

America's Renegade Warfare

Exclusive: Claiming the right to launch preemptive wars and fighting an ill-defined "global war on terror," the U.S. government has slaughtered vast numbers of civilians in defiance of international law, says Nicolas J S Davies.

By Nicolas J S Davies

Seventy-seven million people in North and South Korea find themselves directly in the line of fire from the threat of a Second Korean War. The rest of the world is recoiling in horror from the scale of civilian casualties such a war would cause and the unthinkable prospect that either side might actually use nuclear weapons.

Since the first Korean War killed at least 20 percent of North Korea's population and left the country in ruins, the U.S. has repeatedly failed to follow through on diplomacy to establish a lasting peace in Korea and has instead kept reverting to illegal and terrifying threats of war. Most significantly, the U.S. has waged a relentless propaganda campaign to discount North Korea's legitimate defense concerns as it confronts the threat of a U.S. war machine that has only grown more dangerous since the last time it destroyed North Korea.

The North has lived under this threat for 65 years and has watched Iraq and Libya destroyed after they gave up their nuclear weapons programs. When North Korea discovered a U.S. plan for a Second Korean War on South Korea's military computer network in September 2016, its leaders quite rationally concluded that a viable nuclear deterrent is the only way to guarantee their country's safety.

What does it say about the role the U.S. is playing in the world that the only way North Korea's leaders believe they can keep their own people safe is to develop weapons that could kill millions of Americans?

The Changing Face of War

The Second World War was the deadliest war ever fought, with at least 75 million people killed, about five times as many as in the First World War. When the slaughter ended in 1945, world leaders signed the United Nations Charter to try to ensure that that scale of mass killing and destruction would never happen again. The U.N. Charter is still in force, and it explicitly prohibits the threat or use of military force by any nation.

It was not just the scale of the slaughter that shocked the world's leaders into that brief moment of sanity in 1945. It was also the identities of the

dead. Two-thirds of the people killed in the Second World War were civilians, a drastic change from the First World War, only a few decades earlier, when an estimated 86 percent of the people killed were uniformed combatants. The use of nuclear weapons by the United States raised the specter that future wars could kill an exponentially greater numbers of civilians, or even end human civilization altogether.

War had become "total war," no longer fought only on battlefields between soldiers, but between entire societies with ordinary people, their homes and their lives now on the front line. In the Second World War:

–Fleets of warplanes deliberately bombed cities to "dehouse" civilian populations, as British officials described their own bombing of Germany. "As I write this," George Orwell wrote from London in 1941, "Highly civilized human beings are flying overhead, trying to kill me."

–Submarines sank hundreds of merchant ships in an effort to starve their enemies into submission. General Carter Clarke, who was in charge of interpreting Japanese intelligence for President Truman, said in a 1959 interview that Japan surrendered because it faced mass starvation due to the sinking of its merchant shipping, not because of the gratuitous U.S. nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It was estimated that 7 million more civilians would die of starvation if Japan fought on until 1946.

–Genocidal mass extermination campaigns killed civilians based only on their political affiliation or ethnicity. Under cross-examination by a young American prosecutor, Benjamin Ferencz, SS Gruppenfuhrer Dr. Otto Ohlendorf explained patiently to a courtroom in Nuremberg why he found it necessary for the "preemptive defense" of Germany to order the killing of hundreds of thousands of civilians. He explained that even children had to be killed to prevent them too becoming enemies of Germany when they grew up and found out what happened to their parents.

Despite the U.N. Charter and international efforts to prevent war, people in countries afflicted by war today still face the kind of total war that horrified world leaders in 1945. The main victims of total war in our "modern" world have been civilians in countries far removed from the safe havens of power and privilege where their fates are debated and decided: Yugoslavia; Afghanistan; Iraq; Somalia; Pakistan; Yemen; Libya; Syria; Ukraine. There has been no legal or political accountability for the mass destruction of their cities, their homes or their lives. Total war has not been prevented, or even punished, just externalized.

But thanks to billions of dollars invested in military propaganda and public

relations and the corrupt nature of for-profit media systems, citizens of the countries responsible for the killing of millions of their fellow human beings live in near-total ignorance of the mass killing carried out in their name in these “red zones” around the world.

People in ever-spreading war zones are living under the very conditions of total war that the world recoiled from at the end of the Second World War. Like Orwell in London in 1941, they hear highly civilized human beings flying overhead trying to kill them, human beings who know nothing about them beyond the name of the city where they live and its strategic value in wars that offer them, the victims, nothing but death or destitution.

In the case of drones, the human beings trying to kill them from the other side of the world are so highly civilized that they can hop into cars and drive home to have dinner with their families at the end of their shifts, while another “team member” efficiently takes over the “joy-stick” and carries on killing.

People in Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Libya have been subjected to hunger and starvation under sieges and naval blockades that are as brutally effective as German and American submarines were in World War Two. Millions of people in Yemen face an imminent danger of starvation under the U.S.-backed naval blockade and Saudi and Emirati bombing of Yemeni ports.

In retaliation for one missile fired at Riyadh, the Saudi capital, last week, the U.S.-backed coalition completely closed all Yemen’s ports, tightening the blockade on millions of starving people. The requirements of necessity and proportionality, which have been basic principles of customary international law since the Nineteenth Century, lie buried in the graveyards of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Is the U.S. Guilty of Genocide?

The U.S. military occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq quickly adopted “divide and rule” strategies that targeted Pashtuns in Afghanistan and Sunni Arabs in Iraq. When I pointed this out to a friend who teaches military history in 2005, he asked only, “How else can you do it?” I reminded him that “you” don’t have to “do it” at all.

U.S. and allied forces in Iraq have killed at least 10-15 percent of Iraq’s Sunni Arabs and displaced about half of them. Sunni Arabs have been relentlessly targeted for detention, torture and summary execution since 2004, when ex-Drug Enforcement Administration intelligence chief Steven Casteel, retired Colonel James Steele and a CIA team reportedly based on the eighth floor of the Iraqi Interior Ministry recruited, trained and equipped “Special Police”

death squads to conduct a reign of terror that tortured and killed tens of thousands of men and boys in Baghdad and elsewhere.

After training by James Steele's Special Police Training Teams, each Iraqi Special Police unit worked closely with a U.S. Special Police Transition Team (SPTT), and their operations were commanded and controlled from a high-tech command center staffed by U.S. and Iraqi personnel. An SPTT assigned to the notorious Wolf Brigade in Baghdad was from the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, the "Nightstalkers," who usually provide helicopter transport for U.S. special operations but in this case appear to have used their helicopters mainly to fly detainees to their deaths.

After the exposure of their Al Jadiriyah torture prison in November 2005, the Special Police were rebranded as the National Police (and the Wolf Brigade, incongruously, as the Freedom Brigade). But their torture and killing raged on, under cover of an official narrative of "sectarian violence" which scrupulously ignored the command and control of these forces by the Iraqi Interior Ministry, the CIA and the U.S. military.

At the peak of this campaign in July-October 2006, supported by the U.S. Operations Together Forward I & II, National Police death squads flooded the main morgue in Baghdad with up to 1,600 bodies per month. Thousands more Iraqis were killed and buried elsewhere or just disappeared, while 2 million people were displaced inside Iraq and another 2 million fled the country.

This ethnic cleansing campaign has continued under the U.S.-backed Shiite government and has kept driving Sunni Arab Iraqis into armed resistance groups, of which Islamic State is only the latest, creating pretexts for endless violence against them. Kurdish military intelligence reports have estimated that 40,000 civilians were killed in the recent U.S.-led assault on Mosul, by tens of thousands of bombs and missiles dropped by U.S. and "coalition" warplanes, U.S. Marine 220-lb HiMARS rockets and U.S., French and Iraqi heavy artillery. This is still only an estimate, and the true number of civilians killed in Mosul was probably higher.

From 2004 on, the ethnic cleansing of Iraq's Sunni Arabs has been a deliberate, calculated element of the U.S.'s "divide and rule" policy in Iraq, with the "intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group." That is the legal definition of genocide in Article II of the 1948 Genocide Convention. The working title of my book about the U.S. invasion and destruction of Iraq was *From Aggression to Genocide*.

As for the killing of "enemy" children, President Obama justified the murder of 16-year-old American Abdulrahman al-Awlaki in Yemen in October 2011, two weeks

after the assassination of his father, the Yemeni-American preacher Anwar al-Awlaki. In one of Donald Trump's first acts as president, he authorized a U.S. special operations attack that killed Abdulrahman's 8-year old sister Nawar and other family members in January 2017 – after Trump, on the campaign trail, had vowed to kill the families of suspected terrorists.

Benjamin Ferencz, the by then 81-year-old American lawyer who prosecuted SS Gruppenfuhrer Ohlendorf and his accomplices at Nuremberg, was interviewed by NPR eight days after the mass murders of Sept. 11, 2001.

"It is never a legitimate response to punish people who are not responsible for the wrong done," Ferencz insisted. "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 approve of what has happened... I say to the skeptics, 'Follow your procedure and you will see what happens.' ... We will have more fanatics and more zealots deciding to come and kill the evil, the United States."

But in the courtroom of American politics, hopelessly corrupted by the CIA's politicized intelligence and manufactured crises and the "unwarranted influence" of the Military Industrial Complex, our leaders chose Ohlendorf's logic over Ferencz's. Neither the millions of people killed in 16 years of war, nor its legacy of ruin and chaos in country after country, nor the utter failure of the "war on terror" on its own terms have led to any change in this illegitimate, criminal and, in the case of Sunni Arabs in Iraq, genocidal U.S. policy.

The Geneva Conventions

As well as the unfulfilled promise of peace in the U.N. Charter, the post-World War II effort to prevent the future mass slaughter of civilians led to a major revision of the Geneva Conventions in 1949. That included a brand new convention, the Fourth Geneva Convention, dedicated entirely to the protection of civilians in wartime or under military occupation.

Two additional protocols were added to the Geneva Conventions in 1977, to adapt them to the changing nature of war and to provide even greater protections to civilians. The First Additional Protocol has been signed and ratified by 174 countries and the Second by 168 countries. The United States has not ratified either of the Additional Protocols, but it is legally bound by them because treaties that have been ratified by large majorities of countries automatically become part of customary international law, which is universally binding.

To mark the 50th anniversary of the 1949 Conventions in 1999, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) conducted a survey of 17,000 people in 17

countries to see how well people around the world understood “the rules and limits of what is permissible in war” under the Geneva Conventions. The study was titled *People on War – Civilians in the Line of Fire*.

The 17 countries surveyed included 12 where wars had recently been fought, four of the permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, and Switzerland, where the ICRC is based. The introduction to the *People on War* report noted that 90 percent of the people killed in recent wars were civilians and that, in today’s world, “war is war on civilians.” But the report went on:

“...the more these conflicts have degenerated into wars on civilians, the more people have reacted by reaffirming the norms, traditions, conventions and rules that seek to create a barrier between those who carry arms into battle and the civilian population... Large majorities in every war-torn country reject attacks on civilians in general and a wide range of actions that by design or default could harm the innocent.”

People interviewed in Switzerland and the four Security Council permanent member countries were asked to choose between a firm statement that armed forces “must attack only other combatants and leave civilians alone,” and a weaker statement that, “combatants should avoid civilians as much as possible.” About three-quarters of respondents in the U.K., Russia, France and Switzerland chose the first statement, which correctly summarizes the rules of the Fourth Geneva Convention, while 26 percent in the U.K. and 16-17 percent in Russia, France and Switzerland chose the weaker one.

When it came to the United States, though, a very different pattern emerged. Only 52 percent of Americans understood that attacking civilians is strictly prohibited, while 42 percent chose the weaker option, twice as many as in the other four countries. The ICRC report noted that, “Across a wide range of questions, in fact, American attitudes towards attacks on civilians were much more lax.”

The survey also asked whether it is lawful to attack “enemy combatants in populated villages or towns in order to weaken the enemy, knowing that many civilians would be killed.” Once again, while only 20-29 percent of people in the other four countries thought this was allowed, that increased to 38 percent among Americans. Since 1999, this question has arisen again and again across America’s war zones, most recently in the U.S.-led massacres of Iraqi and Syrian civilians in Mosul and Raqqa.

During the U.S. occupation of Iraq, U.N. human rights reports repeatedly reminded U.S. officials of their duty as an occupying power to protect civilians, and notified them that U.S. military operations in civilian areas

were routinely violating international humanitarian law. John Pace, who headed the U.N. Assistance Mission to Iraq during the U.S. occupation, compared U.S. efforts to police Iraq by military force to “trying to swat a fly with a bomb,” a fitting metaphor for the entire “war on terror.”

The *People on War* survey also found large discrepancies in attitudes to the Geneva Conventions themselves. In countries that had recently experienced war, only 28 percent of people agreed with a statement that the Conventions “make no real difference” to the brutality of war. But in the U.S. (57 percent) and U.K. (55 percent), twice as many people agreed with that statement.

U.S. War Crimes

We could speculate on why Americans are so exceptionally “lax” in their attitudes toward protecting civilians in wartime. But in practice, the real-world impact of these exceptional attitudes could be overcome if Americans who joined the armed forces received serious training in their responsibilities under the Fourth Geneva Convention. Tragically, they do not.

U.S. military recruits receive only a 50-minute class on the laws of war, focused mainly on the Third Geneva Convention and the rights of POWs, and a refresher of the same 50-minute class before deployment. A retired JAG officer who taught law of war classes and veterans who have sat through them have all told me that the Fourth Geneva Convention and the rights of civilians as “protected persons” were barely mentioned, if at all.

The lax attitude of Americans toward the killing of civilians and the poor training of U.S. troops in their responsibilities under the Geneva Conventions have combined to make invasion and occupation by *American* forces especially deadly, dangerous and terrifying for civilians in Afghanistan, Iraq and wherever U.S. forces are deployed.

In practice, U.S. forces operate under much lower standards than those of the Geneva Conventions, and civilians whose countries have fallen prey to U.S. aggression do not enjoy the protections guaranteed to them under the laws of war. As I wrote in an article in 2016, this is a classic case of the “normalization of deviance,” a sociological term for the way that powerful institutions like the U.S. military tend to develop weaker, looser norms of conduct than the formal or legal rules that officially apply to them.

Illegal U.S. rules of engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan have included: systematic, theater-wide use of torture; orders to “dead-check” or kill wounded enemy combatants; orders to “kill all military-age males” during certain operations; and “weapons-free” zones that mirror Vietnam-era “free-fire”

zones. A U.S. Marine corporal told a court martial prosecuting one of his men for “dead-checking” a wounded Iraqi civilian that “Marines consider all Iraqi men part of the insurgency,” nullifying the critical distinction between combatants and civilians that is the very basis of the Fourth Geneva Convention.

When junior officers or enlisted troops have been charged with war crimes against civilians, they have often been exonerated or given light sentences because courts martial have found that they were acting on orders from more senior officers. But the senior officers implicated in these crimes have been allowed to testify in secret or not to appear in court at all, and have almost never been charged.

To make matters even worse for civilians in Iraq, U.S. military and civilian officials, including Secretary of State Colin Powell, misled the troops they sent to kill and die in Iraq with lies about shadowy connections between the people of Iraq and the young Saudis who committed the crimes of September 11th. In 2006, three years into the war, a Zogby poll of U.S. troops in Iraq found that 85 percent of them still believed that their mission in Iraq was to “retaliate for Saddam’s role in the 9/11 attacks.”

A million Iraqis have paid with their lives for these American lies and the war crimes they have served to justify, while the U.S. officials involved are still walking free, and in many cases still climbing the twisted ladder of success inside the U.S. Military Industrial Complex. Colonel Jeffrey Buchanan, who headed a Special Police Transition Team in Iraq at the time of the exposure of the Al Jadiriyah torture prison in 2005, has been promoted to the rank of Lieutenant General and is currently in charge of hurricane relief to Puerto Rico.

A New Body of Research

After 16 years of ever-spreading and intractable war, a significant body of research is finally emerging to clarify who exactly the U.S. is fighting in its ever-expanding war zones and what drives civilians to join armed groups like the Taliban, Al Qaeda or Islamic State.

In the looking-glass world of U.S. propaganda, U.S. forces are “fighting them there” so that we don’t have to “fight them here.” But researchers are learning that, like the Iraqis who rose up to resist the illegal U.S. invasion and occupation of their country, most of the people joining armed groups across Africa and the Middle East are only fighting at all because U.S. and allied forces are “fighting them there,” in their countries, cities, villages and homes.

Researchers have interviewed people who have joined armed resistance groups in countries across the world to ask them about what drove them to join an armed group and take part in guerrilla warfare or terrorism. In 2015, the Center for Civilians in Conflict published the results of interviews with 250 people who joined armed groups in Bosnia, Somalia, Gaza and Libya in a report titled, *The People's Perspective: Civilian Involvement in Armed Conflict*. One of its main findings was that, "The most common motivation for involvement, described by interviewees in all four case studies, was the protection of self or family."

If most of the people fighting U.S. forces and their allies across the world, from Niger to Ukraine to the Philippines, are just trying to defend themselves and their families against our "counterterrorism" operations, that turns the whole basis of the U.S. "war on terror" on its head. The most effective way to reduce violence and terrorism would obviously be to stop putting them in such an intolerable position in the first place.

Also in 2015, Lydia Wilson, a researcher for the Center for the Resolution of Intractable Conflict at Oxford University, was allowed to interview a number of captured Islamic State fighters in Kirkuk, Iraq. Wilson's fellow researchers included retired U.S. Major General Doug Stone, who managed U.S. military prisons in Iraq during the U.S. occupation and did some of the first serious Western research into the motivations of Iraqi resistance fighters.

It was hard for Wilson to find captured Islamic State fighters to interview, because Kurdish and U.S.-backed Iraqi government forces summarily execute Islamic State fighters that they capture. But the police in Kirkuk were at least putting prisoners on trial before killing them, so Wilson got permission from the police chief to talk to some prisoners who were awaiting execution.

The first prisoner Lydia Wilson interviewed was captured, tried and sentenced to death for exploding at least four car-bombs and a scooter-bomb in Kirkuk. But his interview was not exceptional – Wilson found that his account of his motivations was repeated by every other prisoner. He explained that his first loyalty was to his wife and two children, and that he joined ISIS (as Islamic State is commonly known) to support his family. He told Wilson, "We need the war to be over, we need security, we are tired of so much war... all I want is to be with my family, my children."

At the end of the interview, Wilson asked the prisoner if he had any questions. By then he knew that General Stone, one of Wilson's colleagues, was ex-U.S. military, and, instead of asking a question, he just exploded in anger at him, "The Americans came. They took away Saddam but they also took away our security. I didn't like Saddam, we were starving then, but at least we didn't have war. When you came here, the civil war started."

General Stone was not surprised. This was the same outraged speech he had heard from nearly every prisoner since he started interviewing his own prisoners in Iraq in 2007, identifying the poisonous and blood-soaked legacy of the U.S. invasion and occupation as the driving force behind their actions.

Lydia Wilson summarized what she learned about the prisoners in Kirkuk in an article for *The Nation*: “They are children of the occupation, many with missing fathers at crucial periods (through jail, death by execution or fighting in the insurgency), filled with rage against America and their own government. They are not fueled by the idea of an Islamic caliphate without borders; rather, ISIS is the first group since the crushed Al Qaeda to offer these humiliated and enraged young men a way to defend their dignity, family and tribe. This is not radicalization to the ISIS way of life, but the promise of a way out of their insecure and undignified lives; the promise of living in pride as Iraqi Sunni Arabs, which is not just a religious identity, but cultural, tribal and land-based, too.”

The recent killing of four U.S. soldiers in Niger surprised many Americans, but the U.S. has 6,000 troops in 53 countries in Africa, so we should be ready to welcome home flag-draped coffins from seemingly random countries across the continent. But before our deluded leaders reduce the entire continent of Africa to a new U.S. “battlefield,” Americans should take note of a new report published by the U.N. Development Program (UNDP), titled *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment*.

This report is based on 500 interviews with militants from across Africa. As its title suggests, the interviewers questioned the militants specifically about the “tipping point” that decided each of them to actually join an armed group such as Boko Haram, Al-Shabab or Al Qaeda. By far the largest number (71 percent) said that some kind of “government action,” such as “killing of a family member or friend” or “arrest of a family member or friend,” was the final straw that pushed them over the red line from civilian life to guerrilla war. By contrast, religious ideology was generally not a decisive factor in that decision.

The report concluded, “State security-actor conduct is revealed as a prominent accelerator of recruitment, rather than the reverse.” In its section on “Policy Implications,” it added, “The *Journey to Extremism* research provides startling new evidence of just how directly counter-productive security-driven responses can be when conducted insensitively.”

Across the world, it is obvious, and now well-documented, that U.S. aggression and militarism are causing the very problems they claim to be trying to solve. By design or default, U.S. policy is confusing cause and effect to justify military operations that turn civilians into combatants, fueling an

ever-escalating, ever-spreading cycle of increasingly global violence and chaos.

As the world confronts critical problems and demands on its resources, from climate change to poverty and inequality, it can no longer afford to follow the pied piper of American “leadership” that leads only to war and chaos.

U.S. leaders often raise the specter of “appeasement” to guilt-trip reluctant allies into supporting U.S.-led wars. But maybe it is time for world leaders to recognize that the real appeasement they have been engaged in is the appeasement of the United States, by actively or tacitly encouraging it in an illegal policy of militarism and serial aggression that is spreading violence and chaos across the world.

Surely the real lesson of the 1930s and the Second World War, now reinforced by the experience of the past 20 years, is that it is not enough to simply sign treaties that prohibit aggression and war crimes. The world must be ready to actually enforce the prohibition against the threat or use of military force in customary international law, the 1928 Kellogg Brand Pact and the U.N. Charter – by uniting peacefully and diplomatically to stand up to U.S. aggression and militarism before they lead to a cataclysmic total war that will kill tens or even hundreds of millions of civilians, in Korea or somewhere else.

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The Ever-Expanding ‘War on Terror’

In the shadows, the U.S. special operations war on “terrorists” keeps on expanding around the globe, now reaching into Africa where few detectable American “interests” exist, writes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

If national-security reporters are ever replaced by robots writing boilerplate stories, blame it on the fact that U.S. military policy has become so predictable and repetitive.

Consider this *New York Times* [story](#) from 2011:

“The Central Intelligence Agency is building a secret air base in the Middle

East to serve as a launching pad for strikes in Yemen using armed drones. . . . The construction of the base is a sign that the Obama administration is planning an extended war in Yemen against an affiliate of Al Qaeda. . . . The clandestine American operations in Yemen are currently being run by the military's Joint Special Operations Command."

Back then, the story could just as well have been set in South Asia, where Pakistan was also a major target of CIA and military drone strikes. Today it could apply, with only a few word changes, to new drone bases in Africa that target jihadists across the vast and thinly populated Sahel region.

As NBC recently reported, "The Trump administration is paving the way for lethal strikes against terrorists in Niger as the U.S. military pushes forward with a plan to arm the Reaper drones that fly over that country."

That push was prompted by the recent killing of four Americans soldiers who were supporting a secret Joint Special Operations Command mission. NBC reported that their death "is fueling an urgency within the Trump administration to take more aggressive steps against the terrorist groups that are operating in North and West Africa, according to intelligence and military officials."

It's not clear whether the Trump administration even knows what terrorist groups to target. Numerous armed bands operate in the vast desert region, where ethnic and tribal disputes are rife.

Nor is it clear what critical U.S. interests are at stake. Take a look at a map of Africa and see if you can identify anything that most Americans would find worth fighting over within a one-thousand-mile radius of Niger.

The Action-Reaction Cycle

Nonetheless, the Trump administration's response is the latest predictable move in the action-reaction cycle we have seen so many times since 9/11: Washington sends troops to the Middle East, South Asia or Africa to wage war against terrorists. The terrorists kill some of the Americans, so Washington sends even more troops, drones and bombers.

In the process, invariably, some civilians die. More terrorists are born. Soon the United States is building more far-flung bases and waging war in yet another country, without explicit congressional authorization.

As a military strategy, this bipartisan strategy has been a dismal failure. At a cost of several trillion dollars, U.S. military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq and other countries have succeeded only in growing the numbers of terrorists and insurgents and widening their geographic footprint.

In Yemen, for example, drone strikes and Joint Special Operations Command missions in late 2009 and early 2010 killed dozens of civilians, fueling recruitment of local Al Qaeda ranks.

After one such attack with cluster munitions killed 35 women and children in 2009, Princeton University's Gregory Johnsen called the Obama administration's strategy "incredibly dangerous" because it would draw new support to radical jihadists – as indeed it did. Four years later, another U.S. attack wiped out a wedding procession, causing nationwide outrage.

Yet the Trump administration has dramatically increased the pace of drone strikes and other military operations in Yemen, including a botched raid in January that killed "scores of civilians" and one U.S. commando.

More Terror in Somalia

President Obama insisted in 2014 that the "strategy of taking out terrorists who threaten us, while supporting partners on the front lines, is one that we have successfully pursued in Yemen and Somalia for years."

That rosy assessment would come as news not only to the people of Yemen, who have seen Al Qaeda thrive since the United States and Saudi Arabia expanded that country's war, but also in Somalia. The East African country recently suffered the worst terror attack in its history – a truck bomb that killed more than 300 people in the center of Mogadishu.

That attack, according to news reports, may have avenged a "botched U.S.-led operation" against al-Shabaab insurgents in August, which killed ten civilians, including three children.

Few Americans are aware of the scope of U.S. military operations in Somalia, where Washington is fighting one of its many undeclared wars. American drone strikes may have killed as many as 510 people in the country since 2007, according to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, which tracks death and injury reports.

In addition, the Pentagon has sharply increased the number of U.S. soldiers in the country, from 50 or so early this year to more than 400 today.

On March 30, President Trump declared Somalia an "area of active hostilities," giving the Pentagon authority to conduct air strikes without interagency vetting to minimize civilian casualties. The decision was quickly followed by a wave of suicide attacks by al-Shabaab against Somali government forces.

Niger Is Next

The head of the U.S. Africa Command has called Somalia “our most perplexing challenge,” but Niger surely ranks high on the list. Its contingent of 800 U.S. soldiers is one of the largest of several dozen low-profile U.S. military deployments on the continent.

The proposed expansion of drone strikes to that nation “would amount to a significant escalation in American counterterrorism operations,” according to NBC. To date, drones flown by the United States out of a base in Niger have been used only in Libya and Somalia. The base was approved by the Obama administration in 2014 to target “emerging” terrorist threats in the Sahel.

Donald Trump, who long ago forgot his promise to pull back from costly military interventions abroad, is doubling down on Obama’s strategy. “The war is morphing,” said Trump’s close confidant Sen. Lindsey Graham, a senior Republican member of the Armed Services Committee. “You’re going to see more actions in Africa, not less.”

The United States already has hundreds of soldiers stationed in neighboring Cameroon, as well as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Central African Republic, Uganda, South Sudan and other nations – some 6,000 troops in all of Africa.

Nick Turse, author of *Tomorrow’s Battlefield: U.S. Proxy Wars and Secret Ops in Africa*, reports that the U.S. military now conducts an average of nearly 3,500 missions per year on the continent, an “explosive” increase of 1,900 percent since the U.S. Africa Command was created in 2008.

Beware of a Backlash

“The huge increase in U.S. military missions in Africa over the past few years represents nothing less than a shadow war being waged on the continent,” said William Hartung, director of the Arms and Security Project at the Center for International Policy.

“This military-heavy policy,” Hartung warned, “risks drawing the United States more deeply into local and regional conflicts in Africa and generating a backlash that could actually aid terrorist organizations in their recruitment.”

The most authoritative new study of the sources of terrorism and insurgency on the continent, *Journey to Extremism in Africa* (September 2017), finds that what triggers many individuals to join violent groups are incidents of government-sponsored violence, such as “killing of a family member or friend” or “arrest of a family member or friend.”

“These findings throw into stark relief the question of how counter-terrorism

and wider security functions of governments in at-risk environments conduct themselves with regard to human rights and due process,” concludes the report, based on interviews with more than 500 former members of militant organizations.

“State security-actor conduct is revealed as a prominent accelerator of recruitment, rather than the reverse. . . . These findings suggest that a dramatic reappraisal of state security-focused interventions is urgently required.”

Numerous other experts have drawn similar conclusions from conflict zones in the Middle East and Asia. In 2008, a RAND Corporation report on *Lessons for Countering al-Qa’ida* warned the U.S. military to “resist being drawn into combat operations in Muslim societies, since its presence is likely to increase terrorist recruitment. . . . Military force usually has the opposite effect from what is intended: It is often overused, alienates the local population by its heavy-handed nature, and provides a window of opportunity for terrorist-group recruitment.”

Similarly, the *Stimson Task Force on U.S. Drone Policy*, composed of former senior officials of the CIA, Defense Department and State Department, warned in 2014 that U.S. strikes had strengthened radical Islamic groups in the Middle East, Africa and South Asia.

Among other drawbacks, it declared that “civilian casualties, even if relatively few, can anger whole communities, increase anti-US sentiment and become a potent recruiting tool for terrorist organizations. Even strikes that kill only terrorist operatives can cause great resentment, particularly in contexts in which terrorist recruiting efforts rely on tribal loyalties or on an economically desperate population.”

These findings seem fully applicable to Niger, where “The growing foreign military footprint in the country appears to have fed a local backlash against both the government and Western countries,” according to the Congressional Research Service.

Since the killing of the U.S. soldiers, Niger authorities have made things worse, rounding up village leaders and ordering thousands of people to evacuate the area where the Americans were ambushed in order to escalate the war on local militants.

The outcome will, of course, be the exact opposite of what Washington intends. As University of Kent professor Yvan Guichaoua said, “Targeting these groups is the best way to make their leaders heroes, foster unity in jihadi ranks, and inflame communal violence. All policymakers working in the area know well the highly inflammable nature of the situation.”

Unfortunately, the Trump administration has almost no one “working in the area.” President Trump only got around to announcing his intent to nominate an ambassador to Niger on September 2. The administration has deployed only five ambassadors to a continent of 54 countries and has not yet appointed a senior policymaker for Africa in the State Department.

Africa is suffering from a host of maladies, including ineffectual and corrupt governance, severe climate change, crumbling infrastructure and technological backwardness – as well as civil wars and insurgencies. The United Nations just warned that the continent needs 11 million more doctors, nurses and teachers to prevent a “social and economic disaster” by 2030.

Trying to address these complex ailments through increased U.S. armed intervention will simply aggravate the problem, as it has in so many other parts of the world. That should be the real lesson we take from the tragic failure of the recent U.S. military mission in Niger, and from the broader tragedy of our post-9/11 response to terrorism abroad.

Jonathan Marshall, an independent journalist and scholar, is author or co-author of five books related to national security or international relations, including The Lebanese Connection: Corruption, Civil War, and the International Drug Traffic (Stanford University Press, 2012). [This article originally appeared at <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-lose-special-operations-war-africa-23160> Reprinted with author’s permission.]

Mocking Trump Doesn’t Prove Russia’s Guilt

Exclusive: President Trump is getting mocked for “trusting” Vladimir Putin’s denial about “meddling” in U.S. politics – and not accepting Official Washington’s groupthink – but ridicule isn’t evidence, writes ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

If the bloody debacle in Iraq should have taught Americans anything, it is that endorsements by lots of important people who think something is true don’t amount to evidence that it actually is true. If endorsements were the same as

evidence, U.S. troops would have found tons of WMD in Iraq, rather than come up empty.

So, when it comes to whether or not Russia “hacked” Democratic emails last year and slipped them to WikiLeaks, just because a bunch of people with fancy titles think the Russians are guilty doesn’t compensate for the lack of evidence so far evinced to support this core charge.

But the reaction of Official Washington and the U.S. mainstream media to President Trump saying that Russian President Vladimir Putin seemed sincere in denying Russian “meddling” was sputtering outrage: How could Trump doubt what so many important people think is true?

Yet, if the case were all that strong that Russia did “hack” the emails, you would have expected a straightforward explication of the evidence rather than a demonstration of a full-blown groupthink, but what we got this weekend was all groupthink and no evidence.

For instance, on Saturday, CNN responded to Trump’s comment that Putin seems to “mean it” when he denied meddling by running a list of important Americans who had endorsed the Russian-guilt verdict. Other U.S. news outlets and politicians followed the same pattern.

Rep. Adam Schiff of California, the ranking Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee and a big promoter of the Russia-gate allegations, scoffed at what Trump said: “You believe a foreign adversary over your own intelligence agencies?”

The Washington Post’s headline sitting atop Sunday’s lede article read: “Trump says Putin sincere in denial of Russian meddling: Critics call that ‘unconscionable.’”

Sen. Mark Warner of Virginia, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee and another Russia-gate sparkplug, said he was left “completely speechless” by Trump’s willingness to take Putin’s word “over the conclusions of our own combined intelligence community.”

Which gets us back to the Jan. 6 “Intelligence Community Assessment” and its stunning lack of evidence in support of its Russian guilty verdict. The ICA even admitted as much, that it wasn’t asserting Russian guilt as fact but rather as opinion:

“Judgments are not intended to imply that we have proof that shows something to be a fact. Assessments are based on collected information, which is often incomplete or fragmentary, as well as logic, argumentation, and precedents.”

Even The New York Times, which has led the media groupthink on Russian guilt, initially published the surprised reaction from correspondent Scott Shane who wrote: “What is missing from the public report is what many Americans most eagerly anticipated: hard evidence to back up the agencies’ claims that the Russian government engineered the election attack. ... Instead, the message from the agencies essentially amounts to ‘trust us.’”

In other words, the ICA was not a disposition of fact; it was guesswork, possibly understandable guesswork, but guesswork nonetheless. And guesswork should be open to debate.

Shutting Down Debate

But the debate was shut down earlier this year by the oft-repeated claim that all 17 U.S. intelligence agencies concurred in the assessment and how could anyone question what all 17 intelligence agencies concluded!

However, that canard was finally knocked down by President Obama’s own Director of National Intelligence James Clapper who acknowledged in sworn congressional testimony that the ICA was the product of “handpicked” analysts from only three agencies – the CIA, FBI and National Security Agency.

In other words, not only did the full intelligence community not participate in the ICA but only analysts “handpicked” by Obama’s intelligence chiefs conducted the analysis – and as we intelligence veterans know well, if you handpick the analysts, you are handpicking the conclusions.

For instance, put a group of analysts known for their hardline views on Russia in a room for a few weeks, prevent analysts with dissenting viewpoints from weighing in, don’t require any actual evidence, and you are pretty sure to get the Russia-bashing result that you wanted.

So why do you think Clapper and Obama’s CIA Director John Brennan put up the no-entry sign that kept out analysts from the State Department and Defense Intelligence Agency, two entities that might have significant insights into Russian intentions? By all rights, they should have been included. But, clearly, no dissenting footnotes or wider-perspective views were desired.

If you remember back to the Iraq WMD intelligence estimate, analysts from the State Department’s intelligence bureau, known as INR, offered unwelcome dissenting views about the pace of Iraq’s supposed nuclear program, inserting a footnote saying they found it too difficult to predict the fruition of a program when there was no reliable evidence as to when – not to mention if – it had started.

DIA also was demonstrating an unusually independent streak, displaying a willingness to give due consideration to Russia's perspective. Here's the heterodox line DIA took in a major report published in December 2015:

"The Kremlin is convinced the United States is laying the groundwork for regime change in Russia, a conviction further reinforced by the events in Ukraine. Moscow views the United States as the critical driver behind the crisis in Ukraine and the Arab Spring and believes that the overthrow of former Ukrainian President Yanukovich is the latest move in a long-established pattern of U.S.-orchestrated regime change efforts."

So, not only did the Jan. 6 report exclude input from INR and DIA and the other dozen or so intelligence agencies but it even avoided a fully diverse set of opinions from inside the CIA, FBI and NSA. The assessment – or guesswork – came only from those "hand-picked" analysts.

It's also worth noting that not only does Putin deny that Russia was behind the publication of the Democratic emails but so too does WikiLeaks editor Julian Assange who has insisted repeatedly that the material did not come from the Russians. He and others around WikiLeaks have strongly suggested that the emails came as leaks from Democratic insiders.

Seeking Real Answers

In the face of Official Washington's evidence-free groupthink, what some of us former U.S. intelligence analysts have been trying to do is provide both a fuller understanding of Russian behavior and whatever scientific analysis can be applied to the alleged "hacks."

Forensic investigations and testing of relevant download speeds, reported by members of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS), have undermined the Russia-did-it groupthink. But this attempt to engage in actual evaluation of evidence has been either ignored or mocked by mainstream news outlets.

Still, the suggestion in our July 24 VIPS memo that President Trump ask current CIA Director Mike Pompeo to take a fresh look at the issue recently had some consequence when Pompeo contacted VIPS member William Binney, a former NSA Technical Director, and invited him to explain his latest research on the impossibility of the Russians extracting the Democratic emails via an Internet hack based on known download speeds.

In typically candid terms, Binney explained to Pompeo why VIPS had concluded that the intelligence analysts behind the Jan. 6 report had been making stuff up about Russian "hacking."

When news of the Binney-Pompeo meeting broke last week, the U.S. mainstream media again rejected the opportunity to rethink the Russia-did-it groupthink and instead treated Binney as some sort of “conspiracy theorist” with a “disputed” theory, while attacking Pompeo’s willingness to discuss Binney’s findings as “politicizing intelligence.”

Despite the smearing of Binney, President Trump appears to have taken some of this new evidence to heart, explaining his dispute with open-mouthed White House reporters on Air Force One who baited Trump with various forms of the same question: “Do you believe Putin?” amid the new jeering about Trump “getting played” by Putin.

Trump’s demeanor, however, suggested increased confidence that the Russian “hacking” allegations were the “witch hunt” that he has decried for months.

Trump also jabbed the press over its earlier false claims that “all 17 intelligence agencies” concurred on the Russian “hack.” And Trump introduced the idea of a different kind of “hack,” i.e., Obama’s political appointees at the heads of the agencies behind the Jan. 6 report.

Trump said, “You hear it’s 17 agencies. Well it’s three. And one is Brennan ... give me a break. They’re political hacks. ... I mean, you have Brennan, you have Clapper, you have [FBI Director James] Comey. Comey is proven to be a liar and he’s proven to be a leaker.”

Later, in deference to those still at work in intelligence, Trump said, “I’m with our [intelligence] agencies as currently constituted.”

While Trump surely has a dismal record of his own regarding truth-telling, he’s not wrong about the checkered record of the triumvirate of Clapper, Brennan and Comey.

Clapper played a key role in the bogus Iraq-WMD intelligence when he was head of the National Geo-spatial Agency and hid the fact that there was *zero* evidence in satellite imagery of any weapons of mass destruction before the Iraq invasion. When no WMDs were found, Clapper told the media that he thought they were shipped off to Syria.

In 2013, Clapper perjured himself before Congress by denying NSA’s unconstitutional blanket surveillance of Americans. After evidence emerged revealing the falsity of Clapper’s testimony, he wrote a letter to Congress admitting, “My response was clearly erroneous – for which I apologize.” Despite the deception, he was allowed to stay as Obama’s most senior intelligence officer for almost four more years.

Clapper also has demonstrated an ugly bias about Russians. On May 28, as a former DNI, Clapper explained Russian “interference” in the U.S. election to NBC’s Chuck Todd on May 28 with a tutorial on what everyone should know about “the historical practices of the Russians.” Clapper said, “the Russians, typically, are almost genetically driven to co-opt, penetrate, gain favor, whatever, which is a typical Russian technique.”

Brennan, who had previously defended torture as having been an effective way to gain intelligence, was CIA director when agency operatives broke into the computers of the Senate Intelligence Committee when it was investigating CIA torture.

Former FBI Director Comey is infamous for letting the Democratic National Committee arrange its own investigation of the “hacking” that was then blamed on Russia, a development that led some members of Congress to call the supposed “hack” an “act of war.” Despite the risk of nuclear conflagration, the FBI didn’t bother to do its own forensics.

And, by his own admission, Comey arranged a leak to The New York Times that was specifically designed to get a Special Prosecutor appointed to investigate Russia-gate, a job that fell to his old friend Robert Mueller, who has had his own mixed record as the previous FBI director in mishandling the 9/11 investigation.

There are plenty of reasons to want Trump out of the White House, but there also should be respect for facts and due process. So far, the powers-that-be in Washington – in politics, the media and other dominant institutions, what some call the Deep State – have shown little regard for fairness in the Russia-gate “scandal.”

The goal seems to be to remove the President or at least emasculate him on a bum rap, giving him the bum’s rush, so to speak, while also further demonizing Russia and exacerbating an already dangerous New Cold War.

The truth should still count for something. No one’s character should be assassinated, as Bill Binney’s is being now, for running afoul of the conventional wisdom that Trump – like bête noire Putin – never tells the truth, and that to believe either is, well, “unconscionable,” as The Washington Post warns.

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Did Al Qaeda Dupe Trump on Syrian Attack?

Special Report: Buried deep inside a new U.N. report is evidence that could exonerate the Syrian government in the April 4 sarin atrocity and make President Trump look like an Al Qaeda dupe, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

A new United Nations-sponsored report on the April 4 sarin incident in an Al Qaeda-controlled town in Syria blames Bashar al-Assad's government for the atrocity, but the report contains evidence deep inside its "Annex II" that would prove Assad's innocence.

If you read that far, you would find that more than 100 victims of sarin exposure were taken to several area hospitals *before* the alleged Syrian warplane could have struck the town of Khan Sheikhoun.

Still, the Joint Investigative Mechanism [JIM], a joint project of the U.N. and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons [OPCW], brushed aside this startling evidence and delivered the Assad guilty verdict that the United States and its allies wanted.

The JIM consigned the evidence of a staged atrocity, in which Al Qaeda operatives would have used sarin to kill innocent civilians and pin the blame on Assad, to a spot 14 pages into the report's Annex II. The sensitivity of this evidence of a staged "attack" is heightened by the fact that President Trump rushed to judgment and ordered a "retaliatory" strike with 59 Tomahawk missiles on a Syrian airbase on the night of April 6-7. That U.S. attack reportedly killed several soldiers at the base and nine civilians, including four children, in nearby neighborhoods.

So, if it becomes clear that Al Qaeda tricked President Trump not only would he be responsible for violating international law and killing innocent people, but he and virtually the entire Western political establishment along with the major news media would look like Al Qaeda's "useful idiots."

Currently, the West and its mainstream media are lambasting the Russians for not accepting the JIM's "assessment," which blames Assad for the sarin attack. Russia is also taking flak for questioning continuation of the JIM's mandate. There has been virtually no mainstream skepticism about the JIM's report and almost no mention in the mainstream of the hospital-timing discrepancy.

Timing Troubles

To establish when the supposed sarin attack occurred on April 4, the JIM report relied on witnesses in the Al Qaeda-controlled town and a curious video showing three plumes of smoke but no airplanes. Based on the video's metadata, the JIM said the scene was recorded between 0642 and 0652 hours. The JIM thus puts the timing of the sarin release at between 0630 and 0700 hours.

But the first admissions of victims to area hospitals began as early as 0600 hours, the JIM found, meaning that these victims could not have been poisoned by the alleged aerial bombing (even if the airstrike really did occur).

According to the report's Annex II, "The admission times of the records range between 0600 and 1600 hours." And these early cases – arriving *before* the alleged airstrike – were not isolated ones.

"Analysis of the ... medical records revealed that in 57 cases, patients were admitted in five hospitals before the incident in Khan Shaykhun," Annex II said.

Plus, this timing discrepancy was not limited to a few hospitals in and around Khan Sheikhouh, but was recorded as well at hospitals that were scattered across the area and included one hospital that would have taken an hour or so to reach.

Annex II stated: "In 10 such cases, patients appear to have been admitted to a hospital 125 km away from Khan Shaykhun at 0700 hours while another 42 patients appear to have been admitted to a hospital 30 km away at 0700 hours."

In other words, more than 100 patients would appear to have been exposed to sarin *before* the alleged Syrian warplane could have dropped the alleged bomb and the victims could be evacuated, a finding that alone would have destroyed the JIM's case against the Syrian government.

But the JIM seemed more interested in burying this evidence of Al Qaeda staging the incident – and killing some expendable civilians – than in following up this timing problem.

"The [JIM] did not investigate these discrepancies and cannot determine whether they are linked to any possible staging scenario, or to poor record-keeping in chaotic conditions," the report said. But the proffered excuse about poor record-keeping would have to apply to multiple hospitals over a wide area all falsely recording the arrival time of more than 100 patients.

The video of the plumes of smoke also has come under skepticism from Theodore Postol, a weapons expert at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who noted that none of the three plumes matched up with damage to buildings (as viewed

from satellite images) that would have resulted from aerial bombs of that power. Postol's finding suggests that the smoke could have been another part of a staging event rather than debris kicked up by aerial bombs.

The JIM also could find no conclusive evidence that a Syrian warplane was over Khan Sheikhoun at the time of the video although the report claims that a plane could have come within about 5 kilometers of the town.

A History of Deception

Perhaps even more significantly, the JIM report ignored the context of the April 4 case and the past history of Al Qaeda's Nusra Front staging chemical weapons attacks with the goal of foisting blame on the Syrian government and tricking the U.S. military into an intervention on the side of Nusra and its Islamic-militant allies.

On April 4, there was a strong motive for Al Qaeda and its regional allies to mount a staged event. Just days earlier, President Trump's administration had shocked the Syrian rebels and their backers by declaring "regime change" was no longer the U.S. goal in Syria.

So, Al Qaeda and its regional enablers were frantic to reverse Trump's decision, which was accomplished by his emotional reaction to videos on cable news showing children and other civilians suffering and dying in Khan Sheikhoun.

On the night of April 6-7, before any thorough investigation could be conducted, Trump ordered 59 Tomahawk missiles fired at the Syrian air base that supposedly had launched the sarin attack.

At the time, I was told by an intelligence source that at least some CIA analysts believed that the sarin incident indeed had been staged with sarin possibly flown in by drone from a Saudi-Israeli special operations base in Jordan.

This source said the on-the-ground staging for the incident had been hasty because of the surprise announcement that the Trump administration was no longer seeking regime change in Damascus. The haste led to some sloppiness in tying down all the necessary details to pin the atrocity on Assad, the source said.

But the few slip-ups, such as the apparent failure to coordinate the timing of the hospital admissions to *after* the purported airstrike, didn't deter the JIM investigators from backing the West's desire to blame Assad and also create another attack line against the Russians.

Similarly, other U.N.-connected investigators downplayed earlier evidence that

Al Qaeda's Nusra was staging chemical weapons incidents after President Obama laid down his "red line" on chemical weapons. The militants apparently hoped that the U.S. military would take out the Syrian military and pave the way for an Al Qaeda victory.

For instance, U.N. investigators learned from a number of townspeople of Al-Tamanah about how the rebels and allied "activists" staged a chlorine gas attack on the night of April 29-30, 2014, and then sold the false story to a credulous Western media and, initially, to a U.N. investigative team.

"Seven witnesses stated that frequent alerts [about an imminent chlorine weapons attack by the government] had been issued, but in fact no incidents with chemicals took place," the U.N. report said. "While people sought safety after the warnings, their homes were looted and rumours spread that the events were being staged. ... [T]hey [these witnesses] had come forward to contest the widespread false media reports."

Dubious Evidence

Other people, who did allege that there had been a government chemical attack on Al-Tamanah, provided suspect evidence, including data from questionable sources, according to the report.

The report said, "Three witnesses, who did not give any description of the incident on 29-30 April 2014, provided material of unknown source. One witness had second-hand knowledge of two of the five incidents in Al-Tamanah, but did not remember the exact dates. Later that witness provided a USB-stick with information of unknown origin, which was saved in separate folders according to the dates of all the five incidents mentioned by the FFM [the U.N.'s Fact-Finding Mission]."

"Another witness provided the dates of all five incidents reading it from a piece of paper, but did not provide any testimony on the incident on 29-30 April 2014. The latter also provided a video titled 'site where second barrel containing toxic chlorine gas was dropped tamanaa 30 April 14'"

Some other witnesses alleging a Syrian government attack offered curious claims about detecting the chlorine-infused "barrel bombs" based on how the device sounded in its descent.

The U.N. report said, "The eyewitness, who stated to have been on the roof, said to have heard a helicopter and the 'very loud' sound of a falling barrel. Some interviewees had referred to a distinct whistling sound of barrels that contain chlorine as they fall. The witness statement could not be corroborated with any further information."

However, the claim itself is absurd since it is inconceivable that anyone could detect a chlorine canister inside a “barrel bomb” by “a distinct whistling sound.”

The larger point, however, is that the jihadist rebels in Al-Tamanah and their propaganda teams, including relief workers and activists, appear to have organized a coordinated effort at deception complete with a fake video supplied to U.N. investigators and Western media outlets.

For instance, the Telegraph in London reported that “Videos allegedly taken in Al-Tamanah ... purport to show the impact sites of two chemical bombs. Activists said that one person had been killed and another 70 injured.”

The Telegraph quoted supposed weapons expert Eliot Higgins, the founder of Bellingcat and a senior fellow at the fiercely anti-Russian Atlantic Council, as endorsing the Al-Tamanah claims.

“Witnesses have consistently reported the use of helicopters to drop the chemical barrel bombs used,” said Higgins. “As it stands, around a dozen chemical barrel bomb attacks have been alleged in that region in the last three weeks.”

The Al-Tamanah debunking in the U.N. report received no mainstream media attention when the U.N. findings were issued in September 2016 because the U.N. report relied on rebel information to blame two other alleged chlorine attacks on the government and that got all the coverage. But the case should have raised red flags given the extent of the apparent deception.

If the seven townspeople were telling the truth, that would mean that the rebels and their allies issued fake attack warnings, produced propaganda videos to fool the West, and prepped “witnesses” with “evidence” to deceive investigators. Yet, no alarms went off about other rebel claims.

The Ghouta Incident

A more famous attack – with sarin gas on the Damascus suburb of Ghouta on Aug. 21, 2013, killing hundreds – was also eagerly blamed on the Assad regime, as The New York Times, Human Rights Watch, Higgins’s Bellingcat and many other Western outlets jumped to that conclusion despite the unlikely circumstances. Assad had just welcomed U.N. investigators to Damascus to examine chemical attacks that he was blaming on the rebels.

Assad also was facing the “red line” threat from President Obama warning him of possible U.S. military intervention if the Syrian government deployed chemical weapons. Why Assad and his military would choose such a moment to launch a

deadly sarin attack outside Damascus, killing mostly civilians, made little sense.

But this became another rush to judgment in the West that brought the Obama administration to the verge of launching a devastating air attack on the Syrian military that might have helped Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate and/or the Islamic State win the war.

Eventually, however, the case blaming Assad for the 2013 sarin attack collapsed.

An analysis by genuine weapons experts – such as Theodore Postol, an MIT professor of science, technology and national security policy, and Richard M. Lloyd, an analyst at the military contractor Tesla Laboratories – found that the missile that delivered the sarin had a very short range placing its likely firing position in rebel territory.

Later, reporting by journalist Seymour Hersh implicated Turkish intelligence working with jihadist rebels as the likely source of the sarin.

We also learned in 2016 that a message from the U.S. intelligence community had warned Obama how weak the evidence against Assad was. There was no “slam-dunk” proof, said Director of National Intelligence James Clapper. And Obama cited his rejection of the Washington militaristic “playbook” to bomb Syria as one of his proudest moments as President.

With this background, there should have been extreme skepticism when jihadists and their allies made new claims about the Syrian government engaging in chemical weapons attacks. But there wasn't.

The broader context for these biased investigations is that U.N. and OPCW investigators have been under intense pressure to confirm accusations against Syria and other targeted states.

Right now, the West is blaming Russia for the collapsing consensus behind U.N. investigations, but the problem really comes from Washington's longtime strategy of coercing U.N. organizations into becoming propaganda arms for U.S. geopolitical strategies.

The U.N.'s relative independence in its investigative efforts was decisively broken early this century when President George W. Bush's administration purged U.N. agencies that were not onboard with U.S. hegemony, especially on interventions in the Middle East.

Through manipulation of funding and selection of key staff members, the Bush administration engineered the takeover or at least the neutralizing of one U.N.-

affiliated organization after another.

For instance, in 2002, Bush's Deputy Under-Secretary of State John Bolton spearheaded the takeover of the OPCW as Bush planned to cite chemical weapons as a principal excuse for invading Iraq.

OPCW Director General Jose Mauricio Bustani was viewed as an obstacle because he was pressing Iraq to accept OPCW's conventions for eliminating chemical weapons, which could have undermined Bush's WMD rationale for war.

Though Bustani was just reelected to a new term, the Brazilian diplomat was forced out, to be followed in that job by more pliable bureaucrats, including the current Director General Ahmet Uzumcu of Turkey, who not only comes from a NATO country but served as Turkey's ambassador to NATO and to Israel. [For details, see Consortiumnews.com's "[U.N. Enablers of 'Aggressive War.'](#)"]

Since those days of the Iraq invasion, the game hasn't changed. U.S. and other Western officials expect the U.N. and related agencies to accept or at least not object to Washington's geopolitical interventions.

The only difference now is that Russia, one of the five veto-wielding members of the Security Council, is saying enough is enough – and Russia's opposition to these biased inquiries is emerging as one more dangerous hot spot in the New Cold War.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).

Trump and Democrats Misread Mandates

Exclusive: Neither the Democrats nor President Trump learned the right lessons from the 2016 election, leaving the nation divided at home and bogged down in wars abroad, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

One year ago, the American electorate delivered a confused but shocking result, the election of Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton, a quirky outcome in the Electoral College that put Trump in the White House even though Clinton got three million more votes nationally. But neither party appears to have absorbed

the right lessons from that surprise ending.

The Democrats might have taken away from their defeat the warning that they had forgotten how to speak to the white working class, which had suffered from job losses via “free trade” and felt willfully neglected as Democrats looked toward the “browning of America.”

The choice of Clinton had compounded this problem because she came across as elitist and uncaring toward this still important voting bloc with her memorable description of half of Trump’s voters as “deplorables,” an insult that stung many lower-income whites and helped deliver Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin to Trump.

For more than a decade, some Democratic strategists had promoted the notion that “demography is destiny,” i.e., that the relative growth of Latino, Asian and African-American populations in comparison to whites would ensure a future Democratic majority. That prediction seemed to have been validated by Barack Obama’s winning coalition in 2008 and 2012, but it also had the predictable effect of alienating many whites who felt disrespected and resentful.

So, while the Democrats and Clinton looked to a multicultural future, Trump used his experience in reality TV to communicate with this overlooked demographic group. Trump sold himself as a populist and treated the white working class with respect. He spoke to their fears about economic decline and gave voice to their grievances. He vowed to put “America First” and pull back from foreign military adventures that often used working-class kids as cannon fodder.

But much of Trump’s message, like the real-estate mogul himself, was phony. He really didn’t have policies that would address the needs of working-class Americans. Still, his promises of a massive infrastructure plan, good health-care for all, and rejection of unfair trade deals rang the right bells with enough voters to flip some traditionally Democratic blue-collar states to Republican red.

Staying Blind

You might have thought that the Democrats would respond to Trump’s shocking victory, which also left Republicans in charge of Congress and most statehouses around the country, by launching an apologetic listening tour to reconnect with working-class whites.

There also might have been a clear-eyed evaluation of the weaknesses of the Democratic presidential nominee who came to personify the corrupt insider-culture of Official Washington, exploiting government service for financial gain by raking in millions of dollars for speeches to Wall Street and other special

interests.

Clinton also offended many peace voters because of her support for aggressive war, both as a U.S. senator backing the disastrous invasion of Iraq and as Secretary of State pushing for U.S. military interventions in Libya and Syria. Her apology for voting for the Iraq War came across as opportunistic and insincere, and her undisguised delight over Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi's grisly murder ("We came; we saw; he died!") seemed ghoulish.

And, whether fairly or not, many Americans were turned off by the Democratic Party's emphasis on "identity politics," the assumption that people would vote based on their gender, race or sexual orientation, rather than on bread-and-butter policies and war-or-peace issues.

In other words, the Democratic Party could have looked in the mirror and seen what many Americans found unappealing about the modern version of a party that had done so much to build the country, from the New Deal during the Great Depression through the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, and taking a leading role in addressing environmental, health-care and other national challenges.

But today's Democrats instead chose to blame their plight largely on Russia and its alleged "meddling" in U.S. politics, a strategy that not only made little sense – given the many other reasons why voters turned away from Clinton and her party – but delivered a message to white working-class voters who had gone over to Trump that they were "stupid" and had been "duped."

Whatever one thinks about white working-class voters who favored Trump, calling people gullible is not an effective way to woo back a voting bloc that already feels insulted and alienated.

Missing a Chance

So, when Trump was sworn in last Jan. 20, the ball was largely in his court. He could have focused on rebuilding America's infrastructure; or he could have proposed a serious plan for improving access to health care; or he could have moved pragmatically to resolve a host of international conflicts that President Obama had left behind.

Instead, President Trump squandered his first days in office by getting into absurd arguments about his inaugural crowd size compared to Obama's and denying that Clinton had won the national popular vote. His "alternative facts" made him a laughingstock.

Last spring, when I spoke with a group of Trump voters in West Virginia, they were still faithful to their choice – and wanted Washington to give him a chance

– but they already were complaining about Trump’s personal outbursts on Twitter; they wanted him to concentrate on their real needs, not his petty squabbles.

But Trump wasn’t listening. He couldn’t kick his Twitter habit. He kept putting his giant ego in the way.

As his presidency stumbled forward, Trump also brushed aside suggestions that he reverse his image as a person who had no regard for facts by declassifying information about the conflicts in Syria, Ukraine and elsewhere – to reveal situations where Obama and his team played propaganda games, rather than tell the truth.

And, lacking sufficient knowledge about the world, Trump failed when presented with sophisticated plans for reshaping U.S. policies in the Middle East to become less dependent on Israel and Saudi Arabia. Instead, Trump jumped into the arms of Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Saudi King Salman.

Pandering to Israeli-Saudi desires – and trying to show how tough he was – Trump fired off 59 Tomahawk missiles at Syria over a dubious chemical-weapons incident; threatened more Mideast strife against Iran; and escalated the 16-year-old war in Afghanistan.

Plus, he blustered about war against North Korea and personally insulted the country’s leader, Kim Jong Un, as “little rocket man.” Rather than rein in neoconservative aggression, he continued to unleash it.

When Trump did address domestic policy, he defined himself as basically just another right-wing Republican, supporting a health-care scheme that would have made matters worse for millions of Americans and backing a tax-cut plan that would mostly benefit the rich while blowing an even bigger hole in the deficit. All that red ink, in turn, drowned any hopes for investments in a modern infrastructure.

In other words, Trump exposed himself as the narcissistic incompetent that his critics said he was. He proved incapable of even acting presidential, let alone showing that he could use his power to make life better for average Americans. He was left with little to boast about beyond the economy that was bequeathed to him by Obama.

Republicans also had little to brag about, explaining why Ed Gillespie, the GOP’s gubernatorial nominee in Virginia in 2017, opted for ugly socially divisive attack ads as the best hope for defeating Democrat Ralph Northam, a Gillespie strategy called “Trumpism without Trump.”

But Gillespie’s approach backfired with a surprisingly strong turnout of

Virginia's voters putting Northam into the governor's mansion and almost erasing the solid Republican majority in the state legislature.

Trump was left to tweet about how the Virginia results, which were echoed in other states' elections on Tuesday, weren't a reflection on his own popularity, ignoring his unprecedentedly low approval ratings for a president nine months into his first term.

So, the new political question is whether Trump can belatedly learn from his failures and finally undertake some actions at home and abroad that actually serve the interests of the American people and the world. Or will he continue to bumble and stumble along?

A parallel question is whether the Democrats will misinterpret their strong showing on Tuesday as encouragement to continue ignoring their own political and institutional shortcomings – and to keep on using Russia to bash Trump. Neither side has shown much aptitude for learning.

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](#)).

The Politics of Sexual Harassment and War

The Harvey Weinstein scandal has forced the ugly practice of sexual harassment into the public square, where private companies have proven to be more responsive than the political world, reports David Marks.

By David Marks

The multiple sexual-harassment allegations against movie producer Harvey Weinstein have sent tremors around the world with newly expressed outrage toward the machismo atmosphere of the film industry and other work environments, including the news business and politics.

Clearly, the problem reaches far beyond Weinstein. Allegations and lawsuits filed against Donald Trump mirror the worst of Weinstein's behavior. Trump's hot-mic 2004 interview with "Access Hollywood" surfaced during last year's campaign, with him bragging about his ability to get away with aggressively

kissing women and grabbing their genitals: “When you’re a star, they let you do it. You can do anything. ... Grab ‘em by the pussy. You can do anything.”

But even that wasn’t enough to keep 63 million Americans from voting for Trump and putting him in the White House, although that was in part because many voters saw no moral superiority in Hillary Clinton, who not only disparaged women who complained about sexual harassment by her husband but who enthusiastically embraced war as a ready option for U.S. foreign policy.

Yet, while the political careers of Donald Trump and Bill Clinton survived disclosures of their predatory behavior, Weinstein’s movie empire quickly crumbled after a number of women came forward with accounts of how he used his power to gain sexual favors. Several prominent news personalities, from Bill O’Reilly at Fox to Michael Oreskes at NPR, have lost their jobs, too, amid other sexual harassment complaints.

Oddly, it seems that private industry is now more sensitive to allegations of this kind of sexual misconduct than the American political process, possibly because of the potential legal liabilities for companies as well as the organized partisan defenses that are immediately raised around the highest-level national leaders even when there’s clear evidence of their predatory behavior. While it’s true that some members of Congress have lost seats because of sexual misconduct, the situation has been different at the presidential level.

After Trump’s “grab ‘em by the pussy” boast became public, his Republican “base” rallied around him and prevented the expected collapse of his poll numbers. Similarly, in the 1990s, when Democratic presidential candidate (and later President) Bill Clinton was accused of predatory sexual activity with female subordinates and other vulnerable women, loyal Democrats sprang to his defense and challenged the veracity of the accusers. The Clinton team complained about “cash for trash.”

‘David Cop-a-Feel’

Even earlier, rumors about President George H.W. Bush’s extramarital activities and a fondness for groping unsuspecting women were brushed aside as yellow journalism that should not be taken seriously about so honorable a man. Only recently – in the wake of the Weinstein scandal and more women denouncing boorish male behavior – was Bush pushed into apologizing for inappropriately grabbing women as the punch line to a joke about who his favorite magician is: “David Cop-a-Feel!”

It seems that the most powerful leaders, both in industry and government, are often the most aggressive predators; both on a personal level and with how they

affect the social fabric of the country through their professional actions. There are parallels between the pattern of sexual harassment, in which the historical tendency was for women to stay silent, and the U.S. government's military assaults abroad, which most Americans tolerate as somehow necessary or inevitable.

President George W. Bush inflicted "shock and awe" on Iraq, touching off the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and the destabilization of the entire region yet he is now treated as a respected elder statesman when he criticizes Trump's behavior. President Barack Obama authorized military operations in seven countries, including interventions in Libya and Syria that contributed to other humanitarian disasters, but Obama faced little public outrage among the American people for these actions.

President Trump appears to have learned from his predecessors that he can boost his sagging poll numbers by threatening and launching military strikes. He'll also win some grudging acceptance from the elites of Official Washington who never seem to see a potential war that they don't want to send the U.S. military to fight. In April, Trump got some brief relief from the Russia-gate "scandal" after he ordered the firing of 59 Tomahawk missiles at Syria in a hasty reaction to a dubious chemical weapons incident that he blamed on the Syrian government.

Trump played the tough-guy again on Sept. 19 with a bellicose speech to the United Nations General Assembly, threatening hostilities against North Korea, Iran, Cuba and Venezuela and boasting about his plan to escalate the 16-year-old war in Afghanistan. Despite America's recent history of aggressive war – not to mention historical crimes of genocide, slavery and imperialism – many Americans still profess how morally superior we are to other people.

Any American who dares challenge this "American exceptionalism" can expect to face ostracism much as women who complained about unwanted sexual advances by male bosses in years past could expect to be categorized as troublesome and unfit for professional advancement. That could be especially true in a highly subjective profession like acting.

Yet, whether it's Hollywood's "casting couch" or Official Washington's actions on the international "stage," it remains difficult to stop predatory behavior. When a culture of male dominance looms in every direction, it is a rare individual who will defy convention – even a morally bereft convention – and do what's right. That's especially true when the almost certain result will be loss of friends and loss of income. We have seen plenty of cases in which even women will make excuses for male misconduct, whether involving sex or war, as Hillary Clinton has shown.

But a culture that tolerates various forms of abusive and predatory behavior, whether it's silence amid a culture of sexual harassment or blind patriotism toward dubiously justified wars, has lost its moral compass. A democracy that in principle embraces the equality of all with everyone possessing unalienable rights, including life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, would have no tolerance for predators of any kind, whether at home, in the workplace or in warfare across the globe.

David Marks is a veteran documentary filmmaker and investigative reporter. His work includes films for the BBC, including *Nazi Gold*, on the role of Switzerland in WWII and biographies of Jimi Hendrix and Frank Sinatra.

Trump and the NAFTA Effect

President Trump has blamed NAFTA for eliminating manufacturing jobs for U.S. workers but it also caused economic dislocation in Mexico, driving some desperate Mexicans northward to the U.S., as Dennis J Bernstein reports.

By Dennis J Bernstein

During his campaign and his presidency, Donald Trump has threatened to withdraw from the North American Free Trade Agreement if Canada and Mexico refused to renegotiate a "much better deal."

"A Trump administration will renegotiate NAFTA," Candidate Trump declared at one campaign stop after another, "and if we don't get the deal we want, we will terminate NAFTA and get a much better deal for our workers and our companies; 100 percent."

But as with many issues, the reality of Trump often doesn't measure up to the rhetoric. I spoke to noted labor journalist and photographer David Bacon about the prospects for NAFTA and free trade under Trump, and the devastating impacts that such policies have had and will continue to have on workers and undocumented workers in particular.

Bacon's books include *The Right to Stay Home: How U.S. Policy Drives Mexican Migration*. I spoke to him on Nov. 1, 2017 for Flashpoints on Pacifica Radio.

Dennis Bernstein: During the campaign, Trump talked about getting rid of NAFTA. Where are we now in "free trade land"?

David Bacon: Trump promised that he would renegotiate NAFTA, but, after all,

Obama made the same promise when he was running for office. They were appealing for the votes of people who were hurt by the agreement here. NAFTA did have an enormous impact on working people in this country.

The Economic Policy Institute says that NAFTA cost the jobs of about 680,000 people in the US. The Department of Labor used to keep track of job losses because people who could show that they lost their job because it was moved to Mexico were entitled to get extended unemployment benefits. By the time Bush became president, that number had already reached about half a million people and Bush told the Department of Labor to stop counting because it was becoming politically embarrassing for all the politicians who had voted for the treaty.

There is no question that NAFTA did have an impact on people here and in many ways it led to a kind of displacement here that was similar to what we saw during the Depression, with people coming from the Dustbowl, but also what we are seeing with people coming here from Mexico.

Although the rhetoric of Trump and the Republican Party pits workers in this country against workers in Mexico—because we lost jobs, Mexicans must have gained those jobs—the reality is that Mexico lost many more jobs than they gained. But one of the things that did happen to people in this country is the migration of people internally in the United States.

When the Green Giant plant shut down here in Watsonville and moved operations to Mexico, a thousand immigrant Mexican women lost those jobs so that Green Giant could then pay women in Mexico one-tenth the wage to do the same work. Many of the women who lost their jobs had to go somewhere else to find work, the same way that people had to who lost their jobs in auto plants.

We also saw the same thing happen with people coming here from Mexico. About 3 million farmers in southern Mexico lost their jobs because of corn dumping by big US agricultural corporations like Archer Daniels Midland, and many of those people ended up coming here to the United States. One thing that progressive unions are trying to do is point out to people the similarity of experiences on either side of the border and that the only way to deal with the impact of treaties like NAFTA is by reaching across the border in solidarity. The idea that the Trump administration is going to force General Motors to bring jobs back to the United States is just ridiculous.

Dennis Bernstein: So Trump hasn't brought back thousands of jobs yet?

David Bacon: No, and he's not going to.

Dennis Bernstein: What has been the trend with NAFTA , where do you see this going?

David Bacon: Trade policies are very much bipartisan. NAFTA was negotiated under the [George HW] Bush administration, the Clinton administration pushed it through Congress, then we saw the Bush II administration follow the same policies. These are all trade policies designed to enhance the profits of corporations and that is not going to change. So long as both parties are serving those interests, nothing is going to change.

The only person in the political establishment who has had anything different to say is Bernie Sanders. He said that a corporation that was responsible for relocating jobs should not be entitled to bid on federal contracts. That would obviously have an enormous impact on a company like General Motors.

Dennis Bernstein: How does forced migration happen? In the corporate media it is portrayed as all these people wanting to get the good life in the United States. But this is not really going on.

David Bacon: Let's take the corn farmers in Mexico as an example. When NAFTA was passed it pulled down the barriers that had been in place to prevent US corporations from dumping produce in Mexico. So Cargill, Archer Daniels Midland and the Continental Grain Company took subsidies that Congress gave them in the Farm Bill and used them to subsidize their sale of corn in Mexico. They were selling corn at 19% below their own cost of production. They were trying to drive Mexican producers out of the market.

Remember that the cultivation of corn started in Oaxaca. The first domesticated corn was found in a cave outside Oaxaca City. So we owe the fact that we are able to eat corn at all to these communities.

Under NAFTA, 3 million farmers had to leave home and look for work elsewhere. They went to Mexico City, they became workers in *maquiladoras* [manufacturing operations], in the export farms in Baja, California, and here in the United States. The number of farm workers in California rose from about 20,000 to about 165,000 during the period of NAFTA. In fact, they have become an enormous part of the farm labor workforce all along the Pacific Coast.

In many ways, this is a very sad story. These communities were the ones who started corn cultivation. These are very stable communities going back many thousands of years. People don't get up and move for the fun of it. It takes the forces of survival to get people to leave.

Not all the consequences for us in the United States have been bad. For instance, workers coming from Oaxaca have been the source of a movement to organize farm workers. We now have a union of farmworkers in Washington state that was formed by workers from Oaxaca. Here in California at a blueberry farm

near Delano about 500 workers organized themselves into a union. The reason is that people are coming from communities with a very stable culture of mutual support.

A demographer named Rick Mines did a survey of indigenous farm workers in California and found that a third of workers he interviewed reported earning wages that were less than minimum wage. Clearly people are not happy about the situation and try to organize to change it.

So this massive movement of people as a result of NAFTA is also leading to a rebirth of union organizing among farm workers in California. But while this has had a very positive impact on working class life here, it has come at a terrible cost. The uprooting of communities of people forced people to make some terrible choices.

A friend of mine is a high school teacher in Oaxaca. He says that it is very difficult to stand up in front of his class and urge his students to get an education in Oaxaca when the students themselves have family members and friends working in the United States making more in real wages than he is making as a teacher.

This process of forced migration is robbing people of a future in the communities where they live. This has terrible consequences for these communities. There are towns in Oaxaca now where most of the working age population is living in the United States and the people who remain are surviving on the remittances being sent home by their family members here in California. That is not a very stable situation and doesn't promise much for the future.

That is what *The Right to Stay Home* is about. People in Oaxaca are saying that there is nothing wrong with migration but it should be a voluntary choice. The choice of whether to leave home and come to the United States should be voluntary, not something that is forced on people by hunger.

What has to change in order for that to happen? The trade agreements must be changed to eliminate the dumping that leads to forced migration. We need political change in both countries to give people the freedom to migrate, equality and decent jobs. But we also need to ensure that the towns that people are coming from are places that are able to offer a future to their young people as they are growing up.

Dennis Bernstein: Has the situation gotten appreciably worse under Trump?

David Bacon: Unquestionably, the Obama administration did do terrible things. We saw the deportation of 300,000 to 400,000 people a year, the growth of these

privatized detention centers. But the rhetoric of the administration and the ability of people to pressure the government is different.

The whole reason we have DACA to begin with is because young undocumented people organized themselves against deportation and were able, through action, to get people out of detention, finally sitting in in Obama's campaign office in Chicago in 2012 and getting them to issue an executive order that gave legal immigration status to about 800,000 young people.

Now we have people in power like Jeff Sessions and Jim Kelly who are saying they are going to undo the kinds of advances that people made in the last eight years. A lot of what Trump is talking about is undoing what immigrant rights activists and unions and progressive people have fought for over the last eight years.

Another thing is reinstating these cooperation programs between the police and the immigration authorities that we were able to get rid of in California and New York. Now here comes Trump and Sessions saying that they are going to reinstate it.

In fact, the rate of deportations in the first months of the Trump administration have been much higher than in the last part of the Obama administration, when popular pressure was able to force the administration to stop this kind of cooperation between the police and immigration authorities.

Dennis Bernstein: In the 45 seconds remaining, what is your version of humane immigration reform?

David Bacon: It means that everybody has a legal status here in the United States. We need to decriminalize migration and get rid of the detention centers. We need to demilitarize the border. And we need to stop the process by which people are being forced to migrate in order to survive. Changing the trade agreements, including NAFTA, is another crucial part of humane immigration reform.

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.

Learning to Love McCarthyism

Special Report: Many American liberals who once denounced McCarthyism as evil

are now learning to love the ugly tactic when it can be used to advance the Russia-gate “scandal” and silence dissent, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The New York Times has finally detected some modern-day McCarthyism, but not in the anti-Russia hysteria that the newspaper has fueled for several years amid the smearing of American skeptics as “useful idiots” and the like. No, the Times editors are accusing a Long Island Republican of McCarthyism for linking his Democratic rival to “New York City special interest groups.” As the Times laments, “It’s the old guilt by association.”

Yet, the Times sees no McCarthyism in the frenzy of Russia-bashing and guilt by association for any American who can be linked even indirectly to any Russian who might have some ill-defined links to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

On Monday, in the same edition that expressed editorial outrage over that Long Island political ad’s McCarthyism, the Times ran two front-page articles under the headline: “A Complex Paper Trail: Blurring Kremlin’s Ties to Key U.S. Businesses.”

The two subheads read: “Shipping Firm Links Commerce Chief to Putin ‘Cronies’” and “Millions in Facebook Shares Rooted in Russian Cash.” The latter story, which meshes nicely with the current U.S. political pressure on Facebook and Twitter to get in line behind the New Cold War against Russia, cites investments by Russian Yuri Milner that date back to the start of the decade.

Buried in the story’s “jump” is the acknowledgement that Milner’s “companies sold those holdings several years ago.” But such is the anti-Russia madness gripping the Establishment of Washington and New York that any contact with any Russian constitutes a scandal worthy of front-page coverage. On Monday, The Washington Post published a page-one article entitled, “9 in Trump’s orbit had contacts with Russians.”

The anti-Russian madness has reached such extremes that even when you say something that’s obviously true – but that RT, the Russian television network, also reported – you are attacked for spreading “Russian propaganda.”

We saw that when former Democratic National Committee chairwoman Donna Brazile disclosed in her new book that she considered the possibility of replacing Hillary Clinton on the Democratic ticket after Clinton’s public fainting spell and worries about her health.

Though there was a video of Clinton’s collapse on Sept. 11, 2016, followed by

her departure from the campaign trail to fight pneumonia – not to mention her earlier scare with blood clots – the response from a group of 100 Clinton supporters was to question Brazile's patriotism: "It is particularly troubling and puzzling that she would seemingly buy into false Russian-fueled propaganda, spread by both the Russians and our opponents about our candidate's health."

In other words, the go-to excuse for everything these days is to blame the Russians and smear anyone who says anything – no matter how true – if it also was reported on RT.

Pressing the Tech Companies

Just as Sen. Joe McCarthy liked to haul suspected "communists" and "fellow-travelers" before his committee in the 1950s, the New McCarthyism has its own witch-hunt hearings, such as last week's Senate grilling of executives from Facebook, Twitter and Google for supposedly allowing Russians to have input into the Internet's social networks.

Trying to appease Congress and fend off threats of government regulation, the rich tech companies displayed their eagerness to eradicate any Russian taint.

Twitter's general counsel Sean J. Edgett told the Senate Judiciary subcommittee on crime and terrorism that Twitter adopted an "expansive approach to defining what qualifies as a Russian-linked account."

Edgett said the criteria included "whether the account was created in Russia, whether the user registered the account with a Russian phone carrier or a Russian email address, whether the user's display name contains Cyrillic characters, whether the user frequently Tweets in Russian, and whether the user has logged in from any Russian IP address, even a single time. We considered an account to be Russian-linked if it had even one of the relevant criteria."

The trouble with Twitter's methodology was that none of those criteria would connect an account to the Russian government, let alone Russian intelligence or some Kremlin-controlled "troll farm." But the criteria could capture individual Russians with no link to the Kremlin as well as people who weren't Russian at all, including, say, American or European visitors to Russia who logged onto Twitter through a Moscow hotel.

Also left unsaid is that Russians are not the only national group that uses the Cyrillic alphabet. It is considered a standard script for writing in Belarus, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Serbo-Croatia and Ukraine. So, for instance, a Ukrainian using the Cyrillic alphabet could end up falling into the category of "Russian-linked" even if he or she hated Putin.

Twitter's attorney also said the company conducted a separate analysis from information provided by unidentified "third party sources" who pointed toward accounts supposedly controlled by the St. Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency (IRA), totaling 2,752 accounts. The IRA is typically described in the U.S. press as a "troll farm" which employs tech-savvy employees who combat news and opinions that are hostile to Russia and the Russian government. But exactly how those specific accounts were traced back to this organization was not made clear.

And, to put that number in some perspective, Twitter claims 330 million active monthly users, which makes the 2,752 accounts less than 0.001 percent of the total.

The Trouble with 'Trolling'

While the Russia-gate investigation has sought to portray the IRA effort as exotic and somehow unique to Russia, the strategy is followed by any number of governments, political movements and corporations – sometimes using enthusiastic volunteers but often employing professionals skilled at challenging critical information or at least muddying the waters.

Those of us who operate on the Internet are familiar with harassment from "trolls" who may use access to "comment" sections to inject propaganda and disinformation to sow confusion, to cause disruption, or to discredit the site by promoting ugly opinions and nutty conspiracy theories.

As annoying as this "trolling" is, it's just a modern version of more traditional strategies used by powerful entities for generations – hiring public-relations specialists, lobbyists, lawyers and supposedly impartial "activists" to burnish images, fend off negative news and intimidate nosy investigators. In this competition, modern Russia is both a late-comer and a piker.

The U.S. government fields legions of publicists, propagandists, paid journalists, psy-ops specialists, contractors and non-governmental organizations to promote Washington's positions and undermine rivals through information warfare.

The CIA has an entire bureaucracy dedicated to propaganda and disinformation, with some of those efforts farmed out to newer entities such as the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) or paid for by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). NATO has a special command in Latvia that undertakes "strategic communications."

Israel is another skilled player in this field, tapping into its supporters

around the world to harass people who criticize the Zionist project. Indeed, since the 1980s, Israel has pioneered many of the tactics of computer spying and sabotage that were adopted and expanded by America's National Security Agency, explaining why the Obama administration teamed up with Israel in a scheme to plant malicious code into Iranian centrifuges to sabotage Iran's nuclear program.

It's also ironic that the U.S. government touted social media as a great benefit in advancing so-called "color revolutions" aimed at "regime change" in troublesome countries. For instance, when the "green revolution" was underway in Iran in 2009 after the reelection of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the Obama administration asked Twitter to postpone scheduled maintenance so the street protesters could continue using the platform to organize against Ahmadinejad and to distribute their side of the story to the outside world.

During the so-called Arab Spring in 2011, Facebook, Twitter and Skype won praise as a means of organizing mass demonstrations to destabilize governments in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria. Back then, the U.S. government denounced any attempts to throttle these social media platforms and the free flow of information that they permitted as proof of dictatorship.

Social media also was a favorite of the U.S. government in Ukraine in 2013-14 when the Maidan protests exploited these platforms to help destabilize and ultimately overthrow the elected government of Ukraine, the key event that launched the New Cold War with Russia.

Swinging the Social Media Club

The truth is that, in those instances, the U.S. governments and its agencies were eagerly exploiting the platforms to advance Washington's geopolitical agenda by disseminating American propaganda and deploying U.S.-funded non-governmental organizations, which taught activists how to use social media to advance "regime change" scenarios.

While these uprisings were sold to Western audiences as genuine outpourings of public anger – and there surely was some of that – the protests also benefited from U.S. funding and expertise. In particular, NED and USAID provided money, equipment and training for anti-government operatives challenging regimes in U.S. disfavor.

One of the most successful of these propaganda operations occurred in Syria where anti-government rebels operating in areas controlled by Al Qaeda and its fellow Islamic militants used social media to get their messaging to Western mainstream journalists who couldn't enter those sectors without fear of

beheading.

Since the rebels' goal of overthrowing President Bashar al-Assad meshed with the objectives of the U.S. government and its allies in Israel, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, Western journalists uncritically accepted the words and images provided by Al Qaeda's collaborators.

The success of this propaganda was so extraordinary that the White Helmets, a "civil defense" group that worked in Al Qaeda territory, became the go-to source for dramatic video and even was awarded the short-documentary Oscar for an informational produced for Netflix – despite evidence that the White Helmets were staging some of the scenes for propaganda purposes.

Indeed, one argument for believing that Putin and the Kremlin might have "meddled" in last year's U.S. election is that they could have felt it was time to give the United States a taste of its own medicine.

After all, the United States intervened in the 1996 Russian election to ensure the continued rule of the corrupt and pliable Boris Yeltsin. And there were the U.S.-backed street protests in Moscow against the 2011 and 2012 elections in which Putin strengthened his political mandate. Those protests earned the "color" designation the "snow revolution."

However, whatever Russia may or may not have done before last year's U.S. election, the Russia-gate investigations have always sought to exaggerate the impact of that alleged "meddling" and molded the narrative to whatever weak evidence was available.

The original storyline was that Putin authorized the "hacking" of Democratic emails as part of a "disinformation" operation to undermine Hillary Clinton's candidacy and to help elect Donald Trump – although no hard evidence has been presented to establish that Putin gave such an order or that Russia "hacked" the emails. WikiLeaks has repeatedly denied getting the emails from Russia, which also denies any meddling.

Further, the emails were not "disinformation"; they were both real and, in many cases, newsworthy. The DNC emails provided evidence that the DNC unethically tilted the playing field in favor of Clinton and against Sen. Bernie Sanders, a point that Brazile also discovered in reviewing staffing and financing relationships that Clinton had with the DNC under the prior chairwoman, Debbie Wasserman Schultz.

The purloined emails of Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta revealed the contents of Clinton's paid speeches to Wall Street (information that she was trying to hide from voters) and pay-to-play features of the Clinton Foundation.

A Manchurian Candidate?

Still, the original narrative was that Putin wanted his Manchurian Candidate (Trump) in the White House and took the extraordinary risk of infuriating the odds-on favorite (Clinton) by releasing the emails even though they appeared unlikely to prevent Clinton's victory. So, there was always that logical gap in the Russia-gate theory.

Since then, however, the U.S. mainstream narrative has shifted, in part, because the evidence of Russian election "meddling" was so shaky. Under intense congressional pressure to find something, Facebook reported \$100,000 in allegedly "Russian-linked" ads purchased in 2015-17, but noted that only 44 percent were bought before the election. So, not only was the "Russian-linked" pebble tiny – compared to Facebook's annual revenue of \$27 billion – but more than half of the pebble was tossed into this very large lake after Clinton had already lost.

So, the storyline was transformed into some vague Russian scheme to exacerbate social tensions in the United States by taking different sides of hot-button issues, such as police brutality against blacks. The New York Times reported that one of these "Russian-linked" pages featured photos of cute puppies, which the Times speculated must have had some evil purpose although it was hard to fathom. (Oh, those devious Russians!).

The estimate of how many Americans may have seen one of these "Russian-linked" ads also keeps growing, now up to as many as 126 million or about one-third of the U.S. population. Of course, the way the Internet works – with any item possibly going viral – you might as well say the ads could have reached billions of people.

Whenever I write an article or send out a Tweet, I too could be reaching 126 million or even billions of people, but the reality is that I'd be lucky if the number were in the thousands. But amid the Russia-gate frenzy, no exaggeration is too outlandish or too extreme.

Another odd element of Russia-gate is that the intensity of this investigation is disproportionate to the lack of interest shown toward far better documented cases of actual foreign-government interference in American elections and policymaking.

For instance, the major U.S. media long ignored the extremely well-documented case of Richard Nixon colluding with South Vietnamese officials to sabotage President Lyndon Johnson's Vietnam War peace talks to gain an advantage for Nixon in the 1968 election. That important chapter of history only gained The

New York Times' seal of approval earlier this year after the Times had dismissed the earlier volumes of evidence as "rumors."

In the 1980 election, Ronald Reagan's team – especially his campaign director William Casey in collaboration with Israel and Iran – appeared to have gone behind President Jimmy Carter's back to undercut Carter's negotiations to free 52 American hostages then held in Iran and essentially doom Carter's reelection hopes.

There were a couple of dozen witnesses to that scheme who spoke with me and other investigative journalists – as well as documentary evidence showing that President Reagan did authorize secret arms shipments to Iran via Israel shortly after the hostages were freed during Reagan's inauguration on Jan. 20, 1981.

However, since Vice President (later President) George H.W. Bush, who was implicated in the scheme, was well-liked on both sides of the aisle and because Reagan had become a Republican icon, the October Surprise case of 1980 was pooh-poohed by the major media and dismissed by a congressional investigation in the early 1990s. Despite the extraordinary number of witnesses and supporting documents, Wikipedia listed the scandal as a "conspiracy theory."

Israeli Influence

And, if you're really concerned about foreign interference in U.S. elections and policies, there's the remarkable influence of Israel and its perceived ability to effect the defeat of almost any politician who deviates from what the Israeli government wants, going back at least to the 1980s when Sen. Chuck Percy and Rep. Paul Findley were among the political casualties after pursuing contacts with the Palestinians.

If anyone doubts how Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has continued to pull the strings of U.S. politicians, just watch one of his record-tying three addresses to joint sessions of Congress and count how often Republicans and Democrats jump to their feet in enthusiastic applause. (The only other foreign leader to get the joint-session honor three times was Great Britain's Prime Minister Winston Churchill.)

So, what makes Russia-gate different from the other cases? Did Putin conspire with Trump to extend a bloody war as Nixon did with the South Vietnamese leaders? Did Putin lengthen the captivity of U.S. hostages to give Trump a political edge? Did Putin manipulate U.S. policy in the Middle East to entice President George W. Bush to invade Iraq and set the region ablaze, as Israel's Netanyahu did? Is Putin even now pushing for wider Mideast wars, as Netanyahu is?

Indeed, one point that's never addressed in any serious way is why is the U.S. so angry with Russia while these other cases, in which U.S. interests were clearly damaged and American democracy compromised, were treated largely as non-stories.

Why is Russia-gate a big deal while the other cases weren't? Why are opposite rules in play now – with Democrats, many Republicans and the major news media flogging fragile “links,” needling what little evidence there is, and assuming the worst rather than insisting that only perfect evidence and perfect witnesses be accepted as in the earlier cases?

The answer seems to be the widespread hatred for President Trump combined with vested interests in favor of whipping up the New Cold War. That is a goal valued by both the Military-Industrial Complex, which sees trillions of dollars in strategic weapons systems in the future, and the neoconservatives, who view Russia as a threat to their “regime change” agendas for Syria and Iran.

After all, if Russia and its independent-minded President Putin can be beaten back and beaten down, then a big obstacle to the neocon/Israeli goal of expanding the Mideast wars will be removed.

Right now, the neocons are openly lusting for a “regime change” in Moscow despite the obvious risks that such turmoil in a nuclear-armed country might create, including the possibility that Putin would be succeeded not by some compliant Western client like the late Boris Yeltsin but by an extreme nationalist who might consider launching a nuclear strike to protect the honor of Mother Russia.

The Democrats, the liberals and even many progressives justify their collusion with the neocons by the need to remove Trump by any means necessary and “stop fascism.” But their contempt for Trump and their exaggeration of the “Hitler” threat that this incompetent buffoon supposedly poses have blinded them to the extraordinary risks attendant to their course of action and how they are playing into the hands of the war-hungry neocons.

A Smokescreen for Repression

There also seems to be little or no concern that the Establishment is using Russia-gate as a smokescreen for clamping down on independent media sites on the Internet. Traditional supporters of civil liberties have looked the other way as the rights of people associated with the Trump campaign have been trampled and journalists who simply question the State Department's narratives on, say, Syria and Ukraine are denounced as “Moscow stooges” and “useful idiots.”

The likely outcome from the anti-Russian show trials on Capitol Hill is that

technology giants will bow to the bipartisan demand for new algorithms and other methods for stigmatizing, marginalizing and eliminating information that challenges the mainstream storylines in the cause of fighting “Russian propaganda.”

The warning from powerful senators was crystal clear. “I don’t think you get it,” Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-California, warned social media executives last week. “You bear this responsibility. You created these platforms, and now they are being misused. And you have to be the ones who do something about it. Or we will.”

As this authoritarian if not totalitarian future looms and as the dangers of nuclear annihilation from an intentional or unintentional nuclear war with Russia grow, many people who should know better are caught up in the Russia-gate frenzy.

I used to think that liberals and progressives opposed McCarthyism because they regarded it as a grave threat to freedom of thought and to genuine democracy, but now it appears that they have learned to love McCarthyism except, of course, when it rears its ugly head in some Long Island political ad criticizing New York City.

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).

How US Blunders Strengthened Iran

Exclusive: By echoing the Israeli-Saudi bellicosity toward Iran, President Trump is repeating the same mistakes of his predecessors and inviting wider Mideast wars that could enhance Iran’s position, writes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

Behind only North Korea, Iran is the country the Trump administration vilifies most. The White House endorses Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s injunction that “We must all stand together to stop Iran’s march of conquest, subjugation and terror.”

Parroting Netanyahu’s claim that Iran is “busy gobbling up the nations” of the

Middle East, CIA Director and conservative GOP stalwart Mike Pompeo warned in June that Iran – which he branded “the world’s largest state sponsor of terrorism” – now wields “enormous influence . . . that far outstrips where it was six or seven years ago.”

In an interview with MSNBC, Pompeo elaborated, “Whether it’s the influence they have over the government in Baghdad, whether it’s the increasing strength of Hezbollah and Lebanon, their work alongside the Houthis in Iran, (or) the Iraqi Shias that are fighting along now the border in Syria . . . Iran is everywhere throughout the Middle East.”

Few would deny that Iran’s influence in the region has grown over the past decade. What’s missing from such dire warnings of its imperial designs, however, is any reflection on how aggressive policies by the United States and its allies have consistently backfired, creating needless chaos that Iran has exploited as a matter of self-interest and self-defense.

Consider the case of Hezbollah, a Lebanese-based Shiite organization that Israeli leaders describe as a major threat and almost certainly the target of Israel’s next war. Although the Iranian-backed force intervened actively in Syria to back the Assad government, it disclaims any intent to start a war with Israel.

It does, however, declare with great bravado its intent to deter another Israeli invasion of its homeland. “Israel should think a million times before waging any war with Lebanon,” said its leader earlier this year.

Spurred by Israeli Invasions

In fact, Hezbollah owes its very existence to Israel’s repeated invasions of their country. In 1982, Israel broke a cease-fire with the Palestine Liberation Organization and invaded southern Lebanon with 60,000 troops. The Reagan administration took no steps to stop that invasion, which caused thousands of civilian casualties and turned much of the population against Israel.

With Iranian money and guidance, the Shiite resistance in Lebanon coalesced around the organization that became known as Hezbollah. “We are only exercising our legitimate right to defend our Islam and the dignity of our nation,” the group claimed in one of its ideological tracts. “We appealed to the world’s conscience, but heard nothing.”

Years later, former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak conceded that “It was our presence [in Lebanon] that created Hezbollah.” Former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin seconded that assessment, saying that Israel had let the “genie out of the bottle.”

In 2006, Israel again invaded Lebanon, this time to wipe out Hezbollah. Israel's indiscriminate attacks against civilians drew condemnation from international human rights organizations. They also succeeded in strengthening the very enemy Israel sought to annihilate.

"Especially since the 2006 war with Israel, . . . an overwhelming majority of the Shi'a have embraced Hezbollah as the defender of their community," writes Augustus Richard Norton in his study, *Hezbollah: A Short History*. "This suggests that outsiders . . . seeking to reduce Hezbollah's influence in Lebanon must redress the security narrative rather than take steps that validate it."

Instead, of course, the United States and its Sunni Arab and Turkish allies promoted the violent overthrow of Syria's government, drawing Hezbollah forces into the fight for the survival of their longtime ally. While Hezbollah has paid a political and human price for its military expedition, its soldiers have gained tremendous battle experience, making them all the more formidable a foe.

The Iraqi Gift

Washington's greatest geostrategic gift to Iran was the unprovoked U.S. overthrow of Iran's arch enemy, Saddam Hussein, in 2003. Iran had lost hundreds of thousands of lives and hundreds of billions of dollars in an eight-year war with Iraq, triggered by Saddam's invasion in 1980. The Bush administration not only killed Saddam, but handed political power to Iraq's majority Shiite population, which looked to Iran for spiritual and political guidance.

That windfall may not have been entirely luck. The leading Iraqi lobbyist for war, the neoconservatives' darling Ahmed Chalabi, was later identified by U.S. authorities as a key Iranian intelligence asset. U.S. counterintelligence agents concluded that Chalabi and other Iraqi exiles, who peddled false claims about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, had "been used as agents of a foreign intelligence service ... to reach into and influence the highest levels of the U.S. government," in the words of a Senate Intelligence Committee report.

But Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's office shut down the investigation, leaving Chalabi to direct the political purge of Iraq's government and then become Iraq's deputy prime minister and oil minister. The Chalabi-led purge targeted Iraq's Sunni politicians, aggravating the country's sectarian divide and fueling the insurgency that still plagues the country today. The violence strengthened Iran's hand in the country, as Shiite militia sought Tehran's help to defend their communities.

At the same time, popular opposition to the U.S. occupation led to the rise of radical Sunni terrorists. It was from their swelling ranks in Iraq's prisons

that ISIS was born. ISIS made lightning gains across much of western Iraq in June 2014, with the conquest of Fallujah, Tikrit, and Mosul, the country's second most populous city. With its very existence in jeopardy, Iraq's beleaguered government welcomed Iran's immediate dispatch of 2,000 soldiers to help block the ISIS offensive. Syria's air force also began striking ISIS bases in coordination with Baghdad.

Misguided Pressure

Washington, in contrast, rejected Iraq's call for air strikes and suggested that its Shiite-led government should step down to placate aggrieved Sunnis. Only in August 2014 did President Obama authorize limited bombing of ISIS to protect minorities threatened by their military advance. Needless to say, many Iraqis were grateful to Iran for its military support at a critical time.

"The Iranians are playing a long game and a waiting game," said Sajad Jiyad, the director of the Al Bayan Center for Planning and Studies in Baghdad. "They put their skins on the line. They lost three or four generals plus a dozen senior officers."

So when a "hamfisted" Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, speaking in Saudi Arabia, recently demanded that Baghdad send home Iranian-backed paramilitary units that helped defeat ISIS, it didn't go over well with Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi.

"No party has the right to interfere in Iraqi matters," his office stated. Abadi called the Popular Mobilization forces "Iraqi patriots," not mere proxies of Iran, and insisted that they "should be encouraged because they will be the hope of country and the region." Score another few points for Tehran.

ISIS might never have spread into Syria had not the United States publicly promoted the overthrow of the Assad government in 2011, following years of covert efforts by Washington and Israel to weaken the regime and promote sectarian divisions within Syria.

Contributing greatly to the rise of radical Islamist forces in Syria was the U.S.-backed overthrow of the Gaddafi regime in Libya, which unleashed large stocks of arms and hundreds of hardened fighters to spread their revolution into Syria.

By late 2011, Sunni-led states such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar began financing and arming militant Islamist rebels in Syria, including Al Qaeda and even ISIS. The resulting war killed hundreds of thousands of combatants and civilians, uprooted millions of refugees, and laid waste to ancient cities.

The Obama administration proved itself just as deluded as the Bush administration about the efficacy of armed intervention. Describing hopes by the White House that Libya's uprising would "ripple out to other nations in the region" and fuel anti-regime movements in Syria and Iran, the *Wall Street Journal* reported, "Syria has served for 30 years as Iran's closest strategic ally in the region. U.S. officials believe the growing challenge to Mr. Assad's regime could motivate Iran's democratic forces."

Instead, of course, Syria's conflict prompted Iran's hardliners to send Revolutionary Guard units and Hezbollah forces to the defense of their ally. With the help of Russian air power, they turned the tide in Assad's favor, leaving the Damascus regime intact and greatly in Tehran's debt.

The Yemeni Mess

Echoing longstanding claims by Saudi Arabia, the Trump administration also insists that Iran is a major backer of Houthi tribal forces who swept down from northern Yemen to seize control of most of the country in early 2015. That March, with U.S. backing, a Saudi-led coalition of Arab states launched a scorched-earth military campaign to oust the Houthis, in the name of resisting Iran.

The coalition's indiscriminate bombing of industrial and other civilian targets, including schools and hospitals, has laid waste to much of the country and destroyed the economy. Its blockade of ports caused mass hunger and triggered the world's worst cholera epidemic.

"Cynics can argue that the real strategy of the Saudi coalition is to rely on starvation and disease to wear down the Yemeni people," observed former White House adviser and CIA analyst Bruce Riedel. "The United Nations has labeled the war the worst humanitarian catastrophe in the world . . . (Yet) Iran is the only winner, as it provides aid and expertise to the Houthis at a tiny fraction of the cost of the Saudi war effort while the Islamic Republic's Gulf enemies spend fortunes on a conflict they jumped into with no endgame or strategy."

Experts point out that Washington picked the wrong ally in this fight. "The Houthis are one of the few groups in the Middle East that has little intention or ability to confront the United States or Israel," writes Harvard lecturer Asher Orkaby. "And far from being aligned with extremists, the Houthi movement has repeatedly clashed with the Islamic State . . . and al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. It is Saudi Arabia that has long supported Sunni Islamist groups in Yemen."

To compound the irony, the paranoid sheiks in Riyadh created the very threat

they set out to crush with their invasion in 2015. Iranian ties to the Houthis were negligible before then. Remarking on years of attempts to smear them as pawns of Iran, the U.S. ambassador to Yemen reported in a classified cable in 2009, “The fact that . . . there is still no compelling evidence of that link must force us to view this claim with some skepticism.”

Two former members of the State Department’s Office of Policy Planning have recently confirmed that “the vast majority of the Houthi arsenal . . . was seized from Yemeni army stockpiles,” not provided by Iran.

As the devastating war grinds on, however, Iran has provided the Houthis with modest training, advice, and ground munitions. “Iran has exploited, on the cheap, the Saudi-led campaign, and thus made the expansion of Iranian influence in Yemen a Saudi self-fulfilling prophecy,” they observe.

“By catering to the Saudis in Yemen,” they add, “the United States has . . . strengthened Iranian influence in Yemen, undermined Saudi security, brought Yemen closer to the brink of collapse, and visited more death, destruction, and displacement on the Yemeni population.”

Qatar and Beyond

In a moment of particular lunacy, President Trump this June tweeted his support for a Saudi-led political and economic blockade of Qatar, a tiny but gas-rich Gulf emirate. Riyadh is aggrieved in part by Qatar’s sponsorship of Al Jazeera, the politically nettlesome broadcaster. Trump’s action surprised and embarrassed the Pentagon, which operates a huge military base in Qatar.

Iran quickly took advantage of this latest Saudi blunder. It opened its airspace to Qatari flights that were barred from crossing the Arabian Peninsula. It shipped food to replace supplies lost by the closure of the Saudi-Qatari border. In gratitude, Qatar restored full diplomatic relations with Tehran after recalling its ambassador two years ago.

“This dispute has pushed Qatar towards other players in the region who are critical: Iran, Turkey, Russia, China,” said Rob Richer, former Associate Deputy Director for Operations at the CIA. “These are players who now have a lot more influence as we diminish our influence in the region. In this way, the blockade has actually undermined everything that the Saudis and Emiratis wanted by pushing the Qataris into the arms of these other regional players.”

Time after time, in other words, the United States and its regional supporters have made a mess of matters with their overt and covert military interventions in the Middle East. It’s only natural that Iran, having long been targeted by Washington and its allies (sometimes for understandable reasons), tries to seize

opportunities to defend its interests.

The lesson we should learn is that curbing Iran and promoting U.S. security interests will require less intervention from afar, not more self-defeating forays into the region.

As Chatham House research fellow Renad Mansour recently observed, until the United States overcomes its counterproductive reactions to obsessive fears of Iranian influence, “the Iranophobes will be right about one thing: Iran is the smarter player in the region.”

Jonathan Marshall is author or co-author of five books related to national security and international relations, including *The Lebanese Connection: Corruption, Civil War, and the International Drug Trade* (Stanford University Press, 2012).

How Afghans View the Endless US War

To understand why the 16-year-old U.S. war in Afghanistan continues to fail requires a look from the ground where Afghans live and suffer, a plight breeding strong opposition to the U.S. presence, explains Kathy Kelly.

By Kathy Kelly

On a recent Friday at the Afghan Peace Volunteers' (APV) Borderfree Center, here in Kabul, 30 mothers sat cross-legged along the walls of a large meeting room. Masoumah, who co-coordinates the Center's "Street Kids School" project, had invited the mothers to a parents meeting. Burka-clad women who wore the veil over their faces looked identical to me, but Masoumah called each mother by name, inviting the mothers, one by one, to speak about difficulties they faced.

From inside the netted opening of a burka, we heard soft voices and, sometimes, sheer despair. Others who weren't wearing burkas also spoke gravely. Their eyes expressed pain and misery, and some quietly wept. Often a woman's voice would break, and she would have to pause before she could continue:

“I have debts that I cannot pay,” whispered the first woman.

“My children and I are always moving from place to place. I don't know what will happen.”

“I am afraid we will die in an explosion.”

"My husband is paralyzed and cannot work. We have no money for food, for fuel."

"My husband is old and sick. We have no medicine."

"I cannot feed my children."

"How will we live through the winter?"

"I have pains throughout my whole body."

"I feel hopeless."

"I feel depressed, and I am always worried."

"I feel that I'm losing my mind."

The mothers' travails echo across Afghanistan, where, as one article noted, "one-third of the population lives below the poverty line (earning less than \$2 a day) and a further 50 percent are barely above this." Much of the suffering voiced was common: most of the women had to support their families as they moved from house to house, not being able to come up with the rent for a more permanent space, and many women experienced severe body pains, often a result of chronic stress.

Water Shortages

Last week, our friend Turpekai visited the Borderfree Center and spoke with dismay about her family's well having gone dry. Later that morning, Inaam, one of the students in the "Street Kids School," said that his family faces the same problem.

Formerly, wells dug to depths of 20 to 30 meters were sufficient to reach the water table. But now, with the water table dropping an average of one meter a year, new wells must be dug to depths of 80 meters or more. Inflowing refugees create increased demands on the water table in times of drought and so do the extravagant water needs of an occupying military, and the world's largest fortified embassy, that can dig as deep for water as it wants.

Families living on less than \$2 a day have little wherewithal to dig deep wells or begin paying for water. The water has been lost to war.

Sarah Ball, a nurse from Chicago, arrived in Kabul one week ago. Together we visited the Emergency Surgical Center for Victims of War, feeling acutely grateful for an opportunity to donate blood and hear an update from one of their logistical coordinators about new circumstances they encounter in Kabul.

In past visits to Kabul, staff at the Emergency Hospital would point happily to

their volleyball court, the place where they could find diversion and release from tensions inherent in their life saving work. Now, as an average of two "mass casualties" happen each week, often involving many dozens of patients severely injured by war, a triage unit has replaced the volleyball court. Kabul, formerly one of the safest places in Afghanistan, has now become one of the most dangerous.

The Taliban and other armed groups have vowed to continue fighting as long as the U.S. continues to occupy Afghan land, to wage attacks on Afghans and supply weapons to the various fighting factions. The United States maintains nine major bases in Afghanistan and many smaller forward operating bases.

Trump's Continued War

Following President Trump's announcement of an increase in U.S. troops being sent to Afghanistan, the Washington Post reported that "Direct U.S. spending on the war in Afghanistan will rise to approximately \$840.7 billion if the president's fiscal year 2018 budget is approved."

What on earth have they accomplished?!

Masoumah asked each mother a second question: What are you thankful for? The atmosphere became a little less grim as many of the mothers said they were grateful for their children. Beholding the lively, bright and beautiful youngsters who fill the Borderfree Center each Friday, I could well understand their gratitude.

The following day, we joined two dozen young girls living in a squalid refugee camp. Crowded into a small makeshift classroom with a mud floor, our friend Nematullah taught a two-hour class focused on forming peace circles. The little girls were radiant, exuberant and eager for better futures. Nematullah later told us that all their families are internally displaced, many because of war.

I feel deeply moved by the commitment my young friends have made to reject wars and dominance, preferring instead to live simply, share resources, and help protect the environment.??Zarghuna works full-time to coordinate projects at the Border Free Center. She and Masoumah feel passionately committed to social change which they believe will be organized "from the ground up."

I showed Zarghuna a Voices accounting sheet tallying donations entrusted to us for the Street Kids School and The Duvet Project. I wanted to assure her of grassroots support from people giving what they can.

"Big amounts of money coming from the U.S. military destroys us," Zarghuna said. "But small amounts that are given to the people can help change lives and make

them a little better.”

Kathy Kelly (kathy@vcnv.org) co-coordinates Voices for Creative Nonviolence (www.vcnv.org). In Kabul, she is the guest of the Afghan Peace Volunteers (ourjourneytosmile.com)
