Sunni extremist groups with the U.S.-provided weapons presumably ending up in the arsenals of jihadists or sometimes just quit or went missing altogether.

Beyond Syria and Libya, Obama also expanded U.S. military engagements in countries including Yemen, Somalia, Pakistan, and sent a surge of troops to Afghanistan in 2009. And despite belatedly withdrawing U.S. forces from Iraq, with the last U.S. troops finally leaving on December 18, 2011, Obama also presided over a major increase in the use of drone strikes and conventional air wars.

In his first term, Obama dropped 20,000 bombs and missiles, a number that shot up to over 100,000 bombs and missiles dropped in his second term. In 2016, the final year of Obama's presidency, the U.S. dropped nearly three bombs every hour, 24 hours a day.

Obama also had the distinction of becoming the fourth U.S. president in a row to bomb the nation of Iraq. Under criticism for allowing the rise of ISIS in the country, Obama decided to reverse his earlier decision to disengage with Iraq, and in 2014 started bombing the country again. Addressing the American people on Sept. 10, 2014, President Obama said that "ISIL poses a threat to the people of Iraq and Syria, and the broader Middle East including American citizens, personnel and facilities."

"If left unchecked," he continued, "these terrorists could pose a growing threat

beyond that region, including to the United States. While we have not yet detected specific plotting against our homeland, ISIL leaders have threatened America and our allies.”

Of course, this is precisely the result that many voices of caution had warned about back in 2002 and 2003, when millions of Americans were taking to the streets in protest of the looming invasion of Iraq. And, to be clear, it wasn't just the antiwar left urging restraint – establishment figures and paleoconservatives were also voicing concern.

Retired Gen. Anthony Zinni, for example, who served as a Middle East envoy for George W. Bush, warned in October 2002 that by invading Iraq, “we are about to do something that will ignite a fuse in this region that we will rue the day we ever started.” Brent Scowcroft, national security adviser in the first Bush administration, said a strike on Iraq “could unleash an Armageddon in the Middle East.”

No matter, Bush was a gut player who had made up his mind, so those warnings were brushed aside and the invasion proceeded.

### **Campaign 2016**

When presidential candidate Donald Trump began slamming Bush for the Iraq War during the Republican primary campaign in 2015 and 2016, calling the decision to invade Iraq a “big fat mistake,” he not only won over some of the antiwar libertarian vote, but also helped solidify his image as a political outsider who “tells it like it is.”

And after Hillary Clinton emerged as the Democratic nominee, with her track record as an enthusiastic backer of virtually all U.S. interventions and an advocate of deeper involvement in countries such as Syria, voters could have been forgiven for getting the impression that the Republican Party was now the antiwar party and the Democrats were the hawks.

As the late Robert Parry observed in June 2016, “Amid the celebrations about picking the first woman as a major party's presumptive nominee, Democrats appear to have given little thought to the fact that they have abandoned a near half-century standing as the party more skeptical about the use of military force. Clinton is an unabashed war hawk who has shown no inclination to rethink her pro-war attitudes.”

The antiwar faction within the Democratic Party was further marginalized during the Democratic National Convention when chants of “No More War” broke out during former Defense Secretary Leon Panetta's speech. The Democratic establishment responded with chants of “USA!” to drown out the voices for peace and they even

turned the lights out on the antiwar section of the crowd. The message was clear: there is no room for the antiwar movement inside the Democratic Party.

While there were numerous factors that played a role in Trump's stunning victory over Clinton in November 2016, it is no stretch of the imagination to speculate that one of those factors was lingering antiwar sentiment from the Iraq debacle and other engagements of the U.S. military. Many of those fed up with U.S. military adventurism may have fallen for Trump's quasi-anti-interventionist rhetoric while others may have opted to vote for an alternative party such as the Libertarians or the Greens, both of which took strong stances against U.S. interventionism.

But despite Trump's occasional statements questioning the wisdom of committing the military to far-off lands such as Iraq or Afghanistan, he was also an advocate for war crimes such as "taking out [the] families" of suspected terrorists. He urged that the U.S. stop being "politically correct" in its waging of war.

So, ultimately, Americans were confronted with choosing between an unreconstructed regime-changing neoconservative Democratic hawk, and a reluctant interventionist who nevertheless wanted to teach terrorists a lesson by killing their children. Although ultimately the neocon won the popular vote, the war crimes advocate carried the Electoral College.

Following the election it turned out that Trump was a man of his word when it came to killing children. In one of his first military actions as president, Trump ordered an attack on a village in Yemen on Jan. 29, 2017, which claimed the lives of as many as 23 civilians, including a newborn baby and an eight-year-old girl, Nawar al-Awlaki.

Nawar was the daughter of the al-Qaeda propagandist and American citizen Anwar al-Awlaki, who was killed in a September 2011 U.S. drone strike in Yemen.

### **Normalized Aggression**

2017, Trump's first year in office, turned out to be the deadliest year for civilians in Iraq and Syria since U.S. airstrikes began on the two countries in 2014. The U.S. killed between 3,923 and 6,102 civilians during the year, according to a tally by the monitoring group Airwars. "Non-combatant deaths from Coalition air and artillery strikes rose by more than 200 per cent compared to 2016," Airwars noted.

While this spike in civilian deaths did make some headlines, including in the Washington Post, for the most part, the thousands of innocents killed by U.S. airstrikes are dismissed as "collateral damage." The ongoing carnage is

considered perfectly normal, barely even eliciting a comment from the pundit class.

This is arguably one of the most enduring legacies of the 2003 invasion of Iraq – an act of military aggression that was based on false pretenses, which brushed aside warnings of caution, and blatantly violated international law. With no one in the media or the Bush administration ever held accountable for promoting this war or for launching it, what we have seen is the normalization of military aggression to a level that would have been unimaginable 20 years ago.

Indeed, I remember well the bombing of Iraq that took place in 1998 as part of Bill Clinton's Operation Desert Fox. Although this was a very limited bombing campaign, lasting only four days, there were sizable protests in opposition to the military action. I joined a picket of a couple hundred people in front of the White House holding a hand-made sign reading "IMPEACH HIM FOR WAR CRIMES" – a reference to the fact that Congress was at the time impeaching him for lying about a blowjob.

Compare that to what we see today – or, more accurately what we don't see today – in regards to antiwar advocacy. Despite the fact that the U.S. is now engaged in at least seven military conflicts, there is little in the way of peace activism or even much of a national debate over the wisdom, legality or morality of waging war. Few even raise objections to its significant financial cost to U.S. taxpayers, for example the fact that one day of spending on these wars amounts to about \$200 million.

Fifteen years ago, one of the arguments of the antiwar movement was that the war on terror was morphing into a perpetual war without boundaries, without rules, and without any end game. The U.S., in other words, was in danger of finding itself in a state of endless war.

We are now clearly embroiled in that endless war, which is a reality that even Senate war hawk Lindsey Graham acknowledged last year when four U.S. troops were killed in Niger. Claiming that he didn't know that the U.S. had a military presence in Niger, Graham – who chairs the Senate Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs – stated that "this is an endless war without boundaries, no limitation on time or geography."

Although it wasn't clear whether he was lamenting or celebrating this endless and borderless war, his words should be taken as a warning of where the U.S. stands on this 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq – in a war without end, without boundaries, without limits on time or geography.

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# How ‘Operation Merlin’ Poisoned U.S. Intelligence on Iran

Exclusive: The CIA’s “Operation Merlin,” which involved providing Iran with a flawed design for a nuclear weapon and resulted in an alleged whistleblower going to prison, was the perfect example of creating intelligence in order to justify operations, reports Gareth Porter.

By Gareth Porter

Jeffrey Sterling, the case officer for the CIA’s covert “Operation Merlin,” who was convicted in May 2015 for allegedly revealing details of that operation to James Risen of the *New York Times*, was released from prison in January after serving more than two years of a 42-month sentence. He had been tried and convicted on the premise that the revelation of the operation had harmed U.S. security.

The entire case against him assumed a solid intelligence case that Iran had indeed been working on a nuclear weapon that justified that covert operation.



But the accumulated evidence shows that the intelligence not only did not support the need for Operation Merlin, but that the existence of the CIA’s planned covert operation itself had a profound distorting impact on intelligence assessment of the issue. The very first U.S. national intelligence estimate on the subject in 2001 that Iran had a nuclear weapons program was the result of a heavy-handed intervention by Deputy Director for Operations James L. Pavitt that was arguably more serious than the efforts by Vice-President Dick Cheney to influence the CIA’s 2002 estimate on WMD in Iraq.

The full story of the interaction between the CIA operation and intelligence analysis, shows, moreover, that Pavitt had previously fabricated an alarmist intelligence analysis for the Clinton White House on Iran’s nuclear program in late 1999 in order to get Clinton’s approval for Operation Merlin.

**Pavitt Plans Operation Merlin**

The story of Operation Merlin and the suppression of crucial intelligence on Iran's nuclear intentions cannot be understood apart from the close friendship between Pavitt and CIA Director George Tenet. Pavitt's rise in the Operations Directorate had been so closely linked to his friendship with Tenet that the day after Tenet announced his retirement from the CIA on June 3, 2004, Pavitt announced his own retirement.

Soon after he was assigned to the CIA's Non-Proliferation Center (NPC) in 1993, Pavitt got the idea of creating a new component within the Directorate of Operations to work solely on proliferation, as former CIA officials recounted for Valerie Plame Wilson's memoir, *Fair Game*. Pavitt proposed that the new proliferation division would have the authority not only to collect intelligence but also to carry out covert operations related to proliferation, using its own clandestine case officers working under non-official cover.

Immediately after Tenet was named Deputy Director of the CIA in 1995, Pavitt got the new organization within the operations directorate called the Counter-Proliferation Division, or CPD. Pavitt immediately began the planning for a major operation targeting Iran. According to a CIA cable declassified for the Sterling trial, as early as March 1996, CPD's "Office of Special Projects" had already devised a scheme to convey to the Iranians a copy of the Russian TBA-486 "fireset" – a system for multiple simultaneous high explosive detonations to set off a nuclear explosion. The trick was that it had built-in flaws that would make it unworkable.

A January 1997 declassified cable described a plan for using a Russian émigré, former Soviet nuclear weapons engineer recruited in 1996 to gain "operational access" to an Iranian "target." The cable suggested that it would be for the purpose of intelligence on the Iranian nuclear program, in light of the fact that the agency had not issued a finding that Iran was working on nuclear weapons.

But in mid-March 1997 the language used by CPD to describe its proposed covert operation suddenly changed. Another declassified CPD cable from May 1997 said the ultimate goal was "to plant this substantial piece of deception information on the Iranian nuclear weapons program." That shift in language apparently reflected Tenet's realization that the CIA would need to justify the proposed covert operation to the White House, as required by legislation.

With his ambitious plan for a covert operation against Iran in his pocket, Pavitt was promoted to Associate Deputy Director of Operations in July 1997. On February 2, 1998, CPD announced to other CIA offices, according to the declassified cable, that a technical team from one of the national laboratories had finished building the detonation device that would include "multiple nested

flaws,” including a “final fatal flaw” ensuring “that it will not detonate a nuclear weapon.”

An official statement from the national lab certifying that fact was a legal requirement for the CIA to obtain the official Presidential “finding” for any covert operation required by legislation passed in the wake of the Iran-Contra affair.

Pavitt obtained the letter from the national laboratory in mid-1999, a few weeks after it was announced he would be named Deputy Director of the CIA for Operations.

But that left a final political obstacle to a presidential finding: the official position of the CIA’s Intelligence Directorate remained that Iran did not have a nuclear weapons program. The language of the CIA’s report to Congress for the first half of 1999, which was delivered to Congress in early 2000, contained formulations that showed signs of having been negotiated between those who believed Iran must have a nuclear weapons program and those who did not.

The report referred to nuclear-related projects that “will help Iran augment its nuclear technology infrastructure, which in turn would be useful in supporting nuclear weapons research and development.” The shift from “will” to “would” clearly suggested that nuclear weapons work was not yet an established fact.

A second sentence said, “expertise and technology gained, along with the commercial channels and contacts established—even from cooperation that appears strictly civilian in nature—could be used to advance Iran’s nuclear weapons research and developmental program.” That seemed to hint that maybe Iran already had such a nuclear weapons program.

That was not sufficient for Tenet and Pavitt to justify a covert nuclear weapons program involving handing over a fake nuclear detonation device. So the dynamic duo came up with another way around that obstacle. A new intelligence assessment, reported in a front page article by James Risen and Judith Miller in the *New York Times* on January 17, 2000, said the CIA could no longer rule out the possibility that Iran now had the capability to build a bomb – or even that it may have actually succeeded in building one.

Risen and Miller reported that Tenet had begun briefings for Clinton administration officials on the new CIA assessment in December 1999 shortly after the document was completed, citing “several U.S. officials” familiar with it. The Tenet briefings made no mention of any evidence of a bomb-making program, according to the sources cited by the Times. It was based instead on the alleged inability of U.S. intelligence to track adequately Iran’s

acquisition of nuclear technology and materials from the black market.

But the new assessment had evidently not come from the Intelligence Directorate. John McLaughlin, then Deputy Director for Intelligence, said in an e-mail response to a query that he did not recall the assessment. And when this writer asked him whether it was possible that he would not remember or would not have known about an intelligence assessment on such a high profile issue, McLaughlin did not respond. Pavitt and Tenet had obviously gone outside the normal procedure for an intelligence assessment in order to get around the problem of lack of support for their thesis from the analysts.

A declassified CIA cable dated November 18, 1999 instructed the Russian émigré to prepare for a possible trip to Vienna in early 2000, indicating that Tenet hoped to get the finding within a few weeks. Clinton apparently did give the necessary finding in early 2000; in the first days of March 2000 the Russian émigré dropped the falsified fireset plans into the mail chute of the Iranian mission to the United Nations in Vienna.

### **Pavitt Suppresses Unwelcome Iran Nuclear Intelligence**

Pavitt's CPD was also managing a group of covert operatives who recruited spies to provide information on weapons of mass destruction in Iran and Iraq. CPD not only controlled the targeting of the operatives working on those accounts but the distribution of their reports. CPD's dual role thus represented a serious conflict of interest, because the CPD had a vested interest in an intelligence estimate that showed Iran had an active nuclear weapons program, and it could prevent intelligence analysts from getting information that conflicted with that interest.

That is exactly what happened in 2001. One especially valuable CPD operative, who was fluent in both Farsi and Arabic, had begun recruiting agents to provide intelligence on both Iran and Iraq since 1995. His talents had been recognized by the CPD and by higher levels of the Operations Directorate: by 2001 he had been promised an intelligence medal and a promotion to GS-14 – the second highest pay grade level in the civil service.

But that same year the operative reported very important intelligence on the Iran nuclear issue that would have caused serious problems for Pavitt and CPD and led ultimately to his being taken out of the field and being fired.

In a November 2005 court filing in a lawsuit against Pavitt, the unnamed head of CPD and then CIA Director Porter Goss, the operative, identified only as "Doe" in court records, said that one of his most highly valued "human assets" – the CIA term for recruited spies – had given him very important intelligence in

2001. That information was the subject of three crucial lines of the key paragraph in the operative's complaint that were redacted at the demand of the CIA. For years "Doe" sought to declassify the language that had been redacted, but the CIA had fought it.

It was assumed in press accounts at the time that the redacted lines were related to Iraq. But the lawyer who handled the lawsuit for "Doe," Roy Krieger, revealed to this writer in interviews that the redacted lines revealed that the CIA "human asset" in question was an Iranian, and that he had told "Doe" that the Iranian government had no intention of "weaponizing" the uranium that it was planning to enrich.

It was the first intelligence from a "highly-valued" U.S. spy – one who was known to be in a position to know what he claimed to know – on Iran's intentions regarding nuclear weapons to become available to the U.S. intelligence community. "Doe" reported what the spy had said to his supervisor at CPD, according to the court filing, and the supervisor immediately met with Pavitt and the head of CPD. After that meeting the CPD supervisor ordered "Doe" not to prepare any written report on the matter and assured him that Pavitt and the head of the CPD would personally brief President Bush on the intelligence.

But "Doe" soon learned from his own contacts at CIA headquarters that no such briefing ever took place. And "Doe" was soon instructed to terminate his relationship with the asset. After another incident involving intelligence he had reported on WMD in Iraq that had also conflicted with the line desired by the Bush administration, CIA management took "Doe" out of the field, put him in a headquarters job and denied him the intelligence medal and promotion to GS-14 that he had been promised, according to his court filing. The CIA fired "Doe" without specifying a reason in 2005.

Pavitt did not respond to requests for an interview for this story both at the Scowcroft Group and, after he retired, at his home in McLean, Virginia.

The intervention by Pavitt to prevent the intelligence from Doe's Iranian asset from circulating within the U.S. government came as the intelligence community was working on the 2001 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on the Iranian nuclear program. That NIE concluded that Iran was working on a nuclear weapon, but the finding was far from being clear-cut. Paul Pillar, the CIA's National Intelligence Officer for the Middle East and North Africa, who was involved in the 2001 NIE, recalled that the intelligence community had no direct evidence of an Iranian nuclear weapons program. "We're talking about things that are a matter of inference, not direct evidence," Pillar said in an interview with this writer.

Furthermore he recalls that there was a deep divide in the intelligence community between the technical analysts, who tended to believe that evidence of uranium enrichment was evidence of a weapons program, and the Iran specialists, including Pillar himself, who believed Iran had adopted a "hedging strategy" and had made no decision in favor of a nuclear weapon. The technical analysts at the CIA's Weapons Intelligence Non-Proliferation and Arms Control (WINPAC), were given the advantage of writing the first draft not only on Iranian technical capabilities but on Iranian intentions – a subject on which it had no real expertise – as well, according to Pillar.

The introduction of the intelligence from a highly credible Iranian intelligence asset indicating no intention to convert its enriched uranium into nuclear weapons would arguably have changed the dynamic of the estimate dramatically. It would have meant that one side could cite hard intelligence from a valued source in support of its position, while the other side could cite only their own predisposition.

Pillar confirmed that no such intelligence report was made available to the analysts for the 2001 NIE. He noted just how rarely the kind of intelligence that had been obtained by "Doe" was available for an intelligence estimate. "Analysts deal with a range of stuff," he said, "from a tidbit from technical intelligence to the goldmine well-placed source with an absolutely credible account," but the latter kind of intelligence "almost never comes up."

After reading this account of the intelligence obtained by the CPD operative, Pillar said he is not in a position to judge the value of the intelligence from the Iranian asset, but that the information from the CPD Iranian asset "should have been considered by the NIE team in conjunction with other sources of information."

That led to a series of estimates that assumed Iran had a nuclear weapons program.

In 2004, a large cache of purported Iranian documents showing alleged Iranian research related to nuclear weapons was turned over to German intelligence, which the Bush administration claimed came from the laptop of an Iranian scientist or engineer. But former senior German Foreign Official Karsten Voigt later revealed to this writer that the whole story was a fabrication, because the documents had been given by the Mujahedin-E Khalq, the Iranian opposition group that was known to have publicized anti-Iran information fed to it by Israel's Mossad.

Those documents led directly to another CIA estimate in 2005 asserting the existence of an Iranian nuclear weapons program, which in turn paved the way for

all the subsequent estimates – all of which were adopted despite the absence of new evidence of such a program. The CIA swallowed the ruse repeatedly, because it had already been manipulated by Pavitt.

Operation Merlin is the perfect example of powerful bureaucratic interests running amok and creating the intelligence necessary to justify their operations. The net result is that Jeffrey Sterling was unjustly imprisoned and that the United States has gone down a path of Iran policy that poses serious – and unnecessary – threats to American security.

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## All Fire and Fury in Ukraine

Exclusive: The still decidedly volatile situation in Ukraine – resulting from another in a long line of U.S.-inspired regime changes that have destabilized the geopolitical landscape over the past few decades – is worth revisiting for a number of reasons. With the fourth anniversary of the coup just passed, the sudden, shock passing of veteran investigative journalist Robert Parry and Consortium News founder/editor also affords even greater impetus for doing so. This is especially given his incisive body of reportage on the crisis since 2014; the larger issue of America's worsening relationship with Russia; and the geopolitical implications going forward of these developments. Australian blogger Greg Maybury reports.

By Greg Maybury

### **A Shabby Deck of Political Cards**

For those who haven't seen [Ukraine on Fire](#) (UOF), the Oliver Stone-produced documentary on the ongoing Ukrainian crisis, it is not overstating the case to say it's an essential historical document and one of the most important, insightful political documentaries of recent times. It may also be one of the most portentous.

Quite apart from the illuminating history lesson the film delivers as a backdrop to the current situation in one of Europe's most pivotal of battlegrounds, there are many takeaways from the film. To begin, it stands as a vital corrective of the disinformation, misinformation, evangelistic doublespeak, ersatz analysis, unadulterated agitprop, and plain old garden-variety groupthink that attended the public discourse on the events and developments in the country, and which ultimately framed most people's views of the situation. Needless to say, the messages and impressions conveyed by this ongoing, relentless 'psy-op' cum fake news onslaught still 'rules the roost' in most people's minds.



Further, the film's narrative is highly revealing in the manner in which the Western mainstream media (MSM) reported on the events surrounding the turmoil and conflict. In the process it showcases how much the perfidious thought contagion spread by the ever- nefarious neoconservatives and their fellow travelers the liberal interventionists infects U.S. foreign policy, along with the foreign policies of America's assorted vassal states.

It underscores moreover Russia's seemingly inexhaustible forbearance with the U.S., which, sans any rational, coherent geopolitical basis for doing so, has been tested beyond reasonable endurance or expectation. This point is rendered especially palpable during the interviews Stone conducts with Russian president Vladimir Putin for UOF. (This is not to mention the actual The Putin Interviews).

At the same time UOF reveals again for those looking America's recidivistic predisposition for interfering in the affairs of other countries; this is an observation that's always been evident save for the most preternaturally ignorant, ideologically myopic, or imperially inclined. Given the present zeitgeist as reflected by the headline-hogging "soap-saga" of "Russia-gate" – buttressed by former CIA chief James Woolsey's whimsically smug concession recently that America interferes in other countries' affairs "only for a very good cause [and] in the interests of democracy" – this is a reality that cannot be overstated. This is especially so when there are all too few examples where anyone might point to America's interference actually serving the democratic interests (by any way *that* might be objectively measured) of any given country one might care to name.

The narrative encompassed by UOF is by extension a serious indictment on



President Barack Obama's handling of the Ukraine situation and his role in the creation of this singularly unholy mess – a prime exemplar of just how chaotic, dysfunctional, indeed war-like, were in large part the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize winner's foreign policies. Ukraine on Fire attests unequivocally just how far removed the reality of Obama's tenure was from his campaign rhetoric.

More broadly, the disaster in Ukraine – as we'll see still a work in progress even now under his successor, someone who pledged to curtail this direction in U.S. policy making, a promise which in no small measure propelled him into the Oval Office – is one of many that will forever inform people's views of Number 44's shop-soiled legacy. As Eric Zuesse noted a year after the coup, Obama employed a tactic of,

“...attacking Russia by using fundamentalist and other conservative extremists in a given Russia-allied nation, so as to turn that...nation away from Russia, and toward America, and then of trying to crush these same right-wing extremists who've been so effective in defeating (or at least weakening) the pro-Russian leader in that Russia-allied country. This tactic leaves civil war and enormous bloodshed in the given formerly (or still) Russia-allied nation.”

Three years after Zuesse made this comment, and over one year after Obama left office, that situation to all intents prevails, with few harboring any optimism things are going to get better anytime soon. In fact ominously, quite the opposite scenario is unfolding.

Earlier this year, Gilbert Doctorow reported that a new draft law adopted by the Ukrainian Parliament and awaiting president Petro Poroshenko's signature, threatens to escalate the Ukrainian conflict into a full-blown war, pitting nuclear-armed Russia against the United States and NATO. “Due to dire economic conditions,” Doctorow says, “Poroshenko and other government officials in Kiev have become deeply unpopular, and with diminished chances for electoral success may see war as politically advantageous.”

As history indelibly reminds us, this is an all too frequently recurring scenario in the conduct of international affairs. In a statement that undercuts much of the furor over the Russia-gate imbroglio, Doctorow observes that in contrast to the image of Trump administration policies being dictated by Moscow as portrayed by proponents of Russia-gate conspiracy theories, “the United States is moving towards deeper confrontation with the Kremlin in the geopolitical hotspot of Ukraine. For its part, the Kremlin has very little to gain and a great deal to lose economically and diplomatically from a campaign now against Kiev. If successful, as likely would be the case *given the vast disparity in military potential* of the two sides, it could easily become a Pyrrhic victory.” [My emphasis]

Just as ominous is the following. As noted in an Oriental Review op-ed earlier this year, a new neo-Nazi revival is clearly in the offing. This is in a country where fascist/Nazi/extreme right sentiment, especially in the western regions, has a long, storied, and ugly history, one that rarely bubbles far from the surface.

Again, this “ugly history” was laid bare in *Ukraine on Fire*. After concluding that the current situation in Ukraine is ‘painfully reminiscent’ of Germany in the 1920s, the OR op-ed attributes,

“... poor governance on the heels of a lost war, which – added to the sense of betrayed hopes and the sharp decline in average incomes coupled with rising prices – is all driving a critical mass of the Ukrainian population toward an *overwhelming feeling of desperation.*” [My emphasis]

In an observation attended by a profound sense of déjà vu for even casual students of history, the op-ed goes on to say that “[A] demand from the public for a ‘strong hand’ – a new, authoritarian ruler – is rapidly coalescing, due to their dissatisfaction with President Poroshenko and all the other jokers they’ve been dealt from that shabby deck of political cards.” According to the op-ed, a man like that already exists in this ‘destitute and disintegrating’ country. Known as the “White Führer” to his comrades-in-arms, this man is Andriy Biletsky, the commander of the Azov Battalion who is making an ever-bigger name for himself in the Ukrainian parliament and across the broader political arena.

### **Open Season on Russia**

Of course all this only serves to highlight the pressures being brought to bear within the country itself; it is also those from without (not entirely unrelated to be sure) that are – or should be – of equal concern. Herein Doctorow again provides an alarming reveal. Although there are indications Washington is ‘fed up’ with the Kiev regime (and as *Ukraine on Fire* demonstrates conclusively, one it was responsible for installing in the first instance in 2014), he says,

“...the United States has doubled down in its support for a military solution to the conflict. With military trainers now on the ground (*does this development itself not have an ominously familiar ring to it?*), and the U.S. budgeting \$350m for security assistance to Ukraine, Washington has also recently started delivering lethal weapons, including the Javelin anti-tank missile system, free of charge to Kiev.’ [My emphasis].

In a Strategic Culture report, Robert Bridge recently offered an additional reality check on those external pressures. Instead of opting for a more balanced and cooperative foreign policy in its conduct of affairs in Eastern Europe, and

specifically in its bilateral relationship with Russia, in his view, it was via the furphy of “Russia[n] aggression” – an allegation he says was “peddled to the unsuspecting masses based on *fake news of a Russian ‘invasion’ of Ukraine and Crimea*” – [that] the U.S. and NATO “dropped all pretensions [to cooperation] and declared open season on Russia.” [My emphasis]

This was, he notes, further compounded by assertions Russia manipulated the outcome of the 2016 U.S. presidential election and along with Donald Trump’s “empty threat” to pull the pin on NATO if member states did not pony up on additional defense spending, “Eastern Europe has [now] become a veritable hothouse of paranoia-driven militarization.”

We’ll return to this point later, but some backstory is essential here. Whether one has already seen *Ukraine on Fire* or not, it now comes complete with a hitherto unexpected layer of revelation and significance, given that the late Consortium News founder and editor Robert Parry is interviewed at length therein. Parry’s appearance in the film, poignantly as it turns out, underscores the man’s trailblazing achievements and his unimpeachable stature within the alternative, independent media cosmos.

For those folks constantly on the lookout for exemplars of journalism’s fundamental values, his input into the film’s narrative is a reminder to us all just how much his political insight and measured analysis will be missed. It goes without saying that those values have themselves been missing in action for some time in our mainstream media, as Parry himself – to his eternal chagrin – was all too aware. This is a state of affairs to which he spent the last two decades of his life exposing via the Consortium News masthead. So much so it seems, there was even some hint (by the man himself as it turns out) that the stress and pressure of being a media outlier had taken its toll and may have been the catalyst for the strokes he had in the weeks before his untimely death.

Yet Parry’s voluminous, in-depth commentary on Ukraine – including his many pieces on the controversy surrounding the still unresolved mystery of the downing of Malaysian Airlines MH-17 in eastern Ukraine in June 2014 (with 38 of my fellow Aussies on board) – was arguably second to none. His fierce, fearless criticism of those engaging in the aforementioned ‘groupthink’ – not just those in and around the Beltway but in the West in general (with as we’ll see my own country being a noteworthy example) – was insightful, along with his own reporting on events and developments as they unfolded over the months and years that followed 2014’s color revolution which culminated in the coup d’état.

Many of Parry’s observations in the film are reflective of, and derived from, that commentary, as those who followed his reporting closely on the Ukraine situation over the years will appreciate. He was acutely aware that one could

not have a discussion of the key geopolitical events and developments of our time without some serious examination of the manner in which the corporate media manages (read: “massages”) the narratives that frame the Big Issues therein.

As noted, in this Parry was unremitting in his disdain for those of his fellow “investigative journalists” who had sold their souls for the filthy lucre, the celebrity status, and/or the comfortable, secure tenure at one of the “premium” corporate media marques. To him, at best, they were perception managers; at worst glorified stenographers. (For others perhaps less tactful or more scornful than Parry, they were/are simply “presstitutes”!)

Yet for all that disdain, Parry possibly reserved even greater contempt for the “marques” that employed the “presstitutes”, with the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* being singled out for frequently justified, laser-like reproach. To be sure, that was just with the print media. In this the reporting on the Ukraine crisis provides an exemplar – albeit by no means the only one – of just how self-serving, venal, hypocritical, supercilious, irresponsible, and manifestly dishonest the corporate media were.

And of course they still are, each day sliding further and further into irrelevance as they blithely betray both the hallowed U.S. Constitution and the citizens of the country whose individual and collective interests they are increasingly at pains to validly claim to represent, and whose democratic institutions – along with the rights that are purportedly underwritten by said “institutions” – they are supposed to protect.

### **‘Shirt-fronting’ the Mainstream Fakery**

Such a damning indictment of Western media was brought home in spades in the aftermath of the MH-17 disaster. It was a 60 Minutes Australia report on the tragedy that really got his gander up, and in this writer’s view, rightly so. At the time I was preparing my own take on MH-17, when the 60 Minutes segment aired.

I immediately alerted Bob to the report, knowing full well that given his earlier commentary on the tragedy and his views on MSM reporting in general, he’d be less than impressed with the conclusions they arrived at from their “investigation.” Much of this commentary by 60 Minutes was based on the dubious findings of Bellingcat (aka Eliot Higgins), a self-styled open source ‘citizen journalist’ who claimed to have the ‘skinny’ on who was responsible for the disaster.

Now space prohibits herein a full account of the circumstances surrounding the shoot-down, nor does it lend itself to a ‘blow by blow’ of the ‘argy-bargy’

between the 60 Minutes crew and their much touted source Higgins, and Parry himself. Suffice to say there seemed to be few limits to the indignation the former all managed to muster when the intrepid Consortium Newsmen had the temerity to meticulously and relentlessly challenge their account of the tragedy.

(Those unfamiliar with this dust-up – one that perfectly case studies the vast gulf that exists between MSM reportage on MH-17 and that of a respected alternative news outlet – can see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#) for some of the commentary the ‘stoush’ incited and examples of the tit-for-tat exchanges between the respective antagonists.)

It needs be noted that there was much political capital to be gained by those in Washington and most of America’s allies in the West by blaming Russia for the MH-17 tragedy. The U.S. and said allies had already blamed the crisis in Ukraine that derived from the February 2014 coup on Russian “aggression” and Putin’s purported ambitions to resurrect the Soviet Union. So in one sense it was to be expected they’d seek to capitalize on this disaster by blaming the Russians.

Western leaders to this end began tripping over themselves in singling out ‘Vlad the Derailer’ as the bad guy du jour, all the while doing so unencumbered by anything approximating solid evidence to support this stance. As we might expect with the Russia-gate saga, to this day, no definitive proof of the hard-core forensic kind has been presented to identify exactly how the plane was shot down (was the missile launched from the air or from the ground?), much less who actually perpetrated the act (was it the anti-Russian Ukrainian military, the pro-Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine, or the Russians themselves?) Again, to this day, the questions as to whether the plane was deliberately targeted (was it a [false-flag attack?](#), or did it just happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time), also remain unanswered.

As noted, the downing of MH-17 cost the lives of 38 Aussies, and the fallout from the tragedy – to say nothing of the way the disaster was politicized in order to serve the broader geopolitical objectives of the Beltway Bedlamites and their apparatchiks at home along with their counterparts in other Western nations – was especially pronounced Down Under. Our then Prime Minister Tony Abbott, who took to sculling the Washington Kool-Aid by asserting it was Putin himself who was “personally responsible” for the disaster, was especially bolshie in his reaction.

Ahead of Putin’s visit to this country in November 2014 for the G20 meeting in Brisbane that year, Abbott threatened to [“shirt-front” the Russian president](#) over the issue when they officially met up. Whilst this made for great headlines here and abroad, it did nothing to arrest his slide in the opinion polls, which

one can reasonably surmise was at the time in the back of his mind. All in all, coming from a national leader on the world stage, this unprecedented, petulant outburst was something to behold.

But such was the fervor of the times regarding MH-17, and more broadly, the anti-Russian sentiment that prevailed earlier in the year over Russia's "invasion" of Ukraine in the aftermath of America's bespoke coup d'état. Clearly Abbott's desire to leverage the public outrage here in Australia that accompanied the tragedy and to ingratiate himself with the Bedlamites far outweighed any obligation that might've routinely accompanied a more measured diplomatic response. (It was after all to no avail; Abbott's hold on the Aussie "premiership" was itself 'shirt-fronted' about a year after making this comment, being successfully challenged for the leadership by the present PM Malcolm Turnbull.)

It should further be noted that many folks – mostly after the fact – justified the removal of the then Ukrainian government because it was irredeemably corrupt. This of course is a specious and convenient argument – a 'justification' that makes frequent cameos in the annals of regime change – partly so in this case because there's little evidence the replacement regime has been any less corrupt.

But this raises an altogether different, arguably more important consideration: If Uncle Sam had removed every last one of the countless client tyrants he's had on his imperial dance card over the decades on the sole basis of their ethical, moral and/or legal standards of governance, adherence to democratic principles, and/or general political probity, it's fair to surmise the geopolitical terrain might look as different today as the lunar landscape does to an as yet still pristine portion of the Amazonian rainforest. And the U.S. might still retain – and be able to credibly lay claim to – some of the moral capital it had accrued by war's end in 1945, which few would argue it has now all but frittered away.

Of course if we really want to push the envelope herein invoking moral relativism, we only need consider that – notwithstanding what it says on the box – America itself is hardly a bastion of "ethical, moral and/or legal standards of governance, [adherence to] democratic principles, and/or general political propriety." Its 'unblemished' track record of thuggery and skullduggery implementing regime change on every continent except the Great White Patch on the "backside" of the Big Blue Ball is ample evidence of that. This is without even referencing its performance closer to home drawing on such benchmarks! It's a "practice what you preach" thing!

Further, there was and remains no smoking gun evidence linking Russia or the Eastern Ukrainian, pro-Russian separatists to the MH-17 shoot-down, and

therefore no sound rationale for Washington accusing either of complicity in this crime without ponying up with said evidence. If anything, the longer the dog-not-barking question of why the U.S. refused to release all of the forensic evidence and 'intel' related to the shoot-down remains unanswered, the more we should rightfully suspect any findings by the MH-17 investigation team (if they ever see the light of day) – one it has to be emphasized, suspiciously included representatives from the at least equally suspect Kiev regime.

Moreover, for the U.S. to have imposed a further regimen of economic sanctions as a consequence without at least awaiting the outcome of the official investigation spoke further volumes about Washington's deeper game-plan vis-à-vis Ukraine and ultimately, Russia itself. And it would appear we are now seeing that "game-plan" come to a fruition of sorts. Again, to underscore all of this, in one of Parry's last substantive analyses of the Ukraine situation back in June last year, he summed a decidedly more coherent reality for us all.

"As the New York Times instructed us' he observed in 2015, 'there was no coup in Ukraine...no U.S. interference...and there weren't even that many neo-Nazis. And the ensuing conflict wasn't a resistance [movement] among Yanukovych's supporters to his illegal ouster; no, it was 'Russian aggression' or a 'Russian invasion.'" Parry didn't spare the horses:

"If you deviate from this groupthink – if you point out how U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland talked about the U.S. spending \$5 billion on Ukraine; mention her pre-coup intercepted phone call with [Ukrainian] U.S. Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt discussing who the new leaders would be and how 'to glue' or [how to] 'midwife this thing'; note how Nuland and Senator John McCain urged on the violent anti-Yanukovych protesters; recognize that snipers firing from far-right-controlled buildings killed both police *and* protesters to provoke the climactic ouster of Yanukovych; [and if] you think all that indeed looks like a coup – you obviously are the victim of 'Russian propaganda and disinformation.'"

But as Parry glumly observed, thanks to the mainstream U.S. media, most Americans didn't get to hear about any of that as, "[I]t has essentially banned those deviant facts from the public discourse. If they are mentioned at all, they're lumped together with 'fake news' amid the reassuring hope that soon there'll be algorithms to purge such troublesome information from the Internet."

And for anyone whose "blowback antennae" are attuned to such matters, we cannot escape one abiding reality regarding the MH-17 disaster: If the putsch-meisters of the Potomac had minded their own business from the off and left well enough alone in Ukraine, *irrespective of the cause of the shoot-down and who was responsible*, we do know around three hundred innocent people would still be

going about their business, and we wouldn't be having this 'conversation'. Four years later this is a reality I've yet to hear voiced by anyone in the MSM or in the upper echelons of Western governments. [My emphasis].

### **From Nobel Peace Prize to Imperial Warmonger**

Last but not least, consider the following. For this writer, it remains incomprehensible that a U.S. State Department official – in this case the aforementioned Ms Nuland (aka The Maidan Cookie Monster) – would seemingly act in such a brazenly undiplomatic manner in bringing about this coup, a reality that as we've seen independent media folks like Robert Parry were at pains to bring to wider attention. It is in this instance particularly that the "he who lies first, lies best" maxim really comes to the fore.

Yet there can be no doubt that Nuland initiated this action with Obama's full knowledge, with it being as much, if not more so, Obama's mess as it is Nuland's and her neocon cronies. Well might we say, "cue Harry Truman's "the buck stops here!"

Of equal or greater concern herein is this. I'm sure I'm not the only one who noted with considerable bewilderment and dismay, the Kiev regime's deployment – again with the full knowledge, approval indeed encouragement of the regime renovators in Washington – of extreme neo-Nazi forces in facilitating its rise to power from the off, and enforcing since the coup its brutal, illegitimate rule. As noted earlier, they are again getting their second wind.

Given the neoconservatives well-documented vise-grip on U.S. foreign policy in general, and their role in engineering said coup in particular – especially that of the Nuland/Kagan/ex-PNAC factions and their fellow travelers in the U.S. Congress such as McCain, who number amongst them some of the most prominent, so-called "American friends of Israel" – I'm at something of a loss as to how best to explain the glaring disconnect herein.

Of course America's foreign policy "initiatives" over the decades have always embraced an "end justifies the means" precept; only the most naïve or ill-informed would deny this. But for most objective observers – even those of us all too familiar with the CIA's notorious Operation Paperclip, or its equally infamous Operation Gladio, wherein the U.S. actively recruited under-the-radar not-so-rehabbed former Nazis and extreme right wing elements to fight on any number of fronts the Cold War against the Soviets – this is breaking new ground in its embrace of the precept. Prima facie, this has to represent another glaring WTF 'mo' in the conduct of U.S. foreign policy. Geopolitics makes strange bedfellows, one might reasonably conclude! *And* transforms Nobel Peace Prize winners into imperial warmongers!



Or is it possible I'm just missing something obvious here? How are all these "American friends of Israel," either inside or outside of the Capitol 'tent', able to reconcile their on-going support of a regime utilizing such forces – whose pernicious ideology being synonymous with rabid anti-Semitism would one imagines be totally abhorrent to Jewish folks and non-Jews alike – under any circumstances?

As it turns out, the so-called "friends" have been bending butt over backwards since the coup denying, playing down, or completely ignoring this "disconnect". It is only begrudgingly and belatedly they – along with their hacks, flacks and lackeys in the MSM – were able to bring themselves to concede there has been and remains any such neo-Nazi involvement in Ukraine, much less acknowledge any such "disconnect".

Another key question here is this. How does the all powerful AIPAC and various Jewish/Israel lobby groups and affiliated bodies feel about their "American friends" precipitating and engaging in regime change missions that involve the use and on-going embrace of neo-Nazi forces? Is this just some fuzzy 'post-modern' perversion of realpolitik at work here, and I'm simply too naive to understand what the hell is going on and what the end-game might be? And now that the neo-Nazi 'natives' are becoming increasingly restless as noted – their frustration with their nominal patrons within the present regime's hierarchy reaching boiling points – it'll doubtless make for interesting times ahead.

All this of course without considering the added reality of these extreme right-wing factions possibly combining forces and cozying up in a Nazi/fascist/white supremacist group hug cum love-fest with radical jihadist/Islamic militant groups in what could likely shape up to be an exceedingly bloody counter-coup, along with the equally likely prospects of the Ukrainian economy imploding in the interim, or at least in the wake of the turmoil induced by any such coup!

On these matters alone, I'm prepped nonetheless to be enlightened as to how/when anything good is likely to come out of America's color revolution and regime renovation experiment in this part of the geopolitical landscape. And when it comes to the situation in Ukraine, one that has emanated directly from America's interference in its political affairs in 2014, well might we ask of the aforementioned, former CIA chief spook Woolsey: How's that '[we] only [do it] for a very good cause [and] in the interests of democracy' thing workin' out for ya Jimbo?'

Yet whilst these are just some of the reality checks needed in order to assemble a measure of veracity and insight regarding all things Ukraine, such "checks" one imagines are, and will remain for sometime, asynchronous with the narratives disseminated via Washington's anti-Putin, anti-Russian "brochure."

And one final point if I may. If Putin and his Kremlin gremlins did indeed do some kind of a dodgy deal with Donald Trump during the 2016 presidential election in order to get him across the line ahead of Hillary Clinton – the only story that seems to capture the attention of the MSM mavens these days – it would be fair to say that the otherwise estimable Russian president and his beloved Motherland are getting well and truly shafted. Maybe Putin isn't as clever as we give him credit for? To be so artfully duped by a dope like The Trumpster? Oh, the ignominy of it all!

Yet, all that aside, wouldn't many of us just love to hear what the estimable and dutifully righteous Mr Parry might've had to say about more recent and possible developments in the country that interestingly – according to Dutch historian Kees Boterbloem – was affectionately known back in the day as “Little Russia”?

But of course that's not going to happen. I can only hope this missive in some small – if not (ahem) *short* – measure, passes for the next best thing!

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## Honduras Nearing Ten Years of Stolen Elections, Neo-Colonial Rule

Despite an organized and active grassroots movement, Honduran politics have been repeatedly steamrolled by the self-interests of international ruling elites, as journalist and filmmaker Jesse Freeston explained to Dennis J. Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

For weeks following its stolen election, the corrupt right-wing, neo-fascist government of Juan Orlando Hernández's in Honduras has been terrorizing its people. Street protests and spontaneous blockades have been met by extreme violence. Dozens have already died on the frontlines and many more have been arrested and brutalized in detention, while often being held incommunicado.

I spoke to Jesse Freeston, who has been based in Honduras for the last eight years working as a video-journalist and documentary filmmaker, ever since the US supported/Hillary Clinton sustained 2009 coup d'état that purged the duly elected president, Manuel Zelaya. Freeston, who has reported for the Real News Network and Democracy Now en Español, is the producer of the feature documentary “Resistencia: The Fight for the Aguan Valley.”

Freeston reports that, among other crimes against the people, “this regime has:

stolen an election; ignored calls from the Organization of American States to hold a new election; passed a law prohibiting the prosecution of all former and current members of Congress in the midst of a series of massive corruption scandals [and has] appointed a new national police chief who has clear evidence against him of drug trafficking..."

I spoke to Freeston on February 7.

**Dennis Bernstein:** We continue our drumbeat coverage of Honduras and the recent stolen election there, an attempt to suppress the will of the people who, by all accounts, want to have a more progressive government. It has been a very violent situation since the election. We are hearing that dozens of people have been killed and that the atrocities being perpetrated by the government have resulted in a nightmare. Could you put this in the context of the last two recent election cycles in Honduras?

**Jesse Freeston:** On June 28, 2009, there was a vote on a non-binding resolution put forward by President Manuel Zelaya, who had taken up the call of various indigenous groups in the country to rewrite the constitution. When people went out to vote on that day, the military staged a coup d'état and Zelaya wound up in Costa Rica.

This led to the most organized national resistance movement Honduras has ever seen. Assemblies were held, which brought together all these people who stood to gain from a new constitution. Just about every sector of the society were represented, except perhaps the oligarchy.

This led to the formation of the Libre Party, which participated in the 2013 elections [with Manuel Zelaya's wife, Xiomara Castro, running as the party's presidential candidate]. The election was officially won by Juan Orlando Hernandez but there was massive fraud. The November, 2017 elections were even more of a farce.

Despite all that, when the electoral tribunal released its first results, the Oppositional Alliance were up by 5% with 60% of the votes counted. One of the magistrates on the tribunal described it at the time as an "irreversible trend."

Then, counting stopped for over a day when the computer system supposedly crashed. When it was back up again, the tendency had completely flipped and Hernandez ended up winning by one percentage point.

This led to another massive uprising. On one day of action there were 48 blockades of highways and major boulevards in the country. During the last two months, this has been happening a couple times a week.

Even international observers such as the European Union Commission and the

Organization of American States—who have been discredited here after turning their back many times in the last eight years to the crimes of this regime—even they have said that they have to redo the election or there has to be a recount.

Nevertheless, the members of those organizations, like Canada, like the United States and the countries of the European Union, went ahead and validated the election.

**DB:** We have heard that activists and members of the resistance have been arrested.

**JF:** Yes, there are dozens of political prisoners behind bars right now. One of the most worrying cases is that of Edwin Espinal. He is someone who has consistently paid a price for his resistance against the ongoing coup d'état.

In September of 2009, Edwin Espinal's wife died from tear gas inhalation after taking part in several protests. A week later, Edwin was at a small neighborhood protest after which he was arrested for kidnapping because he took a child with him on his motorcycle when he was fleeing the tear gas. The mother of the child went over and over to the police station to explain that she had pleaded with Edwin to take her kid with him. Another time he was jailed for car theft for driving a friend's car.

The first thing that the newly-formed military-trained urban police force did was raid Espinal's house, claiming they had proof that he was a drug trafficker. The police falsely accused him of being involved in the Marriot Hotel fire and right now he is in a maximum security prison on that charge. Journalists and human rights workers are not allowed in to talk to him, his family have not been allowed to see him. This is the first time since the 1980's that a civilian will be tried inside a military base.

**DB:** How would you describe the US role in this situation? We know that Hillary Clinton played a key role in sustaining the coup in 2009.

**JF:** I think that informed people in Honduras realize that changes in political leadership in the US don't make much difference in how Honduras is treated.

Decisions are made here at the US Embassy and ambassadors act as de-facto rulers here, as shadow presidents.

The one constant here is the massive military funding from the US. Since the coup, the Honduran military has received more direct funding from the US than any other country in the Americas, despite the fact that they have not been involved in a single military conflict or been threatened with one.

The military is purely used against people inside the country. Although the

United States is by far the largest funder of the Honduran military, other countries are also involved because humanitarian and other aid is typically diverted to the military.

**DB:** You said that there is a continuity between the last administration's policy toward Honduras and the Trump administration's policy. In terms of so-called US interests, the real problem is that we push a program of "free trade" and we insist on having our military bases there. So we have every reason to sustain the government as long as it provides us with an opportunity to police the region. Could you talk about the geopolitical part of this?

**JF:** I think the more a country depends on its natural resources, the more everything comes down to who controls the land. In 1961, [John F.] Kennedy launched a program called The Alliance for Progress, which was billed as a kind of Marshall Plan for Latin America. It was a response to the Cuban revolution and an attempt to ward off similar revolutions across Latin America.

We were going to give billions of dollars to countries in Latin America if they promised to undertake land reform, if the oligarchy agreed to give up a portion of their land. When Johnson replaced Kennedy there was much less priority assigned to this program. Nonetheless, the Honduran government had to pass a number of land reform laws to receive the money, but none of those laws were ever implemented.

If the US intends to keep its business interests here alive—the sweatshop sector as well as bananas and palm oil—and for Canada, gold mining primarily—they need to maintain their alliance with this land-holding oligarchy. It is this alliance that the resistance is asking the countries of the North and the West to break.

With eight and a half years of organizing experience, the people of Honduras could put together a government so fast it would make your head spin. This movement is very organized. They know who to trust, they know who can provide intellectual support, they know who can run the economy. They are just waiting for the international community to change its alliances.

**DB:** So will the resistance to the Hernandez regime go on?

**JF:** The Oppositional Alliance has decided to wage a "peaceful insurrection," something they are entitled to do under the Honduran constitution, which states that no one owes obedience to a government which takes power by force. The numbers now at the protests have been considerably less than in the past two months, particularly since the inauguration on January 27.

It is hard to predict what will happen but the vast majority of the population

do not want this regime. There is a massive corruption scandal developing and we will see what happens with that. Students are planning a strike for next month. But we will have to wait to see what kinds of ideas are going to be put forward in Honduras.

People are looking at Honduras as a laboratory for the ultra-right of the world. Fortunately, there is a well-organized movement here that will be rising up again and again. It is up to those of us in the international community to put pressure on those who claim to represent us to change their allegiances.

**DB:** Would you say that this is a movement inspired by young people in the country?

**JF:** Yes, and that is the key to understanding this new law that the National Party is trying to pass which would regulate social media. It has to do with this young generation that has grown up in this period following the coup.

Someone like Zelaya doesn't necessarily reach them. This new law the government is trying to pass would give them the right to criminalize anyone posting anything they deem "hateful" on social media. And this is a government that labels "racist" people who are defending rivers from dams being built.

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## Ten Commonsense Suggestions for Making Peace, Not War

President Trump's first year in office brought an escalation of military aggression abroad as he built on the interventions of previous administrations, but there are steps America can take to move towards a more peaceful future, writes retired U.S. Air Force lieutenant colonel William J. Astore at TomDispatch.

By William J. Astore

Whether the rationale is the need to wage a war on terror involving 76 countries or renewed preparations for a struggle against peer competitors Russia and China (as Defense Secretary James Mattis suggested recently while introducing America's new National Defense Strategy), the U.S. military is engaged globally. A network of 800 military bases spread across 172 countries helps enable its

wars and interventions. By the count of the Pentagon, at the end of the last fiscal year about 291,000 personnel (including reserves and Department of Defense civilians) were deployed in 183 countries worldwide, which is the functional definition of a military uncontained. Lady Liberty may temporarily close when the U.S. government grinds to a halt, but the country's foreign military commitments, especially its wars, just keep humming along.

As a student of history, I was warned to avoid the notion of inevitability.

Still, given such data points and others like them, is there anything more predictable in this country's future than incessant warfare without a true victory in sight? Indeed, the last clear-cut American victory, the last true "mission accomplished" moment in a war of any significance, came in 1945 with the end of World War II.

Yet the lack of clear victories since then seems to faze no one in Washington.

In this century, presidents have regularly boasted that the U.S. military is the finest fighting force in human history, while no less regularly demanding that the most powerful military in today's world be "rebuilt" and funded at ever more staggering levels. Indeed, while on the campaign trail, Donald Trump promised he'd invest so much in the military that it would become "so big and so strong and so great, and it will be so powerful that I don't think we're ever going to have to use it."

As soon as he took office, however, he promptly appointed a set of generals to key positions in his government, stored the mothballs, and went back to war.

Here, then, is a brief rundown of the first year of his presidency in war terms.

### **Trump's First Year of War-Making**

In 2017, Afghanistan saw a mini-surge of roughly 4,000 additional U.S. troops (with more to come), a major spike in air strikes, and an onslaught of munitions of all sorts, including MOAB (the mother of all bombs), the never-before-used largest non-nuclear bomb in the U.S. arsenal, as well as precision weapons fired by B-52s against suspected Taliban drug laboratories. By the Air Force's own count, 4,361 weapons were "released" in Afghanistan in 2017 compared to 1,337 in 2016. Despite this commitment of warriors and weapons, the Afghan war remains – according to American commanders putting the best possible light on the situation – "stalemated," with that country's capital Kabul currently under siege.

How about Operation Inherent Resolve against the Islamic State? U.S.-led coalition forces have launched more than 10,000 airstrikes in Iraq and Syria since Donald Trump became president, unleashing 39,577 weapons in 2017. (The

figure for 2016 was 30,743.) The “caliphate” is now gone and ISIS deflated but not defeated, since you can’t extinguish an ideology solely with bombs.

Meanwhile, along the Syrian-Turkish border a new conflict seems to be heating up between American-backed Kurdish forces and NATO ally Turkey.

Yet another strife-riven country, Yemen, witnessed a sixfold increase in U.S. airstrikes against al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula (from 21 in 2016 to more than 131 in 2017). In Somalia, which has also seen a rise in such strikes against al-Shabaab militants, U.S. forces on the ground have reached numbers not seen since the Black Hawk Down incident of 1993. In each of these countries, there are yet more ruins, yet more civilian casualties, and yet more displaced people.

Finally, we come to North Korea. Though no real shots have yet been fired, rhetorical shots by two less-than-stable leaders, “Little Rocket Man” Kim Jong-un and “dotard” Donald Trump, raise the possibility of a regional bloodbath.

Trump, seemingly favoring military solutions to North Korea’s nuclear program even as his administration touts a new generation of more usable nuclear warheads, has been remarkably successful in moving the world’s doomsday clock ever closer to midnight.

Clearly, his “great” and “powerful” military has hardly been standing idly on the sidelines looking “big” and “strong.” More than ever, in fact, it seems to be lashing out across the Greater Middle East and Africa. Seventeen years after the 9/11 attacks began the Global War on Terror, all of this represents an eerily familiar attempt by the U.S. military to kill its way to victory, whether against the Taliban, ISIS, or other terrorist organizations.

This kinetic reality should surprise no one. Once you invest so much in your military – not just financially but also culturally (by continually celebrating it in a fashion which has come to seem like a quasi-faith) – it’s natural to want to put it to use. This has been true of all recent administrations, Democratic and Republican alike, as reflected in the infamous question Madeleine Albright posed to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Colin Powell in 1992: “What’s the point of having this superb military you’re always talking about if we can’t use it?”

With the very word “peace” rarely in Washington’s political vocabulary, America’s never-ending version of war seems as inevitable as anything is likely to be in history. Significant contingents of U.S. troops and contractors remain an enduring presence in Iraq and there are now 2,000 U.S. Special Operations forces and other personnel in Syria for the long haul. They are ostensibly engaged in training and stability operations. In Washington, however, the urge for regime change in both Syria and Iran remains strong – in the case of Iran



implacably so. If past is prologue, then considering previous regime-change operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, the future looks grim indeed.

Despite the dismal record of the last decade and a half, our civilian leaders continue to insist that this country must have a military not only second to none but globally dominant. And few here wonder what such a quest for total dominance, the desire for absolute power, could do to this country. Two centuries ago, however, writing to Thomas Jefferson, John Adams couldn't have been clearer on the subject. Power, he said, "must never be trusted without a check."

The question today for the American people: How is the dominant military power of which U.S. leaders so casually boast to be checked? How is the country's almost total reliance on the military in foreign affairs to be reined in? How can the plans of the profiteers and arms makers to keep the good times rolling be brought under control?

As a start, consider one of Donald Trump's favorite generals, Douglas MacArthur, speaking to the Sperry Rand Corporation in 1957:

"Our swollen budgets constantly have been misrepresented to the public. Our government has kept us in a perpetual state of fear – kept us in a continuous stampede of patriotic fervor – with the cry of grave national emergency. Always there has been some terrible evil at home or some monstrous foreign power that was going to gobble us up if we did not blindly rally behind it by furnishing the exorbitant funds demanded. Yet, in retrospect, these disasters seem never to have happened, seem never to have been quite real."

No peacenik MacArthur. Other famed generals like Smedley Butler and Dwight D. Eisenhower spoke out with far more vigor against the corruptions of war and the perils to a democracy of an ever more powerful military, though such sentiments are seldom heard in this country today. Instead, America's leaders insist that other people judge us by our words, our stated good intentions, not our murderous deeds and their results.

### **Perpetual Warfare Whistles Through Washington**

Whether in Iraq, Afghanistan, or elsewhere in the war on terror, the U.S. is now engaged in generational conflicts that are costing us trillions of dollars, driving up the national debt while weakening the underpinnings of our democracy. They have led to foreign casualties by the hundreds of thousands and created refugees in the millions, while turning cities like Iraq's Mosul into wastelands.

In today's climate of budget-busting "defense" appropriations, isn't it finally

time for Americans to apply a little commonsense to our disastrous pattern of war-making? To prime the pump for such a conversation, here are 10 suggestions for ways to focus on, limit, or possibly change Washington's now eternal war-making and profligate war spending:

1. Abandon the notion of perfect security. You can't have it. It doesn't exist. And abandon as well the idea that a huge military establishment translates into national safety. James Madison didn't think so and neither did Dwight D. Eisenhower.
2. Who could have anything against calling the Pentagon a "defense" department, if defense were truly its focus? But let's face it: the Pentagon is actually a war department. So let's label it what it really is. After all, how can you deal with a problem if you can't even name it accurately?
3. Isn't it about time to start following the Constitution when it comes to our "wars"? Isn't it time for Congress to finally step up to its constitutional duties? Whatever the Pentagon is called, this country should no longer be able to pursue its many conflicts without a formal congressional declaration of war. If we had followed that rule, the U.S. wouldn't have fought any of its wars since the end of World War II.
4. Generational wars – ones, that is, that never end – should not be considered a measure of American resolve, but of American stupidity. If you wage war long, you wage it wrong, especially if you want to protect democratic institutions in this country.
5. Generals generally like to wage war. Don't blame them. It's their profession. But for heaven's sake, don't put them in charge of the Department of "Defense" (James Mattis) or the National Security Council (H.R. McMaster) either – and above all, don't let one of them (John Kelly) become the gatekeeper for a volatile, vain president. In our country, civilians should be in charge of the war makers, end of story.
6. You can't win wars you never should have begun in the first place. America's leaders failed to learn that lesson from Vietnam. Since then they have continued to wage wars for less-than-vital interests with predictably dismal results. Following the Vietnam example, America will only truly win its Afghan War when it chooses to rein in its pride and vanity – and leave.
7. The serious people in Washington snickered when, as a presidential candidate in 2004 and 2008, Congressman Dennis Kucinich called for a Department of Peace. Remind me, though, 17 years into our latest set of wars, what was so funny about that suggestion? Isn't it better to wage peace than war? If you don't believe me, ask a wounded veteran or a Gold Star family.

8. Want to invest in American jobs? Good idea! But stop making the military-industrial complex the preferred path to job creation. That's a loser of a way to go. It's proven that investments in "butter" create double or triple the number of jobs as those in "guns." In other words, invest in education, health care, and civilian infrastructure, not more weaponry.
9. Get rid of the very idea behind the infamous Pottery Barn rule – the warning Secretary of State Colin Powell offered George W. Bush before the invasion of Iraq that if the U.S. military "breaks" a country, somehow we've "bought" it and so have to take ownership of the resulting mess. Whether stated or not, it's continued to be the basis for this century's unending wars. Honestly, if somebody broke something valuable you owned, would you trust that person to put it back together? Folly doesn't decrease by persisting in it.
10. I was an officer in the Air Force. When I entered that service, the ideal of the citizen-soldier still held sway. But during my career I witnessed a slow, insidious change. A citizen-soldier military morphed into a professional ethos of "warriors" and "warfighters," a military that saw itself as better than the rest of us. It's time to think about how to return to that citizen-soldier tradition, which made it harder to fight those generational wars.

Consider retired General John Kelly, who, while defending the president in a controversy over the president's words to the mother of a dead Green Beret, refused to take questions from reporters unless they had a personal connection to fallen troops or to a Gold Star family. Consider as well the way that U.S. politicians like Vice President Mike Pence are always so keen to exalt those in uniform, to speak of them as above the citizenry. ("You are the best of us.")

Isn't it time to stop praising our troops to the rooftops and thanking them endlessly for what they've done for us – for fighting those wars without end – and to start listening to them instead? Isn't it time to try to understand them not as "heroes" in another universe, but as people like us in all their frailty and complexity? We're never encouraged to see them as our neighbors, or as teenagers who struggled through high school, or as harried moms and dads.

Our troops are, of course, human and vulnerable and imperfect. We don't help them when we put them on pedestals, give them flags to hold in the breeze, and salute them as icons of a feel-good brand of patriotism. Talk of warrior-heroes is worse than cheap: it enables our state of permanent war, elevates the Pentagon, ennobles the national security state, and silences dissent. That's why it's both dangerous and universally supported in rare bipartisan fashion by politicians in Washington.

So here's my final point. Think of it as a bonus 11th suggestion: don't make our troops into heroes, even when they're in harm's way. It would be so much better to make ourselves into heroes by getting them out of harm's way.

Be exceptional, America. Make peace, not war.

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## Do We Really Want Nuclear War with Russia?

**From the Archive:** With Moscow saying that U.S. proposals in its new Nuclear Posture Review to develop "tactical" nukes are "confrontational" and "anti-Russian," we republish a 2016 article by Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry (first published on Oct. 3, 2016)

Through an endless barrage of ugly propaganda, the U.S. government and the mainstream American press have put the world on course for a potential nuclear showdown with Russia, an existential risk that has been undertaken cavalierly amid bizarre expressions of self-righteousness from Western institutions.

This extraordinarily dangerous moment reflects the insistence of the Establishment in Washington that it should continue to rule the world and that it will not broach the possibility of other nations asserting their own national interests even in their own neighborhoods.

Rather than adjust to a new multi-polar world, the powers-that-be in Washington have deployed a vast array of propaganda assets that are financed or otherwise encouraged to escalate an information war so aggressively that Russia is reading this onslaught of insults as the conditioning of the Western populations for a world war.

While that may not be the intention of President Obama, who in his recent United Nations address acknowledged the risks from imposing uni-polar order on the world, a powerful bureaucratic machinery is in place to advance U.S. propaganda goals. It is operating on a crazed auto-pilot hurtling toward destruction but beyond anyone's ability to turn it off.

This machinery consists not just of outlets and activists funded by U.S. tax dollars via the National Endowment for Democracy or the U.S. Agency for International Development or NATO's Strategic Communications Command, but like-minded "human rights" entities paid for by billionaire currency speculator George Soros or controlled by neoconservative ideologues who now run major U.S. newspapers, such as *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*.

This propaganda apparatus now has so many specialized features that you get supposedly "progressive" and "anti-war" organizations promoting a major U.S. invasion of Syria under the guise of sweet-sounding policies like "no-fly zones" and "safe zones," the same euphemisms that were used as the gateway to bloody "regime change" wars in Iraq and Libya.

There exists what intelligence veterans call a Mighty Wurlitzer, an organ with so many keys and pedals that it's hard to know where all the sounds come from that make up the powerful harmony, all building to the same crescendo. But that crescendo may now be war with nuclear-armed Russia, which finds in all this demonizing the prelude to either a destabilization campaign aimed at "regime change" in Moscow or outright war.

Yet, the West can't seem to muster the sanity or the honesty to begin toning down or even showing skepticism toward the escalating charges aimed at Russia. We saw similar patterns in the run-up to war in Iraq in 2002-2003 and in justifying the ouster, torture and murder of Libya's Muammar Gaddafi in 2011.

Western propaganda also has enveloped the conflict in Syria to such an extent that the American people don't understand that the U.S. government and its regional "allies" have been supporting and arming jihadist groups fighting under the command of Al Qaeda and even the Islamic State. The propaganda has focused on demonizing Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, while downplaying or ignoring the real nature of the "moderate" opposition.

### **Taking Aim at Putin**

In many ways, the Western insistence on "regime change" in Syria ties in directly to the extraordinary escalation of that strategy to seek "regime change" in Russia. In August-September 2013, America's neocons and liberal war hawks were salivating over the prospect of a U.S. military bombing campaign to devastate Assad's army as punishment for his alleged role in a sarin gas attack outside Damascus.

Although the intelligence was weak regarding Assad's "guilt" – and subsequent evidence has pointed to a likely provocation by radical jihadists using home-made sarin and a jerry-rigged rocket – Official Washington was rubbing its hands

at the prospect of a retaliatory bombing operation that would punish Assad and advance the cause of “regime change.”

At the last minute, however, President Obama listened to the doubts from his intelligence advisers and rejected what he later called the Washington “playbook” of a military response to a complex problem. To the annoyance of Washington insiders, Obama then collaborated with President Putin in a diplomatic settlement in which Syria surrendered all its chemical weapons while still denying any role in the sarin attack. Obama was accused of weakness for not “enforcing his red line” against chemical weapons use.

The despair over Obama’s failure to bomb the Syrian government and open the path for a long-desired “regime change” in Damascus led to a search for other villains, the most obvious one being Putin, who then became the focus of neocon determination to make him share their pain and disappointment.

National Endowment for Democracy President Carl Gershman took to the op-ed page of *The Washington Post* in late September 2013 to declare that Ukraine was now “the biggest prize” and represented an important interim step toward eventually toppling Putin in Russia.

Gershman, who is essentially a neocon paymaster dispensing \$100 million a year in U.S. taxpayers’ money to activists, journalists and various other operatives, wrote: “Russians, too, face a choice, and Putin may find himself on the losing end not just in the near abroad but within Russia itself.”

Within weeks, U.S. neocons – including Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland and Sen. John McCain – were encouraging right-wing Ukrainian nationalists to overthrow Ukraine’s elected President Viktor Yanukovich, a coup accomplished on Feb. 22, 2014, touching off a civil war between Ukraine’s west and east.

As part of that Western propaganda barrage, the Ukraine coup ousting the elected president was hailed as a victory for “democracy” and Yanukovich’s supporters in the south and east who resisted this imposition of illegitimate authority in Kiev became the target of a U.S.-backed “Anti-Terrorism Operation” or ATO.

Led by *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, the Western media fell in line behind the preferred narrative that there was “no coup,” that there were “no neo-Nazis” spearheading the non-coup (or maybe just a few), that the “Heavenly Hundred” who died in the putsch against Yanukovich had given their lives for Ukraine’s “freedom” even though some of the “heavenly” inconveniently were neo-Nazi street fighters, part of a paramilitary force that had killed some 16 police officers.

## Killing 'Terrorists'

Given the West's pro-coup propaganda themes, it became necessary to justify the thousands of eastern Ukrainians slaughtered in the ATO as the killing of "terrorists" or Russian "stooges," getting what they deserved. The 96 percent vote in Crimea's referendum to reunify with Russia had to be a "sham" since the West's narrative held that the Ukrainian people were thrilled with the putsch, so the Crimeans must have voted that way at Russian gunpoint.

The explanation of Crimea's secession from Ukraine was that Russia "invaded" and "annexed" Crimea although there were no images of an invasion (no tanks crossing Crimea's borders, no amphibious landings, no paratroopers descending from the sky – because Russian troops were already in Crimea as part of a basing agreement and helped protect Crimea's inhabitants so they could hold their vote which did represent their desires).

Because the Western propaganda insisted that the new authorities in Kiev were wearing white hats, the Russians had to be fitted with black hats. Every bad thing that happened was automatically Putin's fault. So, when Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 was shot down over eastern Ukraine on July 17, 2014, the West's propaganda machinery whirred into action, blaming Russia for supposedly giving the ethnic Russian rebels powerful Buk anti-aircraft missiles.

The propaganda momentum was so strong by then that there was no Western support for Russia's request for a United Nations investigation. Instead the inquiry was largely turned over to the torture-implicated Ukrainian intelligence service, the SBU, upon which the Dutch and Australians, the other two principal members, became increasingly dependent (by their own admissions). Belgium and Malaysia played lesser roles.

The Joint Investigation Committee (JIT) considered no serious alternatives to the Russians and the rebels being responsible. For instance, when the JIT released its "report" on Sept. 28, 2016, there was no explanation offered for why Dutch intelligence (i.e. NATO intelligence) had concluded that the only missile systems in eastern Ukraine on July 17, 2014, capable of shooting down MH-17 were controlled by the Ukrainian military. The JIT "report" was silent about where those Ukrainian Buk missile systems were at the time of the shoot-down.

It's also a bit of a misnomer to describe the JIT's findings as a "report" since they were really expressed in a series of videos featuring computer-generated graphics supposedly showing a Russian Buk crew driving around Ukraine, mixed in with a few photos from social media of a Buk convoy.

Key to the JIT's findings were phone intercepts provided by the SBU and assembled to reinforce the impression of Russian guilt. The problem, however, was that except for one intercept in which someone said he'd like to have Buks, the word "Buk" is not mentioned; nor the word "missiles"; nor the word "aircraft"; nor any discussion about shooting down a plane. That was all supposition with an authoritative narrator filling in the gaps.

### **Ignoring Contrary Evidence**

The JIT also ignored evidence that contradicted its conclusions, such as other intercepts reporting that a Ukrainian convoy had penetrated close to the eastern city of Luhansk. The significance of that revelation is that it confirms a point that has been largely ignored, that the Ukrainian military could move almost at will across "rebel-controlled territory." The notion that the Ukrainian civil war was like World War I with fixed trench lines was simply a fallacy.

The JIT also had to impose a bizarre route for the Russian Buk battery to follow on its way to the supposed firing location south of the remote eastern town of Snizhne. Because the "social media" photos show the Buk convoy heading east toward Russia, not west from Russia, the JIT had to map out a journey that ignored a simple, direct and discreet route from the Russian border to Snizhne in favor of a trip more than twice as long roaming around eastern Ukraine all the way to Donetsk before turning eastward past a number of heavily populated areas where the Buk convoy, supposedly on a highly secret mission, could be photographed.

The alleged firing location also conflicts with the alleged reason for the Russians taking the extraordinary risk of introducing a Buk system – that it was needed to defend rebel soldiers then fighting mostly in the north against Ukrainian troops and aircraft. For that purpose, the positioning of a Buk battery far to the southeast makes little sense, nor does the decision for a Russian Buk crew to shoot down a commercial airliner flying at 33,000 feet.

JIT's account of the post-crash exfiltration of the Buk convoy back to Russia also is curious, since again the shortest, easiest and least populated route was ignored in favor of one that went far to the north past Luhansk, the alleged site of the supposed "getaway" video (although the supposed location of the "getaway" video was misplaced by Western media groups trying to pin the blame on Russia).

The confirmed parts of the Buk convoy's route, i.e., along highways east of Donetsk, would fit better with a scenario that, I'm told, received serious consideration from U.S. intelligence analysts, that a Ukrainian Buk system under the control of a rogue military unit loyal to a fiercely anti-Putin oligarch



traveled east into what was considered “rebel-controlled territory” to fire on what was hoped to be Putin’s official plane returning from a state visit to South America, i.e. to kill Putin.

A source briefed by these analysts said the missile was fired despite the unit’s doubt that the plane was Putin’s. Although it’s unclear to me exactly what the U.S. intelligence consensus ultimately turned out to be on MH-17 (since I have been refused official updates), there would be logic in a Ukrainian hardliner staging such an audacious missile attack deep inside “rebel territory,” since any assassination of Putin would have to be explained as an accidental attack by his own allies, i.e., the ultimate case of Putin being hoisted on his own petard.

To evaluate which scenario makes more sense – that the Russians dispatched a Buk missile battery on a wild ride across eastern Ukraine or that a Ukrainian Buk battery penetrated into supposedly rebel-controlled territory with the intent of attacking a civilian plane (although not MH-17) – it would be crucial to have an explanation of where the Ukrainian Buk batteries were located on July 17, 2014.

### **Silence on Dutch Intelligence**

Some of the Russia-did-it crowd have dismissed claims that Ukrainian Buk systems were in the area as Russian disinformation, but their presence was confirmed by a report from the Dutch intelligence service, MIVD, relying on NATO information to explain why commercial airliners were still being allowed over the war zone.

The MIVD’s explanation was that the only anti-aircraft missiles that could hit a plane at 33,000 feet were controlled by Ukraine, which was presumed to have no interest in attacking commercial aircraft, and that the rebels lacked any missile system that could reach that high. Clearly, there was an intelligence failure because either some Ukrainian Buk operators did have an intent to strike a civilian plane or the rebels did have a Buk system in the area.

If the JIT were operating objectively, it would have included something about this intelligence failure, either by showing that it had investigated the possibility that Ukrainian Buk missiles were used by a rogue unit or explaining how Western intelligence could have missed Russia’s introduction of a Buk system into eastern Ukraine.

Instead, there was just this video that includes cryptic phone intercepts, assertions about unnamed witnesses and computer-generated graphics “showing” the movement of a Russian Buk convoy along darkened roads in Ukraine.

Despite the unusual nature of this “indictment,” it was widely accepted in Western media as the final proof of Russian perfidy. The evidence was called

“overwhelming” and “conclusive.”

Rather than treating the video report as a prosecutor’s brief – a set of allegations yet to be proved – Western journalists accepted it as flat fact, much as they did Secretary of State Colin Powell’s similar presentation on Feb. 5, 2003, “proving” that Iraq was hiding weapons of mass destruction. (Powell also used computer-generated images – of Iraq’s “mobile chemical weapons labs” that, in reality, didn’t exist.)

The day after the JIT video report was issued, The New York Times’ lead editorial was headlined, “Mr. Putin’s Outlaw State.” It read:

“President Vladimir Putin is fast turning Russia into an outlaw nation. As one of five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, his country shares a special responsibility to uphold international law. Yet, his behavior in Ukraine and Syria violates not only the rules intended to promote peace instead of conflict, but also common human decency.

“This bitter truth was driven home twice on Wednesday [Sept. 28]. An investigative team led by the Netherlands concluded that the surface-to-air missile system that shot down a Malaysia Airlines plane over Ukraine in July 2014, killing 298 on board, was sent from Russia to Russian-backed separatists and returned to Russia the same night. ...

“Russia has tried hard to pin the blame for the airline crash on Ukraine. But the new report, produced by prosecutors from the Netherlands, Australia, Belgium, Malaysia and Ukraine, confirms earlier findings. It uses strict standards of evidence and meticulously documents not only the deployment of the Russian missile system that caused the disaster but also Moscow’s continuing cover-up. ...

“President Obama has long refused to approve direct military intervention in Syria. And Mr. Putin may be assuming that Mr. Obama is unlikely to confront Russia in his final months and with an American election season in full swing. But with the rebel stronghold in Aleppo under threat of falling to the government, administration officials said that such a response is again under consideration.

“Mr. Putin fancies himself a man on a mission to restore Russia to greatness. Russia could indeed be a great force for good. Yet his unconscionable behavior – butchering civilians in Syria and Ukraine, annexing Crimea, computer-hacking American government agencies, crushing dissent at home – suggests that the furthest thing from his mind is becoming a constructive partner in the search for peace.”

## **Rich Irony**

Granted, there is some rich irony in a major U.S. newspaper, which helped justify illegal aggression against Iraq with false reporting about Iraq buying aluminum tubes for nuclear centrifuges, pontificating about international law.

Indeed, the very idea that any serious person in the United States would lecture other countries about international law would be laughable if the hypocrisy were not delivered in such a serious set of circumstances. For decades now, the United States has been a law unto itself, deciding which countries should be bombed and who should be assassinated.

President Obama himself has acknowledged authorizing military strikes in seven countries during his presidency and many of those attacks were done outside international law. Indeed, the Times editorial appears to urge Obama to launch illegal military strikes against the Syrian government and, not surprisingly, doesn't mention the U.S. airstrike that killed some 62 Syrian government soldiers just last month, delivering a death blow to the partial ceasefire.

Instead, you get a medley of the Times' greatest anti-Russian propaganda hits while ignoring the U.S. role in destabilizing and overthrowing Ukraine's elected government in favor of a harshly anti-Russian nationalist regime that then began slaughtering thousands of ethnic Russians who resisted the coup.

Nor does the Times mention that Russia is operating inside Syria by invitation of the sovereign government, while the U.S. has no such authority. And the Times leaves out how the U.S. government and its allies have covertly armed and funded jihadist rebels who have inflicted many of the hundreds of thousands of dead in Syria. Not everyone, including Syrian soldiers, was killed by Assad and the Russians, although that's the impression the Times leaves.

A more nuanced account would reflect this murky reality in which sophisticated U.S. weapons, such as TOW missiles, have ended up in the possession of Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate and its jihadist allies. It would acknowledge that many sides are at fault for these tragedies in Syria and Ukraine – not to mention all the bloodshed that has followed the U.S.-led and U.S.-enabled wars that have torn apart the Middle East over the past decade and a half.

The Times might also admit that Putin was helpful in resolving the 2013 sarin crisis in Syria and achieving a breakthrough on the Iran nuclear talks in 2014. But that would not fit the propaganda need to demonize Putin and ready the American people for another, even more terrifying "regime change," this time in Moscow.

What we can now expect are a series of legal actions brought against Russia in

connection with the MH-17 case and other controversies. The goal will be to further demonize Putin and to destabilize Russia, a process already underway with economic sanctions that have helped throw Russia's economy into recession.

The neocon plan is to ratchet up tensions and pain so Putin's elected government will somehow collapse with the neocons hoping that some U.S. lackey will take over and allow another round of "shock therapy," i.e. the plunder of Russia's resources to the benefit of a few favored oligarchs and their American consultants.

However, given the dreadful experience that the average Russian faced from the earlier round of "shock therapy" in the 1990s – including a stunning decline in life expectancy – the more likely outcome from even a successful neocon scheme of "regime change" would be the emergence of a much more hard-line Russian nationalist than Putin.

Whereas Putin is a calculating and rational leader, the guy who follows him might well be an ideologue ready to use nuclear weapons to protect Mother Russia's honor. After all, it's not as if one of these neocon "regime change" calculations has ever gone wrong before.

Yet, whichever way things go, Official Washington – and its complicit mainstream media – now appear determined to push Russia into a corner with military encroachments from NATO on Russia's borders and with criminal accusations before biased international "investigations." Any misstep in this dangerous game could quickly end life as we know it.

**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).**

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## Forced Migration vs. 'Chain Migration'

Neoliberal economic policies have created a system of forced migration for many people but the Trump team is planning to ramp-up its assault on immigrants and those who advocate for migrants rights, activist Nativo Lopez explained to Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

On January 17, Kevin De Leon, California's Senate President Pro Tempore stated "Immigration and Customs Enforcement is reportedly amassing agents from across the United States as it prepares to launch the most aggressive deportation raids under the Trump Administration in northern California in the coming weeks."

According to Senator De Leon, Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen "is exploring pressing criminal charges against state and local officials who implement 'sanctuary' policies. "The Department of Homeland Security has even admitted they are considering a move to arrest political leaders such as myself," De Leon continued, " who have led the charge in California to prevent the feds from commandeering state and local resources to tear hard working families apart. These extraordinary threats against the President's political opponents are meant to intimidate us, designed to silence and subjugate us. But they will do the opposite."

Indeed, an army of immigrants right supporters, in the form of lawyers, human rights and local community activist, and concerned politicians are now mobilizing from one end of the state to the other to fight back.

I spoke about the significance of the ICE threats and the grassroots uprising in response, with Nativio Lopez. Lopez is a longtime advocate for the undocumented Spanish-speaking communities in Southern California, and a spokesperson for Hermandad Mexicana, a social, cultural and political organization based in Los Angeles. I spoke to Lopez in Los Angeles on January 30.

**Dennis Bernstein:** In terms of deportations, Obama still holds the record as Deporter and Chief, but Trump seems to be pulling out all the stops now.

**Nativio Lopez:** Well, it is almost like "back to the future" with this administration. We saw the most devastating deportation numbers under the Obama administration and now we are seeing much of the same. Actually the numbers are lower compared to the first two years of the Obama administration. But Trump is continuing the work of terrorizing immigrants and the communities they are a part of. Immigrants are the target but working class communities are really feeling the effects of the repressive measures initiated by this administration.

It has targeted California because it has declared itself a sanctuary state. The government of California, including the attorney general, will now be tested as to what their interpretation is of the term "sanctuary."

**DB:** Of course, Obama earned the title "Deporter in Chief," but Trump now takes it to the next level because he is not afraid to talk in terms of ethnic cleansing.

**NL:** When he makes references to El Salvador, Haiti, and the continent of Africa,

these are the same communities who now live within the US. The proposal that he is now making on immigration, supposedly to save the day for the Dreamers, is to legalize the status of 1.8 million but at the same time eliminate the ability to legally bring family members to the United States.

Despite all this talk about “illegal immigration” over the years, the underlying motive of these xenophobes has always been to reduce legal immigration to the United States from Latin American and Asian Pacific countries. They are intent on preserving their idea of a white America by reducing the ability of nationalized immigrants to bring family members to the United States.

**DB:** What is your understanding of the right-wing term “chain immigration”?

**NL:** They are talking from both sides of their mouths. They say people should wait in line and do it legally, and yet we see they are really trying to reduce legal immigration to the country.

Under current law, legal immigrants to this country have the right to immigrate their parents, their siblings, their spouse and any children they have who were born outside the United States. What they are trying to do is eliminate in Congress the ability of a legal immigrant to immigrate his or her parents or siblings. This would reduce by half the number of immigrants who legally come to the United States.

This has happened under both Republican and Democratic administrations. The majority of undocumented immigrants in the United States today are undocumented because of a migration law that was passed in 1978 during the Carter administration which eliminated the right of US citizens to immediately immigrate their parents until the US citizen reached the age of twenty-one.

I myself fought against that legislation because I knew that it would immediately create a balloon of undocumented parents in the United States.

After massive resistance and lobbying, we were able to get legislation in 1986, during the time of the Reagan administration, that allowed parents to legalize their status because they had been in the country so long. They were able to obtain legal permanent status.

**DB:** Instead of chain migration, maybe we should be talking about forced migration.

**NL:** When we talk about defending immigrants against deportation, we should talk about the right to not immigrate to the United States. What forces so many to immigrate here? Extreme poverty, the inability to obtain employment at a decent wage, social violence, drug cartel violence. This is what is forcing migration to the United States.

Certainly the free trade agreements in Mexico and Central America contributed to the mass emigration from those countries. In Mexico alone, over the course of the NAFTA years from 1994 to the present day, four to five million small farm owners have been thrown off their lands and forced to migrate to America because agribusiness, both in Mexico and the United States, gobbled up those lands and forced production to meet the agricultural needs of the United States. Prior to 1994, Mexico was self-sufficient in its domestic corn production. Today it imports from the United States between 40 and 60 percent of its corn. So those are the push factors that bring migrants to the United States.

I laugh when I hear the former president of Mexico, Vicente Fox, criticize the Trump administration. When Fox was president, he did absolutely nothing to defend those Mexicans who were forced to come to the United States, and he was actually a purveyor of privatization of the petroleum industry to serve the interests of US multinational corporations.

**DB:** I am looking at a press release from Kevin de Leon's office, where he writes that "The Department of Homeland Security has even admitted that they are considering a move to arrest political leaders such as myself who have led the charge in California to prevent the feds from commandeering state and local resources to tear hard-working families apart."

**NL:** There is such a thing as state sovereignty and a state's ability to pass laws to protect its residents. At the end of the day, the governor, the president pro tempore, the Latino caucus and other progressive caucuses, the California attorney general—all of them will be tested in the next several days if, in fact, Homeland Security launches the kind of massive detention and deportation that they are threatening against California.

**DB:** We know that every day about 122 Dreamers are losing their DACA status and are faced with uncertainty about their future. We have seen the Democrats collapse on this issue. Do you expect anything at the federal level?

**NL:** I really don't. It is possible that the Democrats cave in and give Trump the \$20 billion he wants to build the wall. It looks like he is going to use the Dreamers as hostages to make good on his campaign promise. Our recommendation to the legislators is to not cave in but to fight back.

We want a clean bill, meaning that all DACA recipients should be allowed to obtain permanent resident status without having to concede anything related to the border wall and certainly anything related to the ability of legal residents to immigrate their family members.

There needs to be massive resistance. I know that in Northern California they

are talking about organizing a 100,000 person march in February. We need to do that throughout California. We need to resist in the courts, we need to resist in the streets.

Actually, a DACA permit holder stands a better chance of fighting deportation than a person who has nothing. Some argue that if we don't accept what Trump is offering, we will be putting in jeopardy 800,000 young people with DACA status.

The fact of the matter is that there is an injunction in place in the federal courts against the cancellation of the DACA program which is going to take months to work its way through the courts.

My personal and political recommendation is to fight for a clean bill and to throw these people out of Congress and out of the White House. If the complexion of Congress changes in November, that will make it extremely difficult for the administration to move forward with its plans for massive deportation.

**Dennis J. Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at [www.flashpoints.net](http://www.flashpoints.net).**

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