

Acceptable Bigotry and Scapegoating of Russia

Exclusive: The scapegoating of Russia has taken on an air of bigotry and ugliness, based largely on Cold War-era stereotypes. In this article, Natylie Baldwin counters this intolerance with some of her positive impressions having traveled the country extensively.

By Natylie Baldwin

Over the last year and a half, Americans have been bombarded with the Gish Gallop claims of Russiagate. In that time, the most reckless comments have been made against the Russians in service of using that country as a scapegoat for problems in the United States that were coming to a head, which were the real reasons for Donald Trump's upset victory in 2016. It has even gotten to the point where irrational hatred against Russia is becoming normalized, with the usual organizations that like to warn of the pernicious consequences of bigotry silent.

The first time I realized how low things would likely get was when Ruth Marcus, deputy editor of the *Washington Post*, sent out the following tweet in March of 2017, squealing with delight at the thought of a new Cold War with the world's other nuclear superpower: "So excited to be watching *The Americans*, throwback to a simpler time when everyone considered Russia the enemy. Even the president."



Not only did Marcus's comment imply that it was great for the U.S. to have an enemy, but it specifically implied that there was something particularly great about that enemy being Russia.

Since then, the public discourse has only gotten nastier. Former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper – who notoriously perjured himself before Congress about warrantless spying on Americans – stated on Meet the Press last May that Russians were uniquely and "genetically" predisposed toward manipulative political activities. If Clapper or anyone else in the public eye had made such a statement about Muslims, Arabs, Iranians, Jews, Israelis, Chinese or just about any other group, there would have been some push-back about the prejudice that it reflected and how it didn't correspond with

enlightened liberal values. But Clapper's comment passed with hardly a peep of protest.

More recently, John Sipher, a retired CIA station chief who reportedly spent years in Russia – although at what point in time is unclear – was interviewed in Jane Mayer's recent New Yorker piece trying to spin the Steele Dossier as somehow legitimate. On March 6, Sipher took to Twitter with the following comment: "How can one not be a Russophobe? Russia soft power is political warfare. Hard power is invading neighbors, hiding the death of civilians with chemical weapons and threatening with doomsday nuclear weapons. And they kill the opposition at home. Name something positive."

In fairness to Sipher, he did backpedal somewhat after being challenged; however, the fact that his unfiltered blabbering reveals such a deep antipathy toward Russians ("How can one not be a Russophobe?") and an initial assumption that he could get away with saying it publicly is troubling.

Glenn Greenwald re-tweeted with a comment asking if Russians would soon acceptably be referred to as "rats and roaches." Another person replied with: "Because they are rats and roaches. What's the problem?"

This is just a small sampling of the anti-Russian comments and attitudes that pass, largely unremarked upon, in our media landscape.

There are, of course, the larger institutional influencers of culture doing their part to push anti-Russian bigotry in this already contentious atmosphere. *Red Sparrow*, both the book and the movie, detail the escapades of a female Russian spy. The story propagates the continued fetishization of Russian women based on the stereotype that they're all hot and frisky. Furthermore, all those who work in Russian intelligence are evil and backwards rather than possibly being motivated by some kind of patriotism, while all the American intel agents are paragons of virtue and seem like they just stepped out of an ad for Nick at Nite's How to be Swell.

The recent Academy Awards continued their politically motivated trend of awarding Oscars for best documentary to films on topics that just happen to coalesce nicely with Washington's latest adversarial policy. Last year it was the *White Helmets* film to support the regime change meme in Syria. This year it's *Icarus* about the doping scandal in Russia.

Similarly, *Loveless*, the new film by Russian director Andrey Zvyagintsev (director of *Leviathan*) is being reviewed – as Catherine Brown points out – by writers from the mainstream American media in a predictably biased fashion. The film focuses on the disintegration of a married Moscow couple's relationship and

the complicated web of factors involved which have tragic ramifications for the couple's 12-year old son.

American reviewers manage to paint the factors detailed in the film that are prevalent in most modern capitalist cities (e.g. being self-centered, materialistic and preoccupied with technological gadgets) as somehow uniquely Russian sins. They also ignore a prominent character in the film that defies their negativity about modern Russia – a character that represents altruism and the growth of civil society in the country.

A common theme in all this is that Russia is a bad country and Russians can't help but be a bunch of good-for-nothings at best and dangerous deviants at worst. Indeed, according to media depictions, sometimes they manage to be both at the same time. But what they don't manage to be is positive, constructive or even complicated. Sipher knows that the average American has been deluged with this anti-Russian prejudice, as reflected in his challenge at the end of his initial tweet about the largest country, geographically at least, in the world: Name something positive.

Countering the Negative

Most people know, at least in the abstract, that few individuals or groups are purely good or bad. Most are a complex combination of both. But many – including those who normally consider themselves to be open-minded liberals – have allowed their lizard brains to be triggered by the constant demonization of Russia in the hopes of taking down Trump whom they deem to be a disproportionate threat to everything they hold dear. So as a counterweight to all the negative constantly pumped out about Russia and to take Sipher up on his challenge, I will list some positive things about Russia and the contribution of the country and its people to the world.

Contemporary Russia's Domestic Policy

Russia has one of the most educated populations in the world, universal health care for its people, a home ownership rate of 84%, strong gun control laws, no death penalty, 140 days of guaranteed maternity leave for women at 100% salary, and Moscow was just voted the 4th safest megacity in the world for women.

And, despite claims that are often repeated in corporate media and even by many in the alternative press, Russia has independent and critical voices in the print media. Even on television, which is heavily influenced by the Kremlin, the Western position is often given airtime by either pro-Western Russian critics or Westerners themselves. During both of my visits to Russia (in 2015 and 2017) I interviewed a cross-section of Russians who all confirmed that they had access

to Western media through both satellite and the internet. Furthermore, while violence against journalists is a concern, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, journalist murders have decreased significantly under Putin compared to the era of Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s.

Am I saying that Russia is a utopia without any problems? No. Like most countries, it has plenty. Most Russians, including Putin, admit this. These problems include still significant poverty rates, comparatively low productivity and life expectancy, and corruption. But it is important to note the direction of trends, which are mostly positive since Putin took over. Under his leadership, poverty rates have been cut in half, life expectancy has increased by several years – especially among men who had suffered the worst mortality crisis since WWII, crime has dropped, pensions have increased and are paid regularly, the unemployment rate has been around 5% for years, great investments in infrastructure and agriculture have been seen along with development throughout the country.

And that development has not just been seen in Moscow and St. Petersburg – the latter city which, by the way, culturally and architecturally rivals those in France and Italy.

There are plenty of medium-sized cities throughout Russia that are becoming well-developed and culturally engaging. As one example, during my 2015 trip, I visited Krasnodar, located in the Black Sea region. The rate of civic construction in the city during 2014 surpassed even Moscow. As a consequence of the challenges of this rapid development, the public felt that decisions were not being made with sufficient feedback from residents, several of whom got together and created a group called the Public Council which eventually found ways to get city authorities to listen to their concerns.

The group had received significant media attention, networked with youth groups and infrastructure specialists, and received foreign experts in urban planning, public arts, transportation and city marketing. They have also organized periodic clean-up and renovation days, which are sponsored by local businesses that donate use of equipment. Currently, they are working on the creation of protected green zones, including one that connects all of the city's hiking paths and another to connect its 16 lakes. They have received no opposition from the Russian government and have elicited the interest of other cities who want to model their approach to local issues.

While in Krasnodar I met a dozen or more professionals, from lawyers to engineers and doctors, who lived in the city and were part of another civic group engaged in charitable, conservation and youth programs. At one point, I took a walking tour of the city. In terms of architecture, I saw the old and the

new side by side, including a large shopping center that was built around a large tower that had been there for generations that local residents saved from destruction by the mall planners, a square with controversial fountains, and a main thoroughfare that was closed to auto traffic, allowing pedestrians free reign. Couples – including some of mixed race, parents pushing baby strollers, and bicyclists – all wound their way through the streets as both Russian and American music was piped in and building walls on one side of the street for a stretch displayed delicate illustrations of Russian history.

Fifteen hundred miles away in the Ural mountain region, the city of Yekaterinburg – named after Catherine I – has the infamous distinction of being the place where Czar Nicholas II and his family were massacred by the Bolsheviks in 1918. On the site where the family's bodies were exhumed, a magnificent Russian Orthodox Church has been erected and dedicated to the last royal family. Nearby is the Yeltsin Library, denoting the Russian Federation's first President, although his legacy is not popular in Russia today.

The city is also home to a wide variety of precious metals and gems, along with a thriving economy. According to Sharon Tennison, an independent program coordinator who has traveled there numerous times over the past 15 years, hundreds of new apartment blocks can be seen on the outskirts of the city to accommodate the recent economic and population growth.

Yekaterinburg has a bustling cultural life that includes an opera house, a ballet, numerous theaters and museums, as well as dozens of libraries. In this respect, the city has continued its preoccupation with the classical arts as in Catherine's period. At the same time, many modern Russian rock bands with a distinctive sound have formed there (known as Ural rock).

The city also has a low rate of violence and crime.

As the New York Times and NPR like to point out and generalize out from, there are some rural and industrial areas in Russia that still need attention and investment. However, there are other towns in the countryside that are doing well.

Russia's Contributions to the World

Russia has made many cultural and humanitarian contributions to the world. In the 18th and 19th centuries, imperial Russia produced some of the most renowned figures in the world of arts. These include writers, such as Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, whose works are often cited by American readers as among the greatest of all time; great composers include Tchaikovsky, Stravinsky and Rachmaninoff.

The country also has a rich history of pre-Soviet philosophers who debated questions of politics, history, spirituality and meaning. One of the most famous is Vladimir Solovyev, classified as belonging to the Slavophile school but distinguished from his fellow Slavophiles by his openness to and integration of several lines of thought.

He acknowledged the intuitive as well as the rational. He was friends with Dostoyevsky but had disagreements over Orthodoxy since Solovyev was an advocate of ecumenism and healing the schism between Orthodoxy and Catholicism. Furthermore, he is credited with influencing Nicolai Berdyaev, Rudolf Steiner and the Russian Symbolists, among others. He admired the Greek goddess Sophia who he characterized as the “merciful unifying feminine wisdom of God.” Solovyev was adept at integrating several spiritual strands, such as Greek philosophy, Buddhism, Kabbalah, and Christian Gnosticism.

Solovyev was famous for his debates with Slavophile contemporary, Nicolai Fedorov. In these and other writings, questions about morality and technological progress, how much humans should control nature, and prioritizing which problems to invest man’s resources in solving were all given great consideration by Solovyev and are still relevant today, in both Russian society and the larger world.

It is interesting to note that, of all the early Slavophile philosophers, Putin chose Solovyev, the one who was the least strident and most open to the synthesis of differing values and viewpoints, as part of his assignment of books for Russia’s regional governors to read a few years back. Of course, that didn’t stop several western pundits – who showed they knew virtually nothing of Solovyev but perhaps some cherry-picked and out-of-context tidbits they’d found online – from distorting his writings, which naturally had to be horrible because Putin recommended them.

Moving on to the 20th century, it should not be forgotten that the Soviet Union bore the brunt of defeating the Nazis during WWII, losing 27 million people, and saw a third of their country destroyed in the process.

In the 21st century, Russia provided significant aid to Americans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Sandy. They also provided safe transport to Yemeni-Americans out of that devastated country after the U.S. State Department effectively abandoned them in 2015. Russia provided medical aid to 60,000 people affected by the Ebola epidemic in West Africa in 2014. Last September, Russia provided 35 tons of aid to earthquake victims in Mexico.

For someone who spent years in Russia as a professional expert working for the U.S. intelligence community, John Sipher is either not well-informed on his

subject or is intentionally being disingenuous when it comes to the suggestion that Russia has done nothing positive, whether under Putin's governance or before.

The Purpose of Scapegoating Russia

In early 2017, journalists Jonathan Allen and Amie Parnes published a book called *Shattered: Inside Hillary Clinton's Doomed Campaign*. Largely based on interviews with insiders from Hillary Clinton's failed 2016 presidential campaign, the book was an attempt to analyze why she lost. The insiders agreed that Clinton had trouble providing a plausible explanation to voters as to why she was running other than that she simply wanted to be president. They also noted her trouble connecting with average Americans and her failure to campaign in certain rust belt areas that Trump ultimately got support in. The book also states that within 24 hours of Clinton's loss, members of her campaign had decided to home in on the excuse of "Russian interference" to explain away her humiliating defeat.

In addition to a bloc of Clinton's supporters continuing to push this excuse for her loss and the ratings motive that channels like CNN and MSNBC have in continuing to milk the scandal, there is also Robert Mueller's investigation which has dragged on for over a year.

The most notable thing about the Mueller investigation to anyone who takes a sober look at it is its constantly evolving purpose. First, the purpose of the investigation was to find any evidence to support the allegation that Russia had hacked into the DNC's emails. When no substantial evidence could be found to support that allegation, the purpose evolved into collusion between Trump and Russia to steal the election on behalf of Trump.

When no substantial evidence could be found to support that allegation, the purpose evolved yet again into Russia influencing the election on behalf of Trump, possibly without his knowledge or participation. When no substantial evidence could be found to support that allegation and all that could be found was a paltry number of social media ad buys – many of which were purchased after the election or advocated conflicting positions or didn't even have anything to do with the election, the purpose became "sowing discord."

After all of this, we have an indictment against 13 private individuals who worked for a "troll farm" that had been exposed several years ago and is run by a caterer with no proven orchestration by Putin or the Kremlin. Mueller also knows that this indictment will never be legally tested because the 13 individuals will never be extradited and stand trial.

After all the shrieking and howling 24/7 for close to a year and a half that Trump was an illegitimate president installed by the Kremlin, this is the best Mueller and the mainstream Democrats can come up with. It's pretty obvious by now that this investigation has simply been feeding into the media and Democratic Party circus mentioned above rather than uncovering anything substantive with which to impeach Trump.

The 2016 election showed that the Democrats faced a sleeping giant that had been awakened – one that the Democratic Party had helped to create for decades by enabling lower living standards, outsourcing of good-paying jobs, the proliferation of low-wage jobs, unaffordable education, lack of health care coverage, public health problems, and decrepit infrastructure.

Consequently, there was a demand for meaningful policies that would help average Americans, policies that polls show they want. But mainstream Democrats will not deliver on such policies, like \$15/hour minimum wage, Medicare for All, and pulling out of our wars and investing the money saved in jobs and infrastructure. They won't deliver on these things for the same reason that Republicans won't deliver on them: because their donors don't want them to. But they are not going to admit that to the American people who were going to keep demanding, so they needed a scapegoat and a diversion.

It's a cheap trick that the political elite is using to appeal to the basest instincts of their fellow Americans while shoring up support for their most reckless tendencies in the area of foreign policy.

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How the Russian Presidential Election Race Looks in its Final Days

Following up on his Feb. 24 article, "[First Impressions of Russia's Upcoming Presidential Election](#)," independent political analyst Gilbert Doctorow takes a close look at how the election is shaping up in the days before the vote.

By Gilbert Doctorow

The candidates for the presidency in Russia's election this Sunday are now in the home stretch. Not much has changed in the past several weeks as regards the standings of each in the polls of voter sympathies. Vladimir Putin holds the lead, way out in front, with nearly 70% of voters saying they will cast their votes for him. The candidate of the Communist Party, Pavel Grudinin, has held on to second place, at just over 7% despite suffering some severe setbacks over revelations of his bank accounts held abroad. And third place, with just over 5% goes to the nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy of the LDPR.

Liberal candidate, Ksenia Sobchak, who positioned herself to catch the protest vote "against all," has about 1.5%. The remaining four candidates – Sergei Baburin, Maxim Suraikin on the Communist Left and Boris Titov, Grigory Yavlinsky on the Liberal Right – have fractions of one percent of the electorate committed to them.



Candidate Putin appears on track to achieve the 70:70 target that his campaign team set for him, meaning a turnout on election day of 70% of the electorate, of which 70% vote for Putin. Such results would support a claim to popular validation of his domestic and foreign programs for the coming six years. It would give him a free hand for substantial reworking of the cabinet, which, rumor says, may come in the days immediately ahead.

However, the campaign is about process as much as it is about results, and at that level there is a great deal which merits consideration because of what this electoral campaign says about the condition of Russian democracy today and where the country is headed.

The campaign has had several dimensions, some of which require that you be physically present to experience them, others of which can be followed from remote, as I have done. For total immersion, one would have to follow the various candidates around the country as they have visited factories, hospitals, farms and all manner of locations to speak and meet with voters. This has been done daily by the Russian media, and so some feel for it can be acquired remotely. For a further broadly based understanding, one would have to pick up the print media at newsstands and tune in to the major federal radio stations which have allocated time to the candidates under rules established by the Central Election Commission. All of this I and others watching from abroad have missed.

What has been available to us outside the country is all of the televised debates, since they were posted on YouTube often within minutes of their broadcast on air. That and campaign materials posted on Russian social media, which I will discuss below. All of this constitutes invaluable material to see the impressive extent of pluralism, free speech and media access allowed in Putin's Russia to his challengers, however slight their share of voter support may be. That in itself is quite a revelation.

Nonetheless, the purpose of the analysis which follows is to reach a fair-minded understanding of the processes under way, not to hand bouquets to the incumbent or to anyone else. Following that guiding principle, I will highlight not only the high degree of democratic freedom in evidence but also the thumb on the scales in favor of the ruling party.

The Debates: Some Observations

When I wrote my first impressions of the campaign on February 24, just after the first televised debate, the full strategy of holding debates and their format were not known to any of us, including the candidates themselves, as I deduce from the bitter complaints they made over the early hour of the broadcast, over its being taped rather than going out live, over there being no face to face dueling, just a couple of minutes time to respond to questions pitched by the presenter to each of them separately. On that first day, the candidates were outraged that the subject for the debate was foreign relations, when as it turned out, none but Zhirinovskiy has much experience or knowledge or interest in foreign policy – their programs being constructed strictly around domestic policy and the economy in particular.

To be sure, it is peculiar that the candidates were kept in the dark about the procedures and format, for which the Central Election Commission is to blame. As we subsequently saw, these debates had formats that varied in some important ways from channel to channel, including the issue of live versus taped broadcast.

Over the course of the nearly three weeks of debates, changes came about in format that were initiated by the candidates themselves, beginning with Ksenia Sobchak, who was quickest off the mark and most determined not to be told how to behave by the very people she urges the electorate to vote against as a played out generation. Specifically, Sobchak was the first to do what any experienced public figure regularly does on interview programs or talk shows: ignore the question and use the microphone given to her to speak directly to voters about what she considered important. She was not censored, the tapes were not cut and thereafter such a possibility was stated by presenters on some of the debates so that other candidates could avail themselves of the same option. Few did.

Sobchak definitely added color and at times scandal to the entire debating process. In this respect, she was fully the match of nationalist party candidate Vladimir Zhirinovskiy who has for decades had exactly that niche position to himself in electoral politics and in talk shows. The other candidates were not dull, but were far more polite, and so less newsworthy.

Part of Zhirinovskiy's bag of tricks as television personality has always been his dress code. At times he has come to interviews and talk shows looking formal in a business suit, but very often he has worn firetruck red sports jackets or other attention-grabbing outfits. Here again, Ksenia Sobchak has done the same in the debates, changing her coiffure, changing her clothes to project different policy positions in her electoral platform. On one day she wore a sweat shirt with big anti-war legend to support what she had to say on how Putin is the war party, whereas she stands for good neighborly relations with all and redirection of Ministry of Defense spending to domestic infrastructure needs.

Along the way, Sobchak has taken some very unpopular stands, particularly with respect to Crimea and what she calls the illegitimate Russian occupation there. This has cost her dearly. Polls show that with a bit more than 1% ready to vote for her, 80% of the electorate say they would never vote for her, making her the most unpopular of all the candidates in the race. However, one can have no doubt that Sobchak and her advisers hold the view that it is better to be hated than to be unknown.

At 36, she has plenty of time ahead to choose policies that will be more in line with the broad population and at that point everyone on the stage with her will have retired. My clear conclusion is that this race has shown Sobchak as the person to watch in the Duma elections of 2021 and in the next presidential race of 2024.

Looking back at the whole series of debates, it is clear now in retrospect that the organizers intended to give all candidates the opportunity to set out broad platforms touching upon every major sector of domestic and foreign policy. On separate days the following issues were featured on each of the channels:

- foreign policy
- youth, education and development of human potential
- development of the regions
- development of industry and especially the military industrial complex
- demography, motherhood and childhood
- health, the social sphere and provisions for the handicapped
- the Russian national idea

It is essential to remember that equal time was granted to all, that all were

invited to participate in person or by proxy regardless of their actual support levels in the population. In the United States such equal access may occur during the primaries in each party, but is choked off once party nominations for the two main parties, Democratic and Republican are closed, with only their respective nominees invited to debate on national television. If the Russian practice were applied to the U.S., it would be as if the Greens and Libertarians were debating with Democrats and Republicans, along with candidates of other still smaller parties with miniscule numbers of registered voters.

The Russian debates were held not only on the two leading news channels, Rossiya-1 and Pervy Kanal, but also on the less watched but still important federal channels Public Broadcasting (ORT) and Television Center (TVTs), both of which posted some debates on YouTube. There were televised debates as well at the regional level to which some candidates sent proxies. One on the Ryazan station of Rossiya-1 for example dated 14 March was posted to YouTube. By their presence or absence, the candidates themselves made it fairly clear that they valued above all Rossiya-1 and Pervy Kanal, and these are the channels that I monitored.

From among these many posted videos, I have decided to highlight here the debates from 13 March, the next to the last day of such televised debates. I think it is preferable to drill down on one day than to skim the surface on several weeks of shows. Moreover, the debates of the 13th on the two leading channels are useful to highlight some very specific Russian features of the country's political class across the board.

In Pervy Kanal, the subject of the day was relations between the federal capital, Moscow, and the regions. The candidates were unanimous in decrying the present situation, which has not successfully addressed and perhaps has even aggravated over the past couple of decades the very large discrepancies between the "donor regions" of Moscow and a handful of other regions enjoying budgetary surpluses, the best salaries in the country and extensive public services and amenities versus the "deficit regions" which are more than 80% of the federal regions, all in chronic need of funding from the central government, struggling with heavy debts to credit institutions and where the salary levels and public services are many times below those of the donor regions.

For this, the Communist Left candidates found cause in the privatization of state assets that led to plundering of resources and removal of wealth from where it is generated to Moscow and beyond to offshore accounts. The Liberal Right candidates found fault with excessive concentration of budgetary decision making and political power in Moscow, resulting in provincial governors waiting in the corridors of the Ministry of Finance to get handouts to be spent as

Moscow directed, not in accordance with local priorities.

Of course, both Liberals Sobchak and Yavlinsky hammered home the need for local mayors and governors to be elected by those whom they govern, not appointed by the Kremlin from among apparatchiki. The issue is valid and highly relevant to whether/how Russia can become dynamic as an economy and as a polity.

And it also was of considerable value to the voter to hear from Boris Titov that fellow liberal Ksenia Sobchak was caught in a contradiction over her support for greater financial independence of the regions, given that her announced preference for Finance Minister should she win the election is Alexei Kudrin, who formerly served under Putin in this capacity, was always and remains in favor of centralization while disparaging local control of finance as likely only to feed corruption and misuse of power.

In passing, this discussion on Pervy Kanal brought out a number of other very important failings of the Putin years as they affect the broad population. One in particular is worth mentioning: the limited nature of "gasification" of the countryside, which is not more than 60% of the population. It was noted that Gazprom has earned 600 billion euros in the past decade largely from exports but has invested only 10 billion euros in bringing gas to the households of Russia itself. The point is painful to the whole rural population of the country which has to cope with the difficult logistics of bottled gas for cooking and wooden logs for heating.

The Rossiya-1 debate of March 13 highlighted the special characteristics of Russia's political class whatever their policy orientation. This typology is not unique, but special and on the Continent, it is closest, perhaps, to France. By this I mean the high intellectual achievements of *all* the candidates. Two of the candidates, Sergei Baburin and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, hold Ph.D. degrees. All seven are well educated in terms of general culture, well-read and appreciative of wit and the ability to draw lessons from literature in fellow candidates whose political positions they otherwise may ridicule.

The topic for the Rossiya-1 debate, "culture, art and preservation of historical memory" was particularly amenable to honest discussion among the candidates. The show which resulted in many ways resembled more a drawing room scene from a Tolstoy or Dostoevsky novel than a political debate in the closing phase of a presidential election race. The candidates were unanimously scathing in their criticism of the current management of culture by Minister Medinsky even if their perspectives on the reasons for the unacceptable state of things are diametrically opposed, ranging from the intrusive and corrupting influence of power and wealth in the appraisal of the Communist Left as opposed to the Liberal Right's underlining mediocracy resulting from the stultifying influence

of a bureaucracy directing and financing culture without the participation of sponsors from the broad base of the business community.

The salon nature of the discussion in which candidates even hastened to support the critiques of the status quo leveled by others was heavily encouraged by the demeanor of the “moderator,” Vladimir Solovyov who, for this debate handled himself not according to the script of the CEC, that is, as a detached timekeeper and referee to keep the debaters within order, but instead as he usually does on his own talk shows, intervening and guiding the discussion while expressing his personal opinions.

It was fascinating to observe the common cultural heritage of all candidates regardless not only of political views but of personal wealth and life experience. In this regard, one or another of the Communist-minded candidates, otherwise critical of the bourgeoisie and oligarchy, were treated with respect similarly to that shown to the consumptive Socialist youth Hippolyte Terentiev by the very proper and aristocratic General Yepanchin and his wife and daughters in *The Idiot* who took him in during his final weeks. And surely one of the most exceptional moments in this electoral campaign was the lengthy citation by Pavel Grudinin’s proxy Maxim Shevchenko of the conversation between Christ and the Grand Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov*, all to make a point about power and art in the Russian mind.

In my “first impressions” and in the transcript of the first televised debate on the Pervy Kanal state network that I issued a couple of days later, I suggested that the Russian campaign is all high-level, intellectual combat in an agora of ideas, which to American ears in particular would be a day and night contrast with the tawdry spectacle of mudslinging and ad hominem argumentation that constituted the 2016 American presidential race.

However, my initial impressions did not take in what was excised from the first debate when it was posted on YouTube: namely a vicious exchange between two candidates, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and Ksenia Sobchak, which may just have sunk lower than even the Clinton-Trump debates. Russia, like the Soviet Union before it, often justifies the arch remark that what is fully prohibited is also permitted. In the full, uncut video, a pirated version of which of course found its way onto the internet within hours, we hear Zhirinovskiy describe Sobchak, who was at a lectern just next to his, as a “streetwalker,” if I may be allowed a euphemism. In response to which, she doused him with the water in her drinking glass.

A less enjoyable and more irritating problem with the first televised debates which fit precisely the habits of Russian political talk shows, such as the moderators of these debates otherwise host, was shouting down speakers and

boisterous heckling. Here again, the most egregious offenders were precisely Zhirinovskiy and Sobchak. Be that as it may, a technical solution was eventually implemented at least on the Pervy Kanal so that by the last debates only one selected candidate had a live microphone at a time.

This obvious and easy to implement solution ensuring unhindered speech by each candidate was not implemented at Rossiya-1 for reasons that are unclear. The result was a second shameful incident marring the record of the debates in what was the very last round on Rossiya-1 yesterday, 14 March. Moderator Vladimir Solovyov claimed he could do nothing towards the end of the show when all 6 male candidates simultaneously subjected Sobchak to verbal abuse for her "fifth column" positions with respect to the national defense and her betrayal to American interests in her latest interview with CNN. Sobchak walked out of the studio in tears just minutes before the curtain came down.

Absence of Putin

One distinguishing feature of the debates was the absence of the President, who chose to neither participate in person, nor to send a proxy.

As it turned out, the absence of Putin from these debates was entirely justified by the utterly unruly behavior and scandals at times during the series. Moreover, had the President or his representative been present he would have been the subject of attack from all seven challengers in unison, a very unfair situation for him and not very enlightening for the electorate.

At the same time, it is very clear that those managing the incumbent's campaign were exploiting every *legal* means to dominate, indeed to overwhelm all his opponents taken together with high quality viewer and listener time singing his praises and arguing for more of the same in the coming six years. These legal means included the delivery of his annual address to the Federal Assembly, the Russian equivalent to the State of the Union address of the American President, in the midst of the electoral campaign, on March 1. This gave Vladimir Putin two hours on all the airwaves to set out what is in effect a program for his next term.

Another device used to put the President before the electorate in a privileged manner was the launch in the past week of two new, sophisticated and full-length documentary films about Vladimir Putin. One, entitled "World Order 2018" features the popular talk show host Vladimir Solovyov as Putin's interlocutor or interviewer.

As we have seen, Solovyov was also the moderator of the debates on the channel Rossiya-1. The film itself is professional if not brilliant. It contains a

number of good sound bites from Putin, such as his recollections of his first visit to Germany in 1992 as an assistant to St. Petersburg mayor Anatoly Sobchak. As he explains here, their meeting with Chancellor Helmut Kohl provided Putin with material that he later used to advantage when he returned to Germany in 2002 as Russian President and delivered a speech to the Bundestag. There are also interesting remarks by Putin about the days immediately following the coup d'etat in Kiev on February 22, 2014 and the behavior of the U.S. And I would point to Putin's comments about relations with Turkey and about the special Turkish interest in the Crimean Tatars.

The second documentary, simply entitled "Putin," was produced by the professional film maker Andrei Kondrashov, who is in the President's election campaign team. Kondrashov is no newcomer to Putin promotion. In March 2015, on the first anniversary of the reunification of Crimea with the Russian Federation, he launched the entertaining "Crimea, A Way Home," which featured dramatic footage of the way Putin and his security team rescued deposed Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich from almost certain capture and execution by the radical nationalists. With the help of excellent visuals, Kondrashov's new film gives us the family history of the Putins in the countryside of the Tver region, interviews with those who knew Vladimir Putin in his youth and at turning points in his career, all told with great human warmth.

To avoid violation of the federal regulations on a candidate's using the federal television channels for unfair free publicity, these documentaries were released onto the Russian social networks Vkontakte and Odnoklassniki, where they apparently have won a large audience. In its first week, "World Order" is said to have found 15 million viewers. Meanwhile, sound bites from these documentaries were picked up by the major news programs of the federal channels as "news," pure and simple. Legal, to be sure, but aggressive campaign devices.

To this we can add Vladimir Putin's interview with Megyn Kelley of CNN in his capacity as President, not candidate, filmed in part immediately following his delivery of his address to the Federal Assembly on 1 March and in conclusion the next day on his visit to Kaliningrad. From start to finish, this filmed interview shows Putin as projecting strength. We see this in his blunt rejection of U.S. allegations of Russian electoral interference in 2016 coming out of the Mueller indictments.

We see it still more clearly in his lengthy explanation of the military hardware part of his March 1 address, showing off Russia's new cutting edge technology nuclear weapons systems and claiming full restoration of strategic parity with the United States. Who could ignore his wry smile over how the vast sums which the United States had spent developing global ABM systems for the sake of a

first strike capability were now demonstrably money thrown out the window.

More generally, there is an issue over the way that leading news programs on the federal channels have become pro-Putin voice boxes. Nowhere is this more true than in Dmitri Kiselyov's News of the Week shows on Sunday evenings.

In my "First Impressions" article, I remarked on Kiselyov's 15-minute segment on 17 February devoted to Communist candidate Pavel Grudinin. That was an expanded version of what was being reported in the news bulletins on Rossiya- and Pervy Kanal daily. The objective was to discredit the underlying claims of Grudinin's candidacy, namely that his profitable Lenin State Farm complex in the Moscow suburbs, paying wages double the national average and providing cheap housing, free day care, free medical care for his employees is the model he intends to generalize all over the country to bring socialist welfare to every home.

Kiselyov directed attention to the complaints filed against Grudinin by elderly pensioners who say they were defrauded by Grudinin in the 1990s when he essentially privatized the state farm and deprived some of its members of their stake in the land assets. Kiselyov further argued that the prosperity of Grudinin's farm comes not from the strawberries it cultivates in great quantities for the Moscow market but from land transactions including rentals and sales from the highly desirable territory it owns in the sought after metropolitan area. A third line of attack focused on the villa and other residence owned in Latvia by Grudinin's son, whose wife had acquired Latvian citizenship. These were described as "emergency airport" facilities for the candidate in case he ever felt the need to leave Russia in a hurry. Kiselyov closed his commentary with a recommendation to Communist Party president Zyuganov that he withdraw support from the non-Party Grudinin before he does irreparable damage to his party and thereby also harms Russia's young democracy. The whiff of sarcasm there and condescension was pungent.

This singling out of the Communist Party candidate for attack by state television news acting as investigator was patently unfair. That kind of sleuthing and exposure should have been done by the other candidates, not by the State. Nonetheless, as it turned out Kiselyov's and Russian state television's focus on Grudinin's moral weaknesses was not unjustified. He was finally "nailed" in an unrelated matter impugning his integrity and the whole claim of the Left to be morally superior to the corrupt and oligarch-infested regime of Vladimir Putin and the United Russia Party.

It was discovered that contrary to Grudinin's declarations to Zyuganov and to the federal electoral commission when applying for registration of his candidacy, Grudinin has some 13 bank accounts in Switzerland holding assets close to a million dollars, as well as some 5 kilograms of physical gold worth a

couple of hundred thousand dollars. This was confirmed in writing to the Central Election Commission (CEC) by UBS Bank in Switzerland. The CEC decided not to disqualify Grudinin, as was their option, but could be highly provocative and destabilizing. They merely will post these accounts abroad on the highly visible list of assets owned by each of the candidates at every voting station. But the damage was done to Grudinin's reputation among the Party faithful. Grudinin stopped entirely appearing on the debates and sent only proxies.

The scandal also damaged the reputation of Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov for failure to do due diligence. One almost certain consequence of these elections will be Zyuganov's retirement from office and the coming to power in the Communist Party of young blood.

A word of explanation about the lists of candidate assets: this has become a tradition in Russian federal elections within the concept of full transparency. At each polling station voters can read about the holdings of the candidates and their immediate family as regards assets in banks, apartments and other real estate, and cars among other property categories. In this regard, two liberal candidates, Ksenia Sobchak and Boris Titov, will stand out for their personal wealth valued at more than one million euros. However, both are supporters of the free market with its rewards, whereas the Communists make a virtue of wealth redistribution and equality.

It is unlikely there will be any great surprises in the election's outcome on 18 March, but it would be a mistake to conclude that the whole exercise is a farce. Russia's young democracy is a work in progress. The debates and other procedures of the electoral campaign are evolving, even if the content – namely credible and experienced candidates for the nation's highest office – remains unsatisfactory. Partly this results from the concentration of political power in Moscow and the still rudimentary self-government across the country that would normally develop future leaders. This will have to be addressed in Putin's final term in office if there is to be a handover of power in 2024 to a worthy successor.

The balloting itself will be another test of the consolidating mechanisms of democracy. The Kremlin says it has done everything possible to ensure fair and transparent elections. Advanced technology has been put in place to make every polling station accessible online, so that electoral monitoring by remote is a reality. Moreover, on a pilot basis the Russians have deployed what they say is block-chain technology to make the voting hack-proof.

As an international election observer serving with an NGO, I expect to see firsthand the results of these efforts to reassure Russians and the world at large that democracy is on the move in Russia. I will issue a report on what I

see in the days immediately following the election.

Gilbert Doctorow is an independent political analyst based in Brussels. His latest book, *Does the United States Have a Future?* was published in October 2017. Both paperback and e-book versions are available for purchase on www.amazon.com and all affiliated Amazon websites worldwide.

Trump Promotes Longtime Russia Hawk Just as Russiagate Loses Momentum

The fact-free and logic-challenged allegations of Trump-Russia collusion have further lost credibility with the appointment of a virulently anti-Russia hawk to replace Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Caitlin Johnstone points out.

By Caitlin Johnstone

Rex Tillerson, whose hotly scrutinized ties to Russia have been a centerpiece of Rachel Maddow's conspiratorial ravings for many months, has been fired. Replacing him as Secretary of State will be Mike Pompeo, who has been a consistent and longstanding Russia hawk for years, going so far as accusing President Obama of endangering America by simply agreeing to meet with Vladimir Putin in 2015.

Like pretty much everything that happens anywhere ever, this occurrence is being cited as evidence of collusion between Donald Trump and the Russian government.

"Tillerson Fired by Trump Hours After Blaming Russia for Chemical Attack in U.K.," blared a headline from the increasingly pro-establishment Intercept, referring to a comment Tillerson had made about the plot hole-riddled claims of the UK government that a Russian double agent had been poisoned by the Kremlin.

"By firing Tillerson one day after he publicly stated that Russia behind a WMD attack on British soil, we now have proof Trump is colluding with Putin," tweeted Vanity Fair editor and tentacle porn connoisseur Kurt Eichenwald. "I don't know if he did in the election. But he is doing it NOW in front of our eyes. He is Kremlin-owned."

"Interesting that Tillerson's ouster came one day after he very publicly broke with the official WH line and said the poisoning of Sergei Skripal 'clearly' came from Russia," said a popular tweet from The Atlantic's Natasha Bertrand.

"WH saying Tillerson was informed Friday, but State Dept statement today seems to indicate he just found out today. Which *really* makes one wonder about the role of the Russia statement yesterday," chimed in MSNBC's Chris Hayes.

This is plainly stupid, and the exact opposite is likely the case. Rex Tillerson had been making comments against Russia throughout his brief career as Secretary of State just like Pompeo and many others in Trump's cabinet, recently blaming Moscow for chemical attacks in Syria and warning of future interference in US elections in the 2018 midterms. He was not replaced by a far more virulently anti-Russia hawk because he sided with the establishment narrative on Russia as he had many times before.

For his part, Trump told reporters "it sounds to me like it would be Russia" in response to questions about who was responsible for the UK poisoning, and cited differences with Tillerson on the Iran nuclear deal as a reason for his firing. If you take Trump on his word (not that I am suggesting anyone should ever do such a thing), his administration is likely to side with the UK on any escalations it chooses to make against the Russian Federation, and he fired Rex Tillerson because this administration and its allies want to advance a more aggressive agenda against Iran.

And that could very well be among the reasons for Tillerson's firing; Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu did reportedly talk "Iran, Iran, and Iran" in their recent meeting. It could also have something to do with the possibility that Pompeo is being groomed for a 2020 presidential candidacy, as sources have reportedly told WikiLeaks editor-in-chief Julian Assange.

I think another possibility worth considering is the timing of the fatal blow the Russiagate narrative has suffered as House Intelligence Committee Republicans officially ended their investigation with the conclusion that there is no evidence of Trump-Russia collusion, and no evidence that Vladimir Putin tried to help Trump win the election. The Mueller investigation still continues, as does the Senate Intelligence Committee investigation, with Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer stating that "We have a responsibility to get to the very bottom of what happened in the 2016 elections and to report on those findings in an unbiased way. If the House isn't going to do it, the Senate must."

But going by what we're hearing from the Senate Intelligence Committee it looks like their investigation might be heading in the same direction, with Senate Intelligence Chairman Richard Burr telling CNN on Monday that he's seen no evidence of collusion either.

"I've read a lot about it, but haven't seen any," Burr said.

It is worth weighing the possibility that now that the American public has been paced into supporting new cold war escalations with Russia, the Russiagate psyop which was used to harness rank-and-file Democrats' fear of Trump to inflame fears of Putin is no longer necessary, and is now being let go in place of more brazen hawkishness. As far as the US intelligence community and its allies are concerned, Russiagate's only purpose has been to manufacture public support for escalations against Russia to secure strategic regions and ultimately hobble the Russia-China tandem, and that scaffolding can safely be removed if Russia hysteria no longer requires fear of Trump collusion to be sustained.

The soulless Mike Pompeo would be a fine overseer of that agenda, and as Secretary of State, the position Hillary Clinton used so effectively to spearhead the decimation of Libya, he'd be in an excellent position to do so.

Also noteworthy is the fact that Trump just promoted a torture supporter in Mike Pompeo and an actual torturer in his replacement as CIA Director Gina Haspel, yet leading Democrats are largely concerned that the administration won't be "tough" enough.

"If he's confirmed, we hope that Mr. Pompeo will turn over a new leaf and will start toughening up our policies towards Russia and Putin," said Chuck Schumer, arguably the most powerful Democrat in America, who recently sparked controversy for citing religious voodoo in defense of the oppression and warmongering of the Israeli state.

This administration is continuing and expanding all of Bush and Obama's most bloodthirsty agendas, and if it attacks Iran it will likely surpass both of them in terms of psychopathic bloodshed, and yet they're worried he's not "tough" enough. They criticize Trump for weakness over his willingness to meet for peace talks with Kim Jong Un after feigning shock at his obnoxious tweets about the North Korean leader, and they blast him for being too cuddly wuddly with Russia despite this administration's already having caved to the longstanding neoconservative agenda to arm Ukraine against Russia, killed Russians in Syria as part of its insane regime change occupation of that country, adopted a Nuclear Posture Review with greatly increased aggression toward Russia and blurred lines between when nuclear strikes are and are not appropriate, sent war ships into the Black Sea "to counter Russia's increased presence there," forced RT and Sputnik to register as foreign agents, expanded NATO with the addition of Montenegro, assigned Russia hawk Kurt Volker as special representative to Ukraine, shut down a Russian consulate in San Francisco and thrown out Russian diplomats.

In short, both parties appear to be doing everything in their power to get as

many people killed as possible, and nobody seems to have their foot anywhere near the brake pedal. Heads up.

Caitlin Johnstone is a rogue journalist, poet, and utopia prepper who publishes regularly at [Medium](#). Follow her work on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), or her [website](#). She has a [podcast](#) and a new book [Woke: A Field Guide for Utopia Preppers](#). This article was re-published with permission.

The Strange Case of the Russian Spy Poisoning

Applying the principle of *cui bono* – who benefits? – to the case of Sergei Skripal might lead investigators away from the Kremlin as the prime suspect and towards Western intelligence agencies, argues James O’Neill.

By James O’Neill

The suspected nerve agent attack upon former Russian intelligence officer Sergei Skripal, which also affected his daughter in the English city of Salisbury last Sunday, has given rise to too much speculation, too much hysteria, and too little analysis or insight. It has provided ammunition for the Russophobic Western media to make accusations that it was another example of Russia in general and Vladimir Putin in particular disposing of a supposed enemy of the Kremlin.

As with the Mueller investigation into the alleged Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election there are accusations with varying degrees of wildness, but little or no actual evidence that would get past first base in any independent court of law.

First, what are the known facts, only some of which have been accurately reported in the western mainstream media? The victim (assuming it was a deliberate attack upon him and his daughter) was formerly a Colonel in the Russian military intelligence service (the GRU). This is the largest of the Russian intelligence agencies and, as with its western equivalents, has a wide variety of functions, of which “spying” is only one.

In the early 1990s Skripal was recruited by an MI6 agent Pablo Miller, whom the British media declined to name. Miller was an MI6 agent in Tallinn, the capital of Estonia. Miller’s main task was recruiting Russians to provide information about their country to the British. An interesting fact, possibly coincidental,

was that the MI6 officer under diplomatic cover in Moscow at this time was Christopher Steele. Steele was later to become better known as the principal author of the infamous Trump dossier.

When Steele returned to London, he ran MI6's Russia desk between the 2006 and 2009. The information that Skripal disclosed would have been given to Steele, first in Moscow and later in London.

Skripal was arrested in 2004. In 2006 he was convicted of treason and sentenced to 18 years imprisonment. In 2010 he was released as part of a prisoner exchange deal with Russian spies in U.S. jails. He went to live in the United Kingdom where he has lived in supposed retirement ever since. Another interesting fact, although again possibly coincidental, is that Salisbury, where Skripal lived, is only about 12 kilometres from Porton Down, the U.K.'s principal research centre for nerve agents.

If the Russians had wanted to kill him, they had ample opportunity to do so during the years when he was imprisoned or the eight years he lived in retirement in Salisbury. If they did wish to kill him, it is not a very credible that they would do so very publicly and by a means that could not be bought off the shelf in the local pharmacy. The handling and the administering of these very dangerous substances require professional expertise. The obvious candidates for the attempted murder are therefore government agencies, but which government is the unanswered question.

This is where the facts become thinner, but the interesting connections of Skripal offer scope for some tentative hypotheses. While living in Salisbury, Skripal became friendly, according to [a report](#) in the UK newspaper the *Daily Telegraph*, with none other than the aforementioned Pablo Miller – whom the Telegraph declined to name but has since been identified on the web.

Miller is now working with a British security consultancy named Orbis Business Intelligence. Again according to the Telegraph, Miller's association with this company has now been removed from Miller's LinkedIn profile.

The obvious question again is: why do so now?

Orbis is the same private intelligence agency as that of Christopher Steele. It seems more than a mere coincidence that the same three men who had personal and professional links going back to the 1990s should have a continuing association at the same time as the Steele dossier was being compiled and later as the so-called Russiagate inquiry was imploding. Former FBI Director James Comey described the Steele dossier as "salacious and unverified" in a Senate hearing.

The former British ambassador Craig Murray has [suggested](#) on his blog that a

motive for the attempted murder of Skripal and his daughter was to further promote the anti-Russian hysteria that inflicts the Western media and the body politic.

That is certainly plausible, and it has certainly been one of the consequences, as the abysmal coverage of the ABC among other outlets makes clear. But an alternative hypothesis presents itself in the light of the above facts, and this hypothesis has not even been mentioned, let alone discussed by our major media.

My admittedly speculative hypothesis (but I would argue, not an unreasonable one) is that Skripal was likely involved in the production of the Steele dossier. He was therefore in a position to offer potentially very damaging information into the circumstances of the Steele dossier. As noted above, that particular narrative has not only spectacularly collapsed, but the revelations reflect very badly on, among others, the U.S. intelligence community, the FBI, the Democratic National Committee, the Obama White House and the Clinton campaign.

In any major criminal enquiry one of the basic questions the investigation asks is: who had the means, the motive and the opportunity? Framed in that light, the Russians come a distant fourth behind the other prime suspects; the U.S. and U.K. intelligence agencies themselves, and those elements of the deep state that sought to prevent Trump winning, and subsequently to undermine his presidency. The primary motive being ascribed to the Russians is revenge for Skripal's treachery more than a decade ago.

A second major question asked in any criminal investigation is *cui bono* – who benefits? It is difficult to perceive a credible argument that Russia is a beneficiary of Skripal's poisoning.

Further support for the hypothesis that this was a false flag operation comes in this statement that British Prime Minister Theresa May made to the UK Parliament. The statement was frankly absurd and could only have been made when the intention was to further demonize and punish Russia, rather than any attempt to establish the truth and apply ordinary principles of evidence and factual analysis.

May's argument is thoroughly deconstructed on the Moon of Alabama website, which pointed out that Russia had destroyed all left over stocks from the Soviet Union's chemical weapon program and does not currently produce chemical weapons. Further, there are any number of governments capable of carrying out the Salisbury attack. "If someone is run-over by a BMW is it 'highly likely' that the German government is responsible for it?" the Moon of Alabama asks.

The obfuscations of the British reinforce in the view that Skripal was dangerous to the anti-Trump forces and the authorities therefore sought to have them removed. There is ample precedent for such actions and those familiar with the “suicide” of Dr. David Kelly will recognize the parallels.

The chances of the truth emerging have become vanishingly small at the same time as a serious conflict with Russia becomes correspondingly greater.

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NBC’s Clueless Boost for Putin

With the Russian president in the heat of a re-election campaign, Putin sat down to talk with NBC’s Megyn Kelly for an interview that enabled him to burnish his credentials to the Russian electorate, Ray McGovern explains.

By Ray McGovern

Russian President Vladimir Putin’s team swept a doubleheader on March 1, with his mid-day speech claiming strategic parity with the U.S., and then the nightcap duel with NBC’s Megyn Kelly. Any lingering doubt that Putin is a shoo-in for another term as President is now dispelled. Putin might consider sending NBC a thank-you note.

As I watched NBC’s special, “[Confronting Putin](#),” Friday evening, I asked myself – naively – what possessed President Putin to subject himself again to what NBC calls a Megan Kelly “grilling,” replete with supercilious questions and less-than-polite interruptions, just nine months after his first such “grilling.” It then hit me that “grilling” is in the eye of the beholder.

Reviewing the original Russian tape of the interviews, it became clear that the tête-à-tête showed a Putin looking patiently but supremely presidential to Russian viewers who could see the whole interviews, not just the selective selected excerpts aired by NBC and “interpreted” by Russophobe-de-jour Richard Haas. (A close adviser to Secretary of State Colin Powell, Haas was among those who told him it was a swell idea to invade Iraq. When the anticipated “cakewalk” turned rather bloody, with no WMD to be found, Haas quit in July 2003 and became President of the Council on Foreign Relations where he is now well into his 15th year.)

Back to the Kelly-Putin pas de deux: At the March 1 interview the Russian President came out swinging. When Kelly asked the first time whether there is “a new arms race right now” after Putin’s announcement of Russia’s new strategic weapons, Putin reminded her that it was the U.S. that withdrew in 2002 from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty of 1972. He added that he had repeatedly warned the Bush/Cheney administration that Russia would be forced to respond to the dangerous upset of the strategic equilibrium.

For some reason best known to Kelly and NBC, Kelly tried repeatedly to make the case that the U.S. decision to scrap the ABM treaty was a result of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, when, she said, “the United States was reassessing its security posture.”

“Complete nonsense,” was Putin’s reply (“polniy chush” in Russian – chush ringing with onomatopoeia and a polite rendering of “B.S.”). Putin explained that “9/11 and the missile defense system are completely unrelated,” adding that even “housewives” are able to understand that. He found occasion to use “polniy chush” (or simply “chush) several times during the interview.

Russian “Interference”

It was no surprise that Kelly was armed with an array of questions about Russian meddling in the 2016 presidential election, and at the start of the March 2 interview asked “can we have that discussion now?” Putin said, “I think we must discuss this issue if it keeps bothering you.” And they were off on a feckless exchange with Putin replying calming to Kelly’s hectoring.

After one interruption, Putin said, “You keep interrupting me; this is impolite.” Kelly apologized, but dutifully went on to cover what seemed to be the remainder of her accusatory talking points. These included repeated insistence that Putin punish the click-bait farmers indicted by Special Counsel Robert Mueller for violating U.S. law.

No doubt fully briefed on the fact that Kelly sports a law degree, Putin asked, “Do you have people with legal training? ... We cannot even launch an investigation without cause. ... Give us at least an official inquiry with a statement of facts; send us an official paper.”

Kelly: “Isn’t it enough that U.S. intelligence agencies ... and now a Special Prosecutor (sic) with a criminal indictment – is that not enough for you to look into it?”

Putin: “Absolutely not. If you do not have legal training, I can assure you that an inquiry is required for this.”

Kelly: "I do."

Putin: "Then you should understand that a corresponding official inquiry should be sent to the Prosecutor-General's Office of the Russian Federation."

The interview got testier toward the end, as Kelly tried to fit in all her questions, including the unsupported accusation that Syrian government forces are using chemical weapons and that Russia bears some responsibility for this.

During the back-and-forth on chemical weapons, Putin not only called the accusations against Russia a lie, but saw fit to refer to Colin Powell's misbegotten speech at the UN just six weeks before the U.S./UK attack on Iraq: "It is a lie just as the vial with the white substance that allegedly proved that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, which the CIA gave to the Secretary of State."

For good measure, Putin threw in "Why did you encourage the government coup in Ukraine?"

Once again for the record, President Putin finished on a familiar note: "Russia and the U.S. should sit down and talk in order to get things straight. I have the impression that this is what the current President wants, but he is prevented from it by some forces. We are ready to discuss any matter, be it missile-related issues, cyberspace, or counterterrorism efforts. ... But the U.S. must also be ready."

Strong President

Sound presidential? Well, that, I'm now convinced, was the whole idea on Putin's part. And Megyn Kelly was, in many respects, the perfect foil. The Russians also took the trouble to publish a full English transcript of the Kelly-Putin interviews of March 1 and 2 for English speakers who might be interested in what NBC left on the cutting room floor.

With less than a week before the Russian election, Putin is no doubt happy that Megyn Kelly stopped by, and that NBC provided such a well-timed opportunity to burnish his credentials for another term as President of Russia.

Ray McGovern works with Tell the Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Savior in inner-city Washington. During his 27-year career as a CIA analyst, he was Chief of the Soviet Foreign Policy Branch and later conducted the morning briefings of The President's Daily Brief to President Ronald Reagan's most senior national security advisers.

Gang of Four: Senators Call for Tillerson to Enter into Arms Control Talks with the Kremlin

Four United States senators are urging a new approach to U.S.-Russian relations based on renewed arms control efforts, but you probably haven't heard about it from the mainstream media, Gilbert Doctorow and Ray McGovern report.

By Gilbert Doctorow and Ray McGovern

In a sad commentary on the parlous state of the U.S. media, a letter to Secretary of State Rex Tillerson from four United States Senators dated March 8 calling for opening arms control talks with the Kremlin ASAP is nowhere to be found in mainstream newspapers a day after its release on the Senate home page of one of the authors, Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.).



Nothing in the *New York Times*. Nothing in the *Washington Post*. And so, it is left to alternative media to bring to the attention of its readership a major development in domestic politics, a significant change in what its own senior politicians are saying should be done about Russia that was brought to our attention bythe Russian mainstream media including the agency RIA Novosti, RBK, Tass within hours of initial posting.

What we have is, first, a genuine man bites dog story. Two of the senators who penned the letter, Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) and Bernie Sanders (I-Vermont), have in recent months been among the most vociferous promoters of the unproven allegations of Trump collusion with the Russians. Now they are putting aside for the moment their attacks on Trump and members of his entourage who dared shake hands or share a joke with a Russian ambassador. They are openly calling upon the Secretary of State to send U.S. personnel to negotiate with Putin's minions over our survival on this planet.

The authors were in a tough spot explaining their new marching orders for State. And they have done their best to impose consistency on what is patently a new policy direction holding great promise for sanity to be restored in U.S.-Russian relations.

First, they cover their backsides by the lengthy recitation of Russia's bad deeds, including alleged election meddling in the 2016 presidential election, violation of international law in Ukraine and the like.

Secondly, they make the proposed arms talks look like a walk down the Rose Garden, with the Russians being told what to do from a position of strength. The objective is focused on inserting two of Russia's latest weapons systems described by Vladimir Putin in his March 1 speech into the framework of the START treaty as it comes up for renewal. That and to resolve issues over alleged Russian violation of the Intermediate Range Missiles convention.

However, buried in this mumbo jumbo is that reference to Putin's speech and the new weapons systems he described, which actually numbered six among them several never heard about before inside the Beltway and looking pretty ominous. So, one may conclude that Putin's intended "shock and awe" speech did have some effect in DC, even if so far no one is saying so, and even if so far, our leading newspapers have called time out till they can decide how to deal with the unwelcome news.

Wittingly or not, the Gang of Four has just opened a breach in the wall of contempt and loathing for Putin and Russia that has been building in Washington for months if not years now. The immediate task is for word of this development to go out to the broad public and for the relics of our once formidable arms negotiations teams to be brought out of mothballs to face Russian counterparts who have been waiting keenly for this moment.

Democratic Fissures

The unusual way in which the letter was made public – and the evident uncertainty on the part of the mainstream media as to how to play it – reflects widening fissures among Democrats.

Even among the most rabid fans of Hillary Clinton (and haters of President Trump) there is a growing sense that, for example, Congressman Adam "trust-me-the-Russians-hacked-our election" Schiff (D-Calif.) may not be able to deliver anything beyond the "trust me." And many are beginning to question whether the sainted Special Counsel, Robert Mueller may not be able to come up with much more than click-bait farms in St. Petersburg and dirt to put dubious characters like Paul Manafort in jail on charges unrelated to Russiagate. (After all, Mueller has already been at it a very long time.)

And what would that mean for the re-election prospects of candidates like the superannuated Democratic-machine product Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.), whose prospects are already waning?

Not to be ruled out is the possibility that the four senators may also be motivated by a new appreciation of the dangers of blaming everything on Russia, with the possible result of U.S.-Russia relations falling into a state of complete disrepair. The key question is whether President Putin can be de-demonized. That will depend on the mainstream media, which, alas, is not accustomed to reassessing and silencing the bellicose drums – even in the face of new realities like the petering out of Russiagate and Putin’s entirely credible declaration of strategic parity.

Gang of Four Letter to Secretary of State Rex Tillerson

As posted on the [website of Senator Merkley](#)

March 8, 2018

The Honorable Rex W. Tillerson
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
Washington, DC

Dear Secretary Tillerson:

We write to urge the State Department to convene the next U.S.-Russia Strategic Dialogue as soon as possible.

A U.S.-Russia Strategic Dialogue is more urgent following President Putin’s public address on March 1st when he referred to several new nuclear weapons Russia is reportedly developing including a cruise missile and a nuclear underwater drone, which are not currently limited by the New START treaty, and would be destabilizing if deployed. There is no doubt we have significant disagreements with Russia, including Russia’s brazen interference in the 2016 U.S. elections; continued violation of the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF); invasion of Ukraine and illegal annexation of Crimea; and destabilizing actions in Syria. However, it is due to these policy rifts, not in spite of them, that the United States should urgently engage with Russia to avoid miscalculation and reduce the likelihood of conflict.

First, we encourage the administration to propose alternative solutions to address Russia’s violation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF). Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov admitted to the existence of this ground launched cruise missile (GLCM), but contended that the system was INF Treaty compliant.

Senior officials from the United States and Russia have said that the INF Treaty plays an “important role in the existing system of international security.” As

such, we urge the State Department to resolve Russia's violation through existing INF Treaty provisions or new mutually acceptable means.

Second, we urge the United States to extend the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START). The Trump administration's own 2018 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) references Russia's robust nuclear modernization program as a main justification behind the U.S. need to recapitalize its three legs of the nuclear triad. An extension of New START would verifiably lock-in the Treaty's Central Limits – and with it – the reductions in strategic forces Russia has made.

The New START Treaty, which entered into force in 2011, provides transparency and predictability into the size and location of Russia's strategic nuclear delivery systems, warheads, and facilities. New START's robust verification architecture involves thousands of data exchanges and regular on-site inspections. The United States confirmed in February that Russia met New START's Central Treaty Limits and it stated that "implementation of the New START Treaty enhances the safety and security of the United States." These same Central Treaty Limits could also govern two of the new types of nuclear weapons referenced by President Putin on March 1st – a case the United States can argue through the Treaty's Biannual Consultative Commission (BCC).

Lastly, as the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review notes, Russia maintains a numerical advantage to the United States in the number of non-strategic nuclear weapons. The Senate, in its Resolution of Ratification on New START in 2010, took stock of this imbalance and called upon the United States to commence negotiations that would "secure and reduce tactical nuclear weapons in a verifiable manner." Attempts by the Obama administration to negotiate an agreement on this class of weapons met resistance from Russia. However, even absent the political space for a formal agreement or binding treaty with Russia, we urge the State Department to discuss ways to enhance transparency on non-strategic nuclear weapons.

Extending New START, resolving Russia's INF violation, and enhancing transparency measures relating to non-strategic nuclear weapons will also help quiet growing calls from many countries that the United States is not upholding its Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) obligations. The Treaty's three mutually reinforcing pillars: non-proliferation, peaceful uses of the atom, and disarmament can only be advanced through U.S. leadership on all three.

There is no guarantee that we can make progress with Russia on these issues. However, even at the height of Cold War tensions, the United States and the Soviet Union were able to engage on matters of strategic stability. Leaders from both countries believed, as we should today, that the incredible destructive force of nuclear weapons is reason enough to make any and all

efforts to lessen the chance that they can never be used again.

Sincerely,

Senators Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.), Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.), Edward J. Markey (D-Mass.), Bernie Sanders (I-Vermont)

Gilbert Doctorow is an independent political analyst based in Brussels. His latest book, *Does the United States Have a Future?* was published in October 2017. Both paperback and e-book versions are available for purchase on www.amazon.com and all affiliated Amazon websites worldwide.

Ray McGovern works with Tell the Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. He served in Army and CIA intelligence analysis for 30 years and, after retiring, co-founded Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS).

The Illusion of War Without Casualties

America's wars in the post-9/11 era have been characterized by relatively low U.S. casualties, but that does not mean that they are any less violent than previous wars, Nicolas J.S. Davies observes.

By Nicolas J.S. Davies

Last Sunday's Oscar Awards were interrupted by an incongruous propaganda exercise featuring a Native American actor and Vietnam vet, featuring a montage of clips from Hollywood war movies.

The actor, Wes Studi, said that he "fought for freedom" in Vietnam. But anyone with even a rudimentary understanding of that war, including for instance the millions of viewers who watched Ken Burns' Vietnam War documentary, knows that it was the Vietnamese who were fighting for freedom – while Studi and his comrades were fighting, killing and dying, often bravely and for misguided reasons, to deny the people of Vietnam that freedom.

Studi introduced the Hollywood movies he was showcasing, including "American Sniper," "The Hurt Locker" and "Zero Dark Thirty," with the words, "Let's take a moment to pay tribute to these powerful films that shine a great spotlight on those who have fought for freedom around the world."

To pretend to a worldwide TV audience in 2018 that the U.S. war machine is

“fighting for freedom” in the countries it attacks or invades was an absurdity that could only add insult to injury for millions of survivors of U.S. coups, invasions, bombing campaigns and hostile military occupations all over the world.

Wes Studi’s role in this Orwellian presentation made it even more incongruous, as his own Cherokee people are themselves survivors of American ethnic cleansing and forced displacement on the Trail of Tears from North Carolina, where they had lived for hundreds or maybe thousands of years, to Oklahoma where Studi was born.

Unlike the delegates at the 2016 Democratic National Convention who broke out in chants of “no more war” at displays of militarism, the great and the good of Hollywood seemed nonplussed by this strange interlude. Few of them applauded it, but none protested either.

From Dunkirk to Iraq and Syria

Perhaps the aging white men who still run the “Academy” were driven to this exhibition of militarism by the fact that two of the films nominated for Oscars were war movies. But they were both films about the U.K. in the early years of the Second World War – stories of British people resisting German aggression, not of Americans committing it.

Like most cinematic paeans to the U.K.’s “finest hour,” both these films are rooted in Winston Churchill’s own account of the Second World War and his role in it. Churchill was roundly sent packing by British voters in 1945, before the war was even over, as British troops and their families instead voted for the “land fit for heroes” promised by the Labour Party, a land where the rich would share the sacrifices of the poor, in peace as in war, with a National Health Service and social justice for all.

Churchill reportedly consoled his cabinet at its final meeting, telling them, “Never fear, gentlemen, history will be kind to us – for I shall write it.” And so he did, cementing his own place in history and drowning out more critical accounts of the U.K.’s role in the war by serious historians like A.J.P. Taylor in the U.K. and D.F. Fleming in the U.S.

If the Military Industrial Complex and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences are trying to connect these Churchillian epics with America’s current wars, they should be careful what they wish for. Many people around the world need little prompting to identify the German Stukas and Heinkels bombing Dunkirk and London with the U.S. and allied F-16s bombing Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Yemen, and the British troops huddled on the beach at Dunkirk with the

destitute refugees stumbling ashore on Lesbos and Lampedusa.

Externalizing the Violence of War

In the past 16 years, the U.S. has invaded, occupied and dropped 200,000 bombs and missiles on seven countries, but it has lost only 6,939 American troops killed and 50,000 wounded in these wars. To put this in the context of U.S. military history, 58,000 U.S. troops were killed in Vietnam, 54,000 in Korea, 405,000 in the Second World War and 116,000 in the First World War.

But low U.S. casualties do not mean that our current wars are less violent than previous wars. Our post-2001 wars have probably killed between 2 and 5 million people. The use of massive aerial and artillery bombardment has reduced cities like Fallujah, Ramadi, Sirte, Kobane, Mosul and Raqqa to rubble, and our wars have plunged entire societies into endless violence and chaos.

But by bombing and firing from a distance with very powerful weapons, the U.S. has wreaked all this slaughter and destruction at an extraordinary low rate of U.S. casualties. The U.S.'s technological war-making has not reduced the violence and horror of war, but it has "externalized" it, at least temporarily.

But do these low casualty rates represent a kind of "new normal" that the U.S. can replicate whenever it attacks or invades other countries? Can it keep waging war around the world and remain so uniquely immune from the horrors it unleashes on others?

Or are the low U.S. casualty rates in these wars against relatively weak military forces and lightly armed resistance fighters giving Americans a false picture of war, one that is enthusiastically embellished by Hollywood and the corporate media?

Even when the U.S. was losing 900-1,000 troops killed in action in Iraq and Afghanistan each year from 2004 to 2007, there was much more public debate and vocal opposition to war than there is now, but those were still historically very low casualty rates.

U.S. military leaders are more realistic than their civilian counterparts. General Dunford, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has told Congress that the U.S. plan for war on North Korea is for a ground invasion of Korea, effectively a Second Korean War. The Pentagon must have an estimate of the number of U.S. troops who are likely to be killed and wounded under its plan, and Americans should insist that it makes that estimate public before U.S. leaders decide to launch such a war.

The other country that the U.S., Israel and Saudi Arabia keep threatening to

attack or invade is Iran. President Obama admitted from the outset that Iran was the ultimate strategic target of the CIA's proxy war in Syria.

Israeli and Saudi leaders openly threaten war on Iran, but expect the U.S. to fight Iran on their behalf. American politicians play along with this dangerous game, which could get thousands of their constituents killed. This would flip the traditional U.S. doctrine of proxy war on its head, effectively turning the U.S. military into a proxy force fighting for the ill-defined interests of Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Iran is nearly 4 times the size of Iraq, with more than double its population. It has a 500,000 strong military and its decades of independence and isolation from the West have forced it to develop its own weapons industry, supplemented by some advanced Russian and Chinese weapons.

In an article about the prospect of a U.S. war on Iran, U.S. Army Major Danny Sjursen dismissed American politicians' fears of Iran as "alarmism" and called his boss, Defense Secretary Mattis, "obsessed" with Iran. Sjursen believes that the "fiercely nationalistic" Iranians would mount a determined and effective resistance to foreign occupation, and concludes, "Make no mistake, U.S. military occupation of the Islamic Republic would make the occupation of Iraq, for once, actually look like the 'cakewalk' it was billed to be."

Is This America's "Phony War"?

Invading North Korea or Iran could make the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan look in hindsight like the German invasions of Czechoslovakia and Poland must have looked to German troops on the Eastern front a few years later. Only 18,000 German troops were killed in the invasion of Czechoslovakia and 16,000 in the invasion of Poland. But the larger war that they led to killed 7 million Germans and wounded 7 million more.

After the deprivations of the First World War reduced Germany to a state of near starvation and drove the German Navy to mutiny, Adolf Hitler was determined, like America's leaders today, to maintain an illusion of peace and prosperity on the home front. The newly conquered people of the thousand-year Reich could suffer, but not Germans in the homeland.

Hitler succeeded in maintaining the standard of living in Germany at about its pre-war level for the first two years of the war, and even began cutting military spending in 1940 to boost the civilian economy. Germany only embraced a total war economy when its previously all-conquering forces hit a brick wall of resistance in the Soviet Union. Could Americans be living through a similar "phony war", one miscalculation away from a similar shock at the brutal reality

of the wars we have unleashed on the world?

How would the American public react if far greater numbers of Americans were killed in Korea or Iran – or Venezuela? Or even in Syria if the U.S. and its allies follow through on their plan to illegally occupy Syria east of the Euphrates?

And where are our political leaders and jingoistic media leading us with their ever-escalating anti-Russian and anti-Chinese propaganda? How far will they take their nuclear brinkmanship? Would American politicians even know before it was too late if they crossed a point of no return in their dismantling of Cold War nuclear treaties and escalating tensions with Russia and China?

Obama's doctrine of covert and proxy war was a response to the public reaction to what were in fact historically low U.S. casualties in Afghanistan and Iraq. But Obama waged war on the quiet, not war on the cheap. Under cover of his dovish image, he successfully minimized the public reaction to his escalation of the war in Afghanistan, his proxy wars in Libya, Syria, Ukraine and Yemen, his global expansion of special operations and drone strikes and a massive bombing campaign in Iraq and Syria.

How many Americans know that the bombing campaign Obama launched in Iraq and Syria in 2014 has been the heaviest U.S. bombing campaign anywhere in the world since Vietnam? Over 105,000 bombs and missiles, as well as indiscriminate U.S., French and Iraqi rockets and artillery, have blasted thousands of homes in Mosul, Raqqa, Fallujah, Ramadi and dozens of smaller towns and villages. As well as killing thousands of Islamic State fighters, they have probably killed at least 100,000 civilians, a systematic war crime that has passed almost without comment in the Western media.

"...And It Is Late"

How will the American public react if Trump launches new wars against North Korea or Iran, and the U.S. casualty rate returns to a more historically "normal" level – maybe 10,000 Americans killed each year, as during the peak years of the American War in Vietnam, or even 100,000 per year, as in U.S. combat in the Second World War? Or what if one of our many wars finally escalates into a nuclear war, with a higher U.S. casualty rate than any previous war in our history?

In his classic 1994 book, Century of War, the late Gabriel Kolko presciently explained,

"Those who argue that war and preparation for it is not necessary to capitalism's existence or prosperity miss the point entirely: it simply has not

functioned in any other way in the past and there is nothing in the present to warrant the assumption that the coming decades will be any different...”

Kolko concluded,

“But there are no easy solutions to the problems of irresponsible, deluded leaders and the classes they represent, or the hesitation of people to reverse the world’s folly before they are themselves subjected to its grievous consequences. So much remains to be done – and it is late.”

America’s deluded leaders know nothing of diplomacy beyond bullying and brinkmanship. As they brainwash themselves and the public with the illusion of war without casualties, they will keep killing, destroying and risking our future until we stop them – or until they stop us and everything else.

The critical question today is whether the American public can muster the political will to pull our country back from the brink of an even greater military disaster than the ones we have already unleashed on millions of our neighbors.

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

The Rise of the New McCarthyism

From the Archive: On March 9, 1954, Senate Republicans criticized Joe McCarthy’s overreaches and took action to limit his power, marking the end of McCarthyism. On the anniversary of that event, we republish an article on the New McCarthyism by Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry ([first published Sept. 26 2017](#))

Make no mistake about it: the United States has entered an era of a New McCarthyism that blames nearly every political problem on Russia and has begun targeting American citizens who don’t go along with this New Cold War propaganda.

A difference, however, from the McCarthyism of the 1950s is that this New McCarthyism has enlisted Democrats, liberals and even progressives in the cause because of their disgust with President Trump; the 1950s version was driven by

Republicans and the Right with much of the Left on the receiving end, maligned by the likes of Sen. Joe McCarthy as “un-American” and as Communism’s “fellow travelers.”

The real winners in this New McCarthyism appear to be the neoconservatives who have leveraged the Democratic/liberal hatred of Trump to draw much of the Left into the political hysteria that sees the controversy over alleged Russian political “meddling” as an opportunity to “get Trump.”

Already, the neocons and their allies have exploited the anti-Russian frenzy to extract tens of millions of dollars more from the taxpayers for programs to “combat Russian propaganda,” i.e., funding of non-governmental organizations and “scholars” who target dissident Americans for challenging the justifications for this New Cold War.

The Washington Post, which for years has served as the flagship for neocon propaganda, is again charting the new course for America, much as it did in rallying U.S. public backing for the 2003 invasion of Iraq and in building sympathy for abortive “regime change” projects aimed at Syria and Iran. The Post has begun blaming almost every unpleasant development in the world on Russia! Russia! Russia!

For instance, a Post editorial on Tuesday shifted the blame for the anemic victory of German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the surprising strength of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) from Merkel’s austerity policies, which have caused hardship for much of the working class, or from her open door for Mideast refugees, which has destabilized some working-class neighborhoods, to – you guessed it – Russia!

The evidence, as usual, is vague and self-interested, but sure to be swallowed by many Democrats and liberals, who hate Russia because they blame it for Trump, and by lots of Republicans and conservatives, who have a residual hatred for Russia left over from the Old Cold War.

The Post cited the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab, which has been pushing much of the hysteria about alleged Russian activities on the Internet. The Atlantic Council essentially is NATO’s think tank and is financed with money from the U.S. government, Gulf oil states, military contractors, global financial institutions and many other sources which stand to gain directly or indirectly from the expanding U.S. military budget and NATO interventions.

Blaming Russia

In this New Cold War, the Russians get blamed for not only disrupting some

neocan “regime change” projects, such as the proxy war in Syria, but also political developments in the West, such as Donald Trump’s election and AfD’s rise in Germany.

The Atlantic Council’s digital lab claimed, according to the Post editorial, that “In the final hours of the [German] campaign, online supporters of the AfD began warning their base of possible election fraud, and the online alarms were ‘driven by anonymous troll accounts and boosted by a Russian-language bot-net.’”

Of course, the Post evinces no evidence tying any of this to the Russian government or to President Vladimir Putin. It is the nature of McCarthyism that actual evidence is not required, just heavy breathing and dark suspicions. For those of us who operate Web sites, “trolls” – some volunteers and some professionals – have become a common annoyance and they represent many political outlooks, not just Russian.

Plus, it is standard procedure these days for campaigns to issue last-minute alarms to their supporters about possible election fraud to raise doubts about the results should the outcome be disappointing.

The U.S. government has engaged in precisely this strategy around the world, having pro-U.S. parties not only complain about election fraud but to take to the streets in violent protests to impugn the legitimacy of election outcomes. That U.S. strategy has been applied to places such as Ukraine (the Orange Revolution in 2004); Iran (the Green Revolution in 2009); Russia (the Snow Revolution in 2011); and many other locations.

Pre-election alerts also have become a feature in U.S. elections, even in 2016 when both Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton raised questions about the legitimacy of the balloting, albeit for different reasons.

Yet, instead of seeing the AfD maneuver as a typical ploy by a relatively minor party – and the German election outcome as an understandable reflection of voter discontent and weariness over Merkel’s three terms as Chancellor – the Atlantic Council and the Post see Russians under every bed and particularly Putin.

Loving to Hate Putin

In the world of neocan propaganda, Putin has become the great *bête noire*, since he has frustrated a variety of neocan schemes. He helped head off a major U.S. military strike against Syria in 2013; he aided President Obama in achieving the Iran nuclear agreement in 2014-15; Putin opposed and – to a degree – frustrated the neocan-supported coup in Ukraine in 2014; and he ultimately supplied the air power that defeated neocan-backed “rebel” forces in Syria in 2015-17.

So, the Post and the neocons want Putin gone – and they have used gauzy allegations about “Russian meddling” in the U.S. and other elections as the new propaganda theme to justify destabilizing Russia with economic sanctions and, if possible, engineering another “regime change” project in Moscow.

None of this is even secret. Carl Gershman, the neocon president of the U.S.-government-funded National Endowment for Democracy, publicly proclaimed the goal of ousting Putin in an op-ed in The Washington Post, writing: “The United States has the power to contain and defeat this danger. The issue is whether we can summon the will to do so.”

But the way neocon propaganda works is that the U.S. and its allies are always the victims of some nefarious enemy who must be thwarted to protect all that is good in the world. In other words, even as NED and other U.S.-funded operations take aim at Putin and Russia, Russia and Putin must be transformed into the aggressors.

“Mr. Putin would like nothing better than to generate doubts, fog, cracks and uncertainty around the German pillar of Europe,” the Post editorial said. “He relishes infiltrating chaos and mischief into open societies. In this case, supporting the far-right AfD is extraordinarily cynical, given how many millions of Russians died to defeat the fascists seven decades ago.”

Not to belabor the point but there is no credible evidence that Putin did any of this. There is a claim by the virulently anti-Russian Atlantic Council that some “anonymous troll accounts” promoted some AfD complaint about possible voter fraud and that it was picked up by “a Russian-language bot-net.” Even if that is true – and the Atlantic Council is far from an objective source – where is the link to Putin?

Not everything that happens in Russia, a nation of 144 million people, is ordered by Putin. But the Post would have you believe that it is. It is the centerpiece of this neocon conspiracy theory.

Silencing Dissent

Similarly, any American who questions this propaganda immediately is dismissed as a “Kremlin stooge” or a “Russian propagandist,” another ugly campaign spearheaded by the Post and the neocons. Again, no evidence is required, just some analysis that what you’re saying somehow parallels something Putin has said.

On Tuesday, in what amounted to a companion piece for the editorial, a Post article again pushed the unproven suspicions about “Russian operatives” buying \$100,000 in Facebook ads from 2015 into 2017 to supposedly influence U.S.

politics. Once again, no evidence required.

In the article, the Post also reminds its readers that Moscow has a history of focusing on social inequities in the U.S., which gets us back to the comparisons between the Old McCarthyism and the new.

Yes, it's true that the Soviet Union denounced America's racial segregation and cited that ugly feature of U.S. society in expressing solidarity with the American civil rights movement and national liberation struggles in Africa. It's also true that American Communists collaborated with the domestic civil rights movement to promote racial integration.

That was a key reason why J. Edgar Hoover's FBI targeted Martin Luther King Jr. and other African-American leaders – because of their association with known or suspected Communists. (Similarly, the Reagan administration resisted support for Nelson Mandela because his African National Congress accepted Communist support in its battle against South Africa's Apartheid white-supremacist regime.)

Interestingly, one of the arguments from liberal national Democrats in opposing segregation in the 1960s was that the repression of American blacks undercut U.S. diplomatic efforts to develop allies in Africa. In other words, Soviet and Communist criticism of America's segregation actually helped bring about the demise of that offensive system.

Yet, King's association with alleged Communists remained a talking point of die-hard segregationists even after his assassination when they opposed creating a national holiday in his honor in the 1980s.

These parallels between the Old McCarthyism and the New McCarthyism are implicitly acknowledged in the Post's news article on Tuesday, which cites Putin's criticism of police killings of unarmed American blacks as evidence that he is meddling in U.S. politics.

"Since taking office, Putin has on occasion sought to spotlight racial tensions in the United States as a means of shaping perceptions of American society," the article states. "Putin injected himself in 2014 into the race debate after protests broke out in Ferguson, Mo., over the fatal shooting of Michael Brown, an African American, by a white police officer.

"'Do you believe that everything is perfect now from the point of view of democracy in the United States?' Putin told CBS's '60 Minutes' program. 'If everything was perfect, there wouldn't be the problem of Ferguson. There would be no abuse by the police. But our task is to see all these problems and respond properly.'"

The Post's speculative point seems to be that Putin's response included having "Russian operatives" buy some ads on Facebook to exploit these racial tensions, but there is no evidence to support that conspiracy theory.

However, as this anti-Russia hysteria spreads, we may soon see Americans who also protest the police killing of unarmed black men denounced as "Putin's fellow-travelers," much as King and other civil rights leaders were smeared as "Communist dupes."

Ignoring Reality

So, instead of Democrats and Chancellor Merkel looking in the mirror and seeing the real reasons why many white working-class voters are turning toward "populist" and "extremist" alternatives, they can simply blame Putin and continue a crackdown on Internet-based dissent as the work of "Russian operatives."

Already, under the guise of combating "Russian propaganda" and "fake news," Google, Facebook and other tech giants have begun introducing algorithms to hunt down and marginalize news that challenges official U.S. government narratives on hot-button issues such as Ukraine and Syria. Again, no evidence is required, just the fact that Putin may have said something similar.

As Democrats, liberals and even some progressives join in this Russia-gate hysteria – driven by their hatred of Donald Trump and his supposedly "fascistic" tendencies – they might want to consider whom they've climbed into bed with and what these neocons have in mind for the future.

Arguably, if fascism or totalitarianism comes to the United States, it is more likely to arrive in the guise of "protecting democracy" from Russia or another foreign adversary than from a reality-TV clown like Donald Trump.

The New McCarthyism with its Orwellian-style algorithms might seem like a clever way to neutralize (or maybe even help oust) Trump, but – long after Trump is gone – a structure for letting the neocons and the mainstream media monopolize American political debate might be a far greater threat to both democracy and peace.

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).

To Stop War, Do What Katharine Gun Did

Legendary whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg's advice to stop current and future wars is simple: do what Katharine Gun did, writes Norman Solomon.

By Norman Solomon

Daniel Ellsberg has a message that managers of the warfare state don't want people to hear.

"If you have information that bears on deception or illegality in pursuing wrongful policies or an aggressive war," he said in a statement released last week, "don't wait to put that out and think about it, consider acting in a timely way at whatever cost to yourself... Do what Katharine Gun did."

If you don't know what Katharine Gun did, chalk that up to the media power of the war system.

Ellsberg's [video](#) statement went public as this month began, just before the 15th anniversary of when a British newspaper, the Observer, revealed a secret NSA memo – thanks to Katharine Gun. At the UK's intelligence agency GCHQ, about 100 people received the same email [memo](#) from the National Security Agency on the last day of January 2003, seven weeks before the invasion of Iraq got underway. Only Katharine Gun, at great personal risk, decided to leak the document.

If more people had taken such risks in early 2003, the Iraq War might have been prevented. If more people were willing to take such risks in 2018, the current military slaughter in several nations, mainly funded by U.S. taxpayers, might be curtailed if not stopped. Blockage of information about past whistleblowing deprives the public of inspiring role models.

That's the kind of reality George Orwell was referring to when he wrote: "Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past."

Fifteen years ago, "I find myself reading on my computer from the Observer the most extraordinary leak, or unauthorized disclosure, of classified information that I'd ever seen," Ellsberg recalled, "and that definitely included and surpassed my own disclosure of top-secret information, a history of U.S. decision-making in Vietnam years earlier." The Pentagon Papers whistleblower instantly recognized that, in the Observer article, "I was looking at something that was clearly classified much higher than top secret... It was an operational cable having to do with how to conduct communications intelligence."

What Ellsberg read in the newspaper story “was a cable from the NSA asking GCHQ to help in the intercepting of communications, and that implied both office and home communications, of every member of the Security Council of the UN. Now, why would NSA need GCHQ to do that? Because a condition of having the UN headquarters and the Security Council in the U.S. in New York was that the U.S. intelligence agencies promised or were required not to conduct intelligence on members of the UN. Well, of course they want that. So, they rely on their allies, the buddies, in the British to commit these criminal acts for them. And with this clearly I thought someone very high in access in Britain intelligence services must dissent from what was already clear the path to an illegal war.”

But actually, the leak didn't come from “someone very high” in GCHQ. The whistleblower turned out to be a 28-year-old linguist and analyst at the agency, Katharine Gun, who had chosen to intervene against the march to war.

As Gun has recounted, she and other GCHQ employees “received an email from a senior official at the National Security Agency. It said the agency was ‘mounting a surge particularly directed at the UN Security Council members,’ and that it wanted ‘the whole gamut of information that could give U.S. policymakers an edge in obtaining results favorable to U.S. goals or to head off surprises.’”

In other words, the U.S. and British governments wanted to eavesdrop on key UN delegations and then manipulate or even blackmail them into voting for war.

Katharine Gun took action: “I was furious when I read that email and leaked it. Soon afterwards, when the Observer ran a front-page story – ‘U.S. dirty tricks to win vote on Iraq war’ – I confessed to the leak and was arrested on suspicion of the breach of section 1 of the Official Secrets Act.”

The whistleblowing occurred in real time. “This was not history,” as Ellsberg put it. “This was a current cable, I could see immediately from the date, and it was before the war had actually started against Iraq. And the clear purpose of it was to induce the support of the Security Council members to support a new UN resolution for the invasion of Iraq.”

The eavesdropping was aimed at gaining a second – and this time unequivocal – Security Council resolution in support of an invasion. “British involvement in this would be illegal without a second resolution,” Ellsberg said. “How are they going to get that? Obviously essentially by blackmail and intimidation, by knowing the private wants and embarrassments, possible embarrassments, of people on the Security Council, or their aides, and so forth. The idea was, in effect, to coerce their vote.”

Katharine Gun foiled that plan. While scarcely reported in the U.S. media

(despite cutting-edge news releases produced by my colleagues at the Institute for Public Accuracy beginning in early March of 2003), the revelations published by the Observer caused huge media coverage across much of the globe – and sparked outrage in several countries with seats on the Security Council.

“In the rest of the world there was great interest in the fact that American intelligence agencies were interfering with their policies of their representatives in the Security Council,” Ellsberg noted. A result was that for some governments on the Security Council at the time, the leak “made it impossible for their representatives to support the U.S. wish to legitimize this clear case of aggression against Iraq. So, the U.S. had to give up its plan to get a supporting vote in the UN.”

The U.S. and British governments “went ahead anyway, but without the legitimating precedent of an aggressive war that would have had, I think, many consequences later.”

Ellsberg said: “What was most striking then and still to me about this disclosure was that the young woman who looked at this cable coming across her computer in GCHQ acted almost immediately on what she saw was the pursuit of an illegal war by illegal means.... I’ve often been asked, is there anything about the release of the Pentagon Papers on Vietnam that you regret. And my answer is yes, very much. I regret that I didn’t put out the top-secret documents available to me in the Pentagon in 1964, years before I actually gave them to the Senate and then to the newspapers. Years of war and years of bombing. It wasn’t that I was considering that all that time. I didn’t have a precedent to instruct me on that at that point. But in any case, I could have been much more effective in averting that war if I’d acted much sooner.”

Katharine Gun “was not dealing only with historical material,” Ellsberg emphasizes. She “was acting in a timely fashion very quickly on her right judgment that what she was being asked to participate in was wrong. I salute her. She’s my hero. I think she’s a model for other whistleblowers. And for a long time I’ve said to people in her position or my old position in the government: Don’t do what I did. Don’t wait till the bombs are falling or thousands more have died.”

By making her choice, Gun risked two years of imprisonment. In Ellsberg’s words, she seemed to be facing “a sure conviction – except that the government was not willing to have the legality of that war discussed in a courtroom, and in the end dropped the charges.”

As this month began, Katharine Gun spoke at a London news conference, co-sponsored by ExposeFacts and RootsAction.org (organizations I’m part of) and

hosted by the National Union of Journalists. Speaking alongside her were three other whistleblowers – Thomas Drake, Matthew Hoh and Jesselyn Radack – who have emerged as eloquent American truth tellers from the NSA, State Department and Justice Department. The presentations by the four are stunning to watch.

Their initiatives, taken at great personal risk, underscore how we can seize the time to make use of opportunities for forthright actions of conscience. This truth is far from confined to what we call whistleblowing. It's about possibilities in a world where silence is so often consent to what's wrong, and disruption of injustice is imperative for creating a more humane future.

Norman Solomon is the coordinator of the online activist group RootsAction.org and the executive director of the Institute for Public Accuracy. He is the author of a dozen books including *War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death*.

Raining on Trump's Parade

Donald Trump has called for a military parade in Washington DC but a coalition of peace and justice groups hope to stop the parade before it happens, explains Margaret Flowers in this interview with Ann Garrison.

By Ann Garrison

President Trump has asked the Pentagon to plan a military parade in Washington DC on Veteran's Day, November 11. Democrats have decried the cost and authoritarian implication, and antiwar groups are planning a countermarch. I spoke to Margaret Flowers, medical doctor, Green Party activist, and co-founder of the movement news website Popular Resistance, who is among those organizing the countermarch.

Ann Garrison: Margaret, does this countermarch have a name yet, and what can you tell us about the coalition organizing it?

Margaret Flowers: So far the coalition is just calling this the "No Trump Military Parade." Our goal is to get so many people signed up to come that Trump feels compelled to cancel it. If that doesn't happen, we hope that we can mobilize more people to come to Washington DC to oppose it than Trump can mobilize to support it.

As far as the coalition goes, and this is still fairly young, we found that a

number of organizations that Popular Resistance works with were organizing responses to the military parade. ANSWER put out a call for people to show up. Veterans for Peace and some of their allied organizations were organizing a veterans and indigenous peace march during that weekend, with a message to reclaim Armistice Day, which is what Veterans Day was initially. Interestingly, this is the hundred year anniversary of the first Armistice Day, the end of World War I.

World Beyond War was also getting people to sign on to oppose the parade, so we thought, "Why don't we bring all these people together and make this a big display of opposition to militarization both at home and abroad?" We had our first exploratory call last week and found that there was a lot of energy and a lot of unity in our messaging against US imperialism, militarization, and austerity for public needs. The people who are behind this are all groups who are strongly opposed to the corporate duopoly war party, and who have been working to revive the peace movement in the United States.

AG: Some of those who identify as peace activists will no doubt say that this march is a reaction to Trump, not to the wars and weapons production that keep escalating no matter who's in the White House. What's your response?

MF: Now that President Trump is in office, that's the concern because that's what the Democratic Party groups and the party itself do when Republicans are in power. They use these issues for their own ends.

It's interesting, and I know that you're aware of this, that the Women's March was not a march against US militarism. Among the so-called progressive Democratic Party candidates running in this year's midterms, I haven't seen anybody who has a strong antimilitarist platform. So there is a possibility that some of these Democratic Party groups will try to latch onto this effort and use it for their own purposes, but all the people and groups organizing this are opposed to the corporate duopoly war party.

I think it's important for us to make it clear that the United States has a long history of militarism, and that it has been escalating under recent presidents. Obama was worse than Bush. Trump is trying to outdo Obama. It's not a matter of who's in the White House or which party has the majority in Congress. It's that the United States is the largest empire in the world, and we have a very strong military machine that demands to be fed constantly. So even if some of those Democratic Party members sign on, they may be adding numbers, but hopefully not diluting the message.

AG: A Women's March on the Pentagon, which is not a reaction to Trump but to war and militarism, is scheduled for October 20-21, the 51st anniversary of the 1967

March on the Pentagon organized by the National Mobilization to End the Vietnam War. Will you be joining or supporting that march as well?

MF: We're very excited about the Women's March on the Pentagon. I think, like you, I refrained from participating in the previous Women's Marches because they were organized by people who were part of the power structure. It's been interesting to see what's going on with that because people at the grassroots level didn't seem to be altogether on board with those who were leading those marches. But, again, there was no strong antimilitarism component to those marches. So we were very excited when Cindy Sheehan announced her Women's March on the Pentagon. I felt like, "Wow, now here's a Women's March I'll actually feel comfortable participating in," so Popular Resistance was one of the early organizations to sign on to that. We've been promoting it on our website, and I will be there, and we'll be supporting it in any way we can.

AG: Assuming Trump's parade goes forward, there will no doubt be a tremendous amount of international media coverage, and the optics will be grim for much of the world if there's no visible resistance. Will you be working on a media strategy with that in mind?

MF: That's one of the main reasons we felt so compelled to organize around Trump's military parade. People around the world keep asking us, "Where is the antiwar movement in the United States? You guys are the aggressors, so why aren't you doing anything about what your country is doing all around the world?" So having this kind of energy around this military parade—this gross display and glorification of militarism—is an opportunity for us in the United States to show the world that there is opposition to US empire and wars of aggression, including these so-called humanitarian interventions that so many progressives are supporting. And, in addition to having protests in Washington DC, we're reaching out to our international allies around the world and asking them to hold actions on that day as well. And of course there's a lot of international media in DC, and when we do actions on various issues, we tend to get more coverage from the international media than from the US media. So we will definitely be reaching out to them.

AG: Do you think a countermarch will be allowed to get anywhere near the Pentagon parade, and have you considered that this might be a dangerous protest?

MF: The benefit of having coalition partners who are actually based in Washington DC is that they can apply for permits as soon as the need arises, and permits are handed out on a first come, first serve basis there. As soon as President Trump put out the message that he might have a military parade on Veterans Day, organizations that we work with quickly applied for permits in as many areas as they could think of where such a parade might happen. So we will

have permits to be close to the parade, and we even applied for them before any groups that may come to support it.

As to whether it might be dangerous: the police in DC are fairly used to dealing with protest, and most of them understand our First Amendment right to freedom of expression. That's not always the case; the police were very aggressive around Trump's inauguration, but I think they may regret that. The public is very largely with us, and a lot of people in the military oppose this gross display of militarization, this waste of money and time, as well. If there's a large turnout, that's protective. The police will be a lot less likely to misbehave if there are a lot of people around.

AG: The peace movement all but completely faded from view during Obama's eight years in office, despite new US Wars in Libya and Syria, escalation of the US War in Afghanistan, and the expansion of US bases and militarism across the African continent. If the peace movement re-emerges under Trump, do you think it could survive the election of another Democratic Party president?

MF: It was difficult to see the antiwar movement all but disappear while Obama was president. Of course we were out there protesting anyway, and when we helped organize the occupation of Freedom Plaza in 2011, it included a very strong antiwar component. It was disappointing to see antiwar protestors get confused by a Democratic president who was such a militarist. So we just have to keep working at reviving and growing the antiwar movement here, and try to demonstrate that this goes across political parties, that both Democrats and Republicans are funded and lobbied by the weapons manufacturers and all the other elements of the military industrial complex. The 2018 military budget is \$700 billion, and it just keeps growing. It now eats up 57% of our discretionary spending, leaving only 43% for education, transportation, housing, and all our other human needs.

We need to demonstrate that this makes us less secure as a nation by creating more animosity towards us around the world and isolating us in the global community. Other nations are finally getting more courage to stand up and say they don't want to be bullied or controlled by us anymore. So this hurts every single person in the United States, as well as the masses of people suffering all the casualties and injuries and agony caused by US wars. No matter who's in office, we have to push the United States to pull back our troops on foreign shores, close down our 800 or more military bases, and redirect our resources to human needs here at home and reparations for all the damage we've done around the world.

AG: How can listeners find more information and/or sign on to attend or engage in planning the November 11 countermarch?

MF: We just got a website up: [No Trump Military Parade](#).

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