

Campaign 2016's Brave New World

As the U.S. election shapes up as a battle between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, the prospect for the public hearing anything approaching a truthful exchange of ideas appears hopeless, writes David Marks.

By David Marks

In 1958, a quarter century after publishing *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley wrote a reflective essay on the themes of his book that ring with prescient truth. His analysis delves into the rise of deceptive candidates who prioritize personal interests over supporting democracy.

Huxley wrote: "From a pulpit or a platform even the most conscientious of speakers finds it very difficult to tell the whole truth. The methods now being used to merchandise the political candidate as though he were a deodorant positively guarantee the electorate against ever hearing the truth about anything."

Huxley's words precisely describe the techniques used in the current presidential campaign. The core issue is the motivation behind the candidates' words.

Hillary Clinton promotes herself as the first female presidential candidate without embracing the pacifist foundations of feminism. She has supported many of the aggressive military actions of the United States in recent years. Her use of liberal rhetoric belies her ties to military and corporate interests and membership in the American oligarchy. Clinton's deceptive techniques in gaining popularity rely mostly on omission of truth. Except for a few grudging mistakes-were-made formulations, she admits to no faults.

Donald Trump brings distortion of truth to a new level. He is an iconic salesman, offering a magic potion that will cure all social and political ills. And in that tradition, he repeatedly assails the status quo, claiming to identify and empathize with the downtrodden and ignored. He intentionally attracts followers in hypnotic, pied-piper fashion, repeatedly asserting he will solve all their problems.

Trump drives this home by encouraging the disenchanting to project their discontent onto current leadership, rather than considering their own role in, or awareness of the dysfunctions in U.S. politics and economy. He offers no real solution to the individual except, "Vote for me."

This subversive approach of spewing emotion while ignoring facts appeals to the

darkest recesses of the human psyche and has become the norm in elections. In that sense, U.S. politics has reached a new low with the Trump candidacy. Very few of Trump's supporters can delineate his policy or position; rather they cite his attack on the establishment or his "honesty" or "strength" as reason for allegiance. Trump's act uses manipulative tactics aimed at stirring the unconscious forces of repressed discontent and frustration.

Trump repeatedly compliments himself on his own simple common sense values as his rhetoric fuels the hostile impulses of his followers. Trump's intolerance and bullying are symptomatic of undisguised fascism.

Different Styles

Candidate Clinton relies on more subtle techniques. She promotes conventional wisdom and the false premise that the U.S. is the arbiter of democracy in the world to justify military intervention. She makes her case for use of force citing "strategic" interests, omitting the corporate and financial motives that are the foundation of her policies. While her arguments appear more logical than her opponent's, they are no less deceptive.

Though candidate Trump criticizes Clinton's penchant for "regime change," he often suggests that forceful intervention or violence is a viable remedy in resolving international crises, stopping extremism, or punishing those who voice protest against him. This resonates with frustrated voters and encourages followers to act out personal anger against those who would doubt the supremacy of their leader. Trump's arrogance and self-absorbed persona are catalysts for unchecked hostility both domestically and internationally.

In his essay of nearly 60 years ago, Huxley describes how propaganda is used to justify violence:

"Propaganda in favor of action dictated by the impulses that are below self-interest offers false, garbled or incomplete evidence, avoids logical argument and seeks to influence its victims by the mere repetition of catchwords, by the furious denunciation of foreign or domestic scapegoats, and by cunningly associating the lowest passions with the highest ideals, so that atrocities come to be perpetrated in the name of God and the most cynical kind of Realpolitik is treated as a matter of religious principle and patriotic duty."

Huxley had observed the rise and fall of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. His evaluation of the social psychology of U.S. politics did not shy away from the universal similarities in human behavior at its worst. That perspective is no less valid today. Both presidential candidates can be assailed for their use of propaganda with "incomplete evidence."

Clinton's appeal is to the status quo, supporting a United States where military expenditures represent the highest proportion of tax revenues, where interests of big business and banking come first, and where mass shootings are a cultural norm. She has an advantage because of her appeal to the majority of voters who cling to normalcy. Clinton attacks Trump as unpredictable and dangerous.

Trump counterattacks by portraying her as deviant, abnormal and criminal, "Crooked Hillary." He also taps into the dissatisfaction with government and the reasonable belief that politicians have led the country astray, calling American leaders weak and incompetent in contrast to his supposed strength and skill.

He relies on a cult of personality and a searing indictment of current leadership to raise his status. Rather than appealing to factual data and proposing viable solutions, Trump is the supreme authoritarian targeting the unchecked emotional forces of those who are entranced by his bravado.

Riding the Discontent

Trump is the voice of collective dissatisfaction, projecting and revealing one version of the American reality. He describes a political world that he also embodies: "Washington is broken, and our country is in serious trouble and total disarray. Very simple. Politicians are all talk, no action. They are all talk and no action. And it's constant; it never ends."

Trump gladly enters this disarray, the realm where he is most comfortable. His stream of consciousness oratory and narcissistic candidacy bring a new bizarre character to the stage in U.S. politics, yet his rise in popularity is the extension of a growing phenomenon. For decades presidential candidates have harvested the bounty from conflicted emotions and despair to gain votes. Their empty sales tactics are often forgotten when they are elected. (In 1988, even the supposedly responsible Republican George H.W. Bush exploited racism with the Willie Horton commercials and promised, "read my lips, no new taxes," before raising taxes as President.)

Fear of Trump's words and demeanor has prompted critics and rivals to show distain, but attacks on him are hurled back with vindictive force. He succeeds in deflecting criticism and bringing former enemies into his camp. We witness the potential rise of an unpredictable tyrant.

Trump initially flaunted his independent wealth, claiming immunity from the pressure of lobbyists. With this, he unwittingly confessed allegiance to personal economic interests and policies that also favor the wealthiest Americans. Many of these same power brokers come to his side as he becomes the likely Republican presidential candidate.

Now that he could be elected, Trump's conflicted presentations of domestic and foreign policy have yet to alienate the politicians, millionaires and billionaires who join his campaign. The real list of priorities for them is short: little else matters but money and profits. Despite concerns about the personality and idiosyncrasies of their candidate, those who not long ago scorned the idea of a President Trump join an extremely dangerous bandwagon.

A billionaire with no leadership experience rises as the voice of the maligned and economically downtrodden. A candidate whose wealth is more telling than any of his stated positions has become the defender of those who suffer from an economy that overtly favors the richest individuals and corporations.

Beyond recognizing and criticizing his blustering racism and fascism, there is minimal challenge to Trump's most ludicrous claim: to represent any other economic class than his own. Trump's greatest vulnerability lies in his status as the super-rich candidate who dubiously presents himself as someone who will come to the aid of the economically challenged.

Allies of the Wealthy

Yet neither wealthy presidential contender – Trump nor Clinton – can be expected to do much that will discomfort the comfortable. While claiming to have altruistic motivations, they are inextricably tied to the forces that drive policies favoring profiteering over basic needs. The most costly impact of Trump's candidacy to America's economic elite will come when the public finally recognizes that the wealthiest Americans have gained vastly disproportional influence.

The founding principles and structure of the U.S. democracy rest on keeping power out of the hands of a small clique of people and their indiscriminate financially based decisions. An oligarch reaching for political office by any means confirms that the interests of an elite class are an entrenched priority.

Yet despite his crude emergence, Trump is not an anomaly. The rise of extreme nationalism in the face of economic crisis is a consequence of decades of corrupt domestic and international policies. The crisis that faces the United States is certainly exemplified by the rise of Donald Trump and would be seriously exacerbated by his presidency, but will not be resolved by his electoral defeat.

Huxley, as early as 1958, adds perspective to a continuing syndrome: "At this point we find ourselves confronted by a very disquieting question: Do we really wish to act upon our knowledge? Does a majority of the population think it worthwhile to take a good deal of trouble, in order to halt and, if possible,

reverse the current drift toward totalitarian control of everything?

“In the United States of America is the prophetic image of the rest of the urban-industrial world as it will be a few years from now; recent public opinion polls have revealed that an actual majority of young people in their teens, the voters of tomorrow, have no faith in democratic institutions, see no objection to the censorship of unpopular ideas, do not believe that government of the people by the people is possible and would be perfectly content, if they can continue to live in the style to which the boom has accustomed them, to be ruled, from above, by an oligarchy of assorted experts.”

Trump, the self-absorbed snake-oil salesman, may self-destruct as quickly as he has risen; however we cannot dismiss the illness allowing his candidacy. Materialism cloaked as patriotism needs to be faced head on and not blamed on a single candidate.

Perhaps Hillary Clinton is more subtle about the forces she is tied to; and clearly has more political experience and a better understanding of the constitutional system. Yet whoever is elected president of the United States will be wed to the identical economic forces. The presidential election of 2016 will be remembered as when Americans were forced to realize that their power has been handed to the economic elite.

Huxley’s question becomes more relevant: “Do we really wish to act upon our knowledge?”

Aldous Huxley’s full 1958 essay, *Brave New World Revisited*, can be read at:

<http://www.huxley.net/bnw-revisited/>

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America’s Many Mideast Blunders

Official Washington’s neocon foreign policy establishment looks forward to more “regime change” wars in the Mideast and more “blank checks” for Israel, but ex-Ambassador Chas W. Freeman Jr. sees such actions as a continued march of folly.

By Chas W. Freeman Jr. (A June 9 speech to the Center for the National Interest, Washington)

I have been asked to speak about the geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East, the realignments occurring among states there, and the prospects for the achievement of renewed stability in the region. I'm tempted to suggest that you read my latest book, *America's Continuing Misadventures in the Middle East*. So much has gone wrong that it is hard to be either brief or optimistic.

Two hundred and eighteen years ago today, Napoleon was preparing to take Malta. His purpose was to clear an obstacle to his seizure of Egypt for revolutionary France. He was able to invade Egypt on July 1, 1798. Napoleon's campaign there and in Palestine kicked off a two-century-long effort by the West to transform the Middle East.

European imperial powers and, latterly, the United States, have repeatedly sought to convert Arabs, Persians, and Turks to the secular values of the European Enlightenment, to democratize them, to impose Western models of governance on them in place of indigenous, Islamic systems, and more recently to persuade them to accept a Jewish state in their midst.

This experiment in expeditionary, transformative diplomacy has now definitively failed. The next administration will inherit a greatly diminished capacity to influence the evolution of the Middle East. Amidst the imbecilities of our interminably farcical election season, it has proven expedient to blame this on President Obama. If only he had bombed Syria, repudiated his predecessor's agreement to withdraw the U.S. military from Iraq, refused to compromise with Iran on nuclear matters, knuckled under to Netanyahu, or whatever, the old order in the Middle East would be alive and well and the United States would still call the shots there.

But this is nonsense. Our estrangement from the Middle East derives from trends that are much deeper than the manifest deficiencies of executive and congressional leadership in Washington. Americans and our partners in the Middle East have developed contradictory interests and priorities. Where shared values existed at all, they have increasingly diverged. There have been massive changes in geo-economics, energy markets, power balances, demographics, religious ideologies, and attitudes toward America (not just the U.S. government).

Many of these changes were catalyzed by historic American policy blunders. In the aggregate, these blunders are right up there with the French and German decisions to invade Russia and Japan's surprise attack on the United States. Their effects make current policies not just unsustainable but counterproductive.

Blunder number one was the failure to translate our military triumph over

Saddam's Iraq in 1991 into a peace with Baghdad. No effort was ever made to reconcile Iraq to the terms of its defeat. The victors instead sought to impose elaborate but previously undiscussed terms by UN fiat in the form of the UN Security Council Resolution 687 – “the mother of all resolutions.”

The military basis for a renewed balance of power in the Gulf was there to be exploited. The diplomatic vision was not. The George H. W. Bush administration ended without addressing the question of how to replace war with peace in the Gulf.

Wars don't end until the militarily humiliated accept the political consequences of their defeat. Saddam gave lip service to UNSCR 687 but took it no more seriously than Netanyahu and his predecessors have taken the various Security Council resolutions that direct Israel to permit Palestinians to return to the homes from which it drove them or to withdraw from the Palestinian lands it has seized and settled. Like Israel's wars with the Arabs, America's war with Iraq went into remission but never ended. In due course, it resumed.

The United States needs to get into the habit of developing and implementing war termination strategies.

Blunder number two was the sudden abandonment in 1993 of the strategy of maintaining peace in the Persian Gulf through a balance of power. With no prior notice or explanation, the Clinton administration replaced this longstanding approach with “dual containment” of both Iraq and Iran.

For decades, offshore balancing had permitted the United States to sustain stability without stationing forces other than a very small naval contingent in the Gulf. When the regional balance of power was undone by the Iran-Iraq War, Washington intervened to restore it, emphasizing that once Kuwait had been liberated and Iraq cut back down to size, U.S. forces would depart.

The new policy of “dual containment” created a requirement for the permanent deployment of a large U.S. air and ground force in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar as well as an expanded naval presence in Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates. The political and socioeconomic irritants this requirement produced led directly to the founding of al Qa`ida and the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington. “Dual containment” was plausible as a defense of Israel against its two most potent regional adversaries, Iran and Iraq. But it made no sense at all in terms of stabilizing the Gulf.

By writing off Iraq as a balancer of Iran, dual containment also paved the way for the 2003 American experiment with regime removal in Baghdad. This rash action on the part of the United States led to the de facto realignment of Iraq

with Iran, the destabilization and partition of Iraq, the destabilization and partition of Syria, the avalanche of refugees now threatening to unhinge the E.U., and the rise of the so-called "Islamic state" or Da`esh.

With Iraq having fallen into the Iranian sphere of influence, there is no apparent way to return to offshore balancing. The U.S. is stuck in the Gulf. The political irritations this generates ensure that some in the region will continue to seek to attack the U.S. homeland or, failing that, Americans overseas.

The United States needs to find an alternative to the permanent garrisoning of the Gulf.

Blunder number three was the unthinking transformation in December 2001 of what had been a punitive expedition in Afghanistan into a long-term pacification campaign that soon became a NATO operation. The objectives of the NATO campaign have never been clear but appear to center on guaranteeing that there will no Islamist government in Kabul.

The engagement of European as well as American forces in this vague mission has had the unintended effect of turning the so-called "global war on terrorism" into what appears to many Muslims to be a Western global crusade against Islam and its followers. Afghanistan remains decidedly unpacified and is becoming more, not less Islamist.

The United States needs to find ways to restore conspicuous cooperation with the world's Muslims.

Blunder number four was the inauguration on February 4, 2002 – also in Afghanistan – of a campaign using missiles fired from drones to assassinate presumed opponents. This turn toward robotic warfare has evolved into a program of serial massacres from the air in a widening area of West Asia and northern Africa. It is a major factor in the metastasis of anti-Western terrorism with global reach.

What had been a U.S. problem with a few Islamist exiles resident in Afghanistan and Sudan is now a worldwide phenomenon. The terrorist movements U.S. interventions have spawned now have safe havens not just in Afghanistan, but in the now failed states of Iraq and Syria, as well as Chad, Lebanon, Libya, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Sinai, Somalia, and Yemen. They also have a growing following among European Muslims and a toehold among Muslim Americans. We have flunked the test suggested by the Yoda of the Pax Americana, Donald Rumsfeld. We are creating more terrorists than we are killing.

The United States needs a strategy that does not continuously reinforce

blowback.

Blunder number five was the aid to Iran implicit in the unprovoked invasion of Iraq on March 20, 2003. This rearranged the region to the severe strategic disadvantage of traditional U.S. strategic partners like Israel and Saudi Arabia by helping to create an Iranian sphere of influence that includes much of Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon.

It showed the United States to be militarily mighty but geopolitically naive and strategically incompetent. Rather than underscoring American military power, it devalued it. The U.S. invasion of Iraq also set off a sectarian struggle that continues to spread around the globe among the Muslim fourth of humanity. The U.S. occupation culminated in a "surge" of forces that entrenched a pro-Iranian regime in Baghdad and that only its authors consider a victory.

The United States needs to deal with the reality and the challenges to others in the region of the Iranian sphere of influence it helped create.

Blunder number six has been to confuse the motives for terrorism with the religious rationalizations its perpetrators concoct to justify its immorality. Many of those who seek revenge for perceived injustices and humiliations at the hands of the West and Western-backed regimes in the Middle East, or who are treated as aliens in their own countries in Europe, give voice to their anger in the language of Islam.

But their political grievances, not heretical Islamic excuses for the mass murders they carry out, are what drive their attempts at reprisal. Islamism is a symptom of Arab anguish and rage. It is a consequence, not a cause of Muslim anger.

Religious ideology is, of course, important. It is a key factor in justifying hatred of those outside its self-selected community. To non-believers, arguments about who is a Jew or whether someone is a true Muslim are incomprehensible and more than a little absurd.

But to the intolerant people doing the excommunicating, such debates define their political community and those who must be excluded from it. They separate friend from foe. And to those being condemned for their disbelief or alleged apostasy, the judgments imposed by this intolerance can now be a matter of life or death.

In the end, the attribution of Muslim resentment of the West to Islam is just a version of the facile thesis that "they hate us because of who we are." This is the opiate of the ignorant. It is self-expiating denial that past and present behavior by Western powers, including the United States, might have created

grievances severe enough to motivate others to seek revenge for the indignities they have experienced.

It is an excuse to ignore and do nothing about the ultimate sources of Muslim rage because they are too discomfiting to bear discussion. Any attempt to review the political effects of American complicity in the oppression and dispossession of millions of Palestinians and the hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of deaths caused by U.S. sanctions, bombing campaigns, and drone warfare is ruled out of order by political correctness and cowardice.

The United States needs to work with its European allies, with Russia, and with partners in the Middle East to attack the problems that are generating terrorism, not just the theology of those who resort to it.

Blunder number seven was the adoption after the 1973 Yom Kippur War of a commitment to maintain a “qualitative military edge” for Israel over any and all potential adversaries in its region. This policy has deprived Israel of any incentive to seek security through non-military means.

Why should Israel risk resting its security on reconciliation with Palestinians and its other Arab neighbors when it has been assured of long-term military supremacy over them and relieved of any concern about the political or economic consequences of using force against them?

Confidence in Israel’s qualitative military edge is now the main source of moral hazard for the Jewish state. Its effect is to encourage Israel to favor short-term territorial gains over any effort to achieve long-term security through acceptance by neighboring states, the elimination of tensions with them, and the normalization of its relations with others in its region. U.S. policy inadvertently ensured that the so-called “peace process” would always be stillborn. And so it proved to be.

Israel’s lack of concern about the consequences of its occupation and settlement of the West Bank and its siege of Gaza has facilitated its progressive abandonment of the universalist Jewish values that inspired Zionism and its consequent separation from the Jewish communities outside its elastic borders. U.S. subsidies underwrite blatant tyranny by Jewish settlers over the Muslim and Christian Arabs they have dispossessed.

This is a formula for the moral and political self-delegitimization of the State of Israel, not its long-term survival. It is also a recipe for the ultimate loss by Israel of irreplaceable American political, military, and other support.

The United States needs to wean Israel off its welfare dependency and end the unconditional commitments that enable self-destructive behavior on the part of

the Jewish state.

Blunder number eight has been basing U.S. policies toward the Middle East on deductive reasoning grounded in ideological fantasies and politically convenient narratives rather than on inductive reasoning and reality-based analysis. America's misadventures cannot be excused as "intelligence errors." They are the result of the ideological politicization of policy-making. This has enabled multiple policy errors based on wishful thinking, selective listening, and mirror-imaging. Examples include:

–The conviction, despite U.N. inspections and much evidence to the contrary, that Saddam's program to develop weapons of mass destruction was ongoing, representing an imminent danger, and could only be halted by his overthrow;

–The supposition that, despite his well-documented secularism, because he was an Arab, a Muslim, and a bad guy, Saddam must be colluding with the religious fanatics of al Qaeda;

–The assumption that the U.S. military presence in Iraq would be short, undemanding, and inexpensive;

–The belief that the overthrow of confessional and ethnic balances would not cause the disintegration of societies like Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Lebanon or ignite a wider sectarian conflict;

–The spurious attribution to people in Iraq of political attitudes and aspirations found mostly among exiles abroad;

–The ludicrous expectation that U.S. forces invading Iraq would be greeted as liberators by all but a few;

–The unshakeable presumption that Israel must want peace more than land;

–The impulse to confuse mob rule on the Arab street with a process of democratization;

–The confidence that free and fair elections would put liberals rather than Islamist nationalists in power in Arab societies like Palestine and Egypt;

–The supposition that the removal of bad guys from office, as in Libya, Yemen, or Syria, would lead to the elevation of better leaders and the flowering of peace, freedom, and domestic tranquility there; and

–Imagining that dictators like Bashar Al-Assad had little popular support and could therefore be easily deposed.

I could go on but I won't. I'm sure I've made my point. Dealing with the Middle East as we prefer to imagine it rather than as it is doesn't work. **The United States needs to return to fact-based analysis and realism in its foreign policy.**

All these blunders have been compounded by the consistent substitution of military tactics for strategy. The diplomatic success of the Iran nuclear deal aside, the policy dialogue in Washington and the current presidential campaign have focused entirely on the adjustment of troop levels, whether and when to bomb things, the implications of counterinsurgency doctrine, when and how to use special forces, whether to commit troops on the ground, and the like, with nary a word about what these uses of force are to accomplish other than killing people. When presented with proposals for military action, no one asks "and then what?"

Military campaign plans that aim at no defined political end state are violence for the sake of violence that demonstrably create more problems than they solve. Military actions that are unguided and unaccompanied by diplomacy are especially likely to do so. Think of Israel's, our, and Saudi Arabia's campaigns in Gaza, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, and Yemen.

By contrast, military interventions that are limited in their objectives, scale, and duration, that end or phase down when they have achieved appropriate milestones, and that support indigenous forces that have shown their mettle on the battlefield can succeed. Examples include the pre-Tora Bora phase of the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan and the first round of Russian intervention in Syria.

The objectives of what was initially conceived as a punitive raid into Afghanistan in October 2001 were (1) to dismantle al Qaeda and (2) to punish its Taliban hosts to ensure that "terrorists with global reach" would be denied a continuing safe haven in Afghanistan. The United States pursued these objectives by supporting mostly non-Pashtun enemies of the mostly Pashtun Taliban who had proven politico-military capabilities and staying power.

A limited American and British investment of intelligence capabilities, special forces, air combat controllers, and air strikes tilted the battlefield in favor of the Northern Alliance and against the Taliban. Within a little more than two months, the Taliban had been forced out of Kabul and the last remnants of al Qaeda had been killed or driven from Afghanistan. We had achieved our objectives.

But instead of declaring victory and dancing off the field, we moved the goal posts. The United States launched an open-ended campaign and enlisted NATO in efforts to install a government in Kabul while building a state for it to

govern, promoting feminism, and protecting poppy growers. The poppies still flourish. All else looks to be ephemeral.

Mr. Putin's intervention in Syria in 2015 relied for its success on ingredients similar to those in the pre-Tora Bora U.S. intervention in Afghanistan. The Russians committed a modest ration of air power and special forces in support of a Syrian government that had amply demonstrated its survivability in the face of more than four years of Islamist efforts to take it down. The Russian campaign had clear political objectives, which it stuck to.

Moscow sought to reduce the complexities of Syria to a binary choice between life under the secular dictatorship of the Assad regime and rule by Islamist fanatics. It cemented a Russian-Iranian entente. It hedged against the likelihood that the Syrian Humpty Dumpty cannot be reassembled, ensuring that, whatever happens, Russia will not lack clients in Syria or be dislodged from its bases at Tartus and Latakia.

Russia succeeded in forcing the United States into a diplomatically credible peace process in which regime removal is no longer a given and Russia and Iran are recognized as essential participants. It retrained, reequipped, and restored the morale of government forces, while putting their Islamist opponents on the defensive and gaining ground against them. The campaign reduced and partially contained the growing Islamist threat to Russian domestic tranquility, while affirming Russia's importance as a partner in combating terrorism.

Moscow also put its hands on the stopcock for the refugee flow from West Asia that threatens the survival of the European Union, underscoring Russia's indispensable relevance to European affairs. It demonstrated its renewed military prowess and reestablished itself as a major actor in Middle Eastern affairs.

And it showed that Russia could be counted upon to stand by protégés when they are at risk, drawing an invidious contrast with the American abandonment of Hosni Mubarak in 2011. The cost of these achievements has been collateral damage to Russia's relations with Turkey, a price Moscow appears willing to play.

But state failure in Syria continues, as it does in Iraq, Libya, Somalia, and Yemen. Jordan and Bahrain are under pressure. Tunisia and Turkey – once avatars of democratic Islamism – seem to be leaving democracy behind. Israel is strangling Gaza while swallowing the rest of Palestine alive. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain are in a near state of war with Iran, which is in the midst of a breakthrough in relations with Europe and Asia, if not America. Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar are trying to stay out of the fight. Once the region's Arab heavyweight, Egypt now subsists on handouts from the Gulf Arabs

and cowers under martial law. Sudan has been partitioned, sidelined, and ostracized by the West.

The Middle East kaleidoscope has yet to come to rest. We can see that the region's future political geography will differ from its past and present contours. But we cannot yet say what it will look like.

"More-of-the-same" policies will almost certainly produce more of the same sort of mess we now see. What is to be done? Perhaps we should start by trying to correct some of the blunders that produced our current conundrums. The world's reliance on energy from the Gulf has not diminished. But ours has. That gives us some freedom of maneuver. We should use it.

We need to harness our military capabilities to diplomacy rather than the other way around. The key to this is to find a way to reenlist Iraq in support of a restored balance of power in the Gulf. That would allow us reduce our presence there to levels that avoid stimulating a hostile reaction and to return to a policy of offshore balancing.

This can only be done if Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Sunni states rediscover the differences between the varieties of Shi'ism in Iraqi Najaf and Iranian Qom. The Shi'ism of Najaf tends to be fatalistic and supportive of Iraqi nationalism. The Shi'ism of Qom is more assertively universalistic and activist. The Saudis and their allies need to make common cause with Shi'ite Iraqis as Arabs rather than castigate them as heretics.

The limited normalization of Iranian relations with the West, including the United States, is an inevitability. The strategies of our Arab partners in the region need to anticipate and hedge against this. And we need to prepare them to do so.

Such an adjustment will take some very tough love from the United States. It will require the Saudis and their allies to back away from the policies based on Salafi sectarianism they have followed for the better part of this decade and reembrace the tolerance that is at the heart of Islam. It will also require some measure of accommodation by them with Iran, regardless of the state of U.S.-Iranian relations.

Without both a turn away from sectarianism and the achievement of a modus vivendi with Iran, the Saudis and their allies will remain on the defensive, Iraq will remain an extension of Iranian influence, and the region will remain inflamed by religious warfare. All this will spill over on Americans and our European allies.

Islamism is an extreme form of political Islam – a noxious ideology that invites

a political retort. It has received none except in Saudi Arabia. There a concerted propaganda campaign has effectively refuted Islamist heresies. No effort has been undertaken to form a coalition to mount such a campaign on a regional basis.

But such a coalition is essential to address the political challenges that Muslim extremists pose to regional stability and to the security of the West. Only the Saudis and others with credibility among Salafi Muslims are in a position to form and lead a campaign to do this. This is an instance where it makes sense for the United States to “lead from behind.”

For our part, Americans must be led to correct our counterproductive misunderstanding of Islam. Islamophobia has become as American as gun massacres. The presumptive candidate of one of our two major parties has suggested banning Muslims from entry into the United States. This is reflective of national attitudes that are incompatible with the cooperation we need with Muslim partners to fight terrorist extremism. If we do not correct these attitudes, we will continue to pay not just in treasure but in blood. Lots of it.

Finally, the United States must cease to provide blank checks to partners in the region prone to misguided and counterproductive policies and actions that threaten American interests as well as their own prospects. No more Yemens. No more Gazas or Lebanons. No more military guarantees that disincentivize diplomacy aimed at achieving long-term security for Israel.

The obvious difficulty of making any of these adjustments is a measure of how far we have diverged from an effective approach to managing our relations with the Middle East and how impaired our ability to contribute to peace and stability there has become. Our mainstream media is credulous and parrots the official line. Our politicians are devoted to narratives that bear almost no relation to the realities of the Middle East. Our government is dysfunctional. Our politics is ... well, ... you pick the word.

Frankly, the prospects that we will get our act and our policies together are not good. But history will not excuse us for acting out Einstein’s definition of insanity: doing more of the same and expecting different results. We won’t get them.

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<http://chasfreeman.net/u-s-policy-and-the-geopolitical-dynamics-of-the-middle-east/>

Hillary Clinton's 'Entangled' Foreign Policy

Exclusive: Besides bashing Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton offered few specifics in her big foreign policy speech which stressed the value of “friends.” But those “entangling alliances” helped create today’s global chaos, writes Daniel Lazare.

By Daniel Lazare

Now that Hillary Clinton has clinched the Democratic nomination, her June 2 foreign-policy speech is looking more and more important. The reason is simple: Clinton is going to be all over Donald Trump in the coming months, punching away at his racism and xenophobia, his thinly veiled appeals to violence, and his fraudulent business practices.

But what she’ll no doubt hit him hardest on is his general unfitness to be anywhere near the nuclear button. As she put it in San Diego: “This is not someone who should ever have the nuclear codes – because it’s not hard to imagine Donald Trump leading us into a war just because somebody got under his very thin skin.”

It’s hard to disagree – the man does seem out of control. But what has critics choking on their morning coffee is the implication that because Trump is bonkers, Hillary must be the opposite, i.e. thoughtful and mature. As opponents ranging from ConsortiumNews’s Robert Parry to Paul R. Pillar, Jeffrey Sachs, Jeet Heer, Diana Johnstone, and Gary Leupp have pointed out, this is a woman who has had a hand in five or six of the major foreign-policy disasters of the post-9/11 period. So where does she get off calling Trump reckless?

But while critics have subjected her record to close examination, they haven’t given the June 2 speech itself the attention it deserves beyond quoting the zingers hurled Trump’s way. Yet everything about her flawed methodology is right there in that one 35-minute talk – the misguided logic, the ill-considered assumptions, the one-sided worldview that consistently leads her into trouble. Essentially, the speech is an ode to international friendship without recognizing how some of those “entangling alliances” have helped tie U.S. foreign policy into knots.

As Clinton put it: “America’s network of allies is part of what makes us exceptional. And our allies deliver for us every day. Our armed forces fight terrorists together; our diplomats work side by side. Allies provide staging

areas for our military, so we can respond quickly to events on the other side of the world. And they share intelligence that helps us identify and defuse potential threats.”

Friends make America strong, Clinton assures us, and if the U.S. is the most powerful country on earth, it’s because it has so many friends. Indeed, “Moscow and Beijing are deeply envious of our alliances around the world,” Clinton went on, “because they have nothing to match them.”

Yet Trump, a classic bull in the china shop, wants to wreck what generations of U.S. diplomats have worked so hard to build up, Clinton argued. If he gets away with it, the Kremlin will celebrate while Americans will mourn the loss of an international power structure that has kept them safe:

“And if America doesn’t lead, we leave a vacuum – and that will either cause chaos, or other countries will rush in to fill the void. Then they’ll be the ones making the decisions about your lives and jobs and safety – and trust me, the choices they make will not be to our benefit.”

Stressing Allies

Allies – a word that appears in various combinations some 15 times during the talk – are what allow the U.S. to multiply its force around the world, Clinton argues. Instead of insulting everyone from Mexico to the Pope, the White House should therefore concentrate on strengthening the friendships it has and adding as many more as it can, Clinton contends.

But there’s an obvious fallacy here. Simply put, it is that every ally is a separate nation with a separate set of priorities, none of which coincide completely with those of the U.S. (and often don’t coincide even more with the priorities of either their own people or the American people). Hence, every “friend” is also a problem, and the more “friends” a country has, the more the problems pile up.

This is an old issue in statecraft, which is why George Washington, Alexander Hamilton and other Founders warned against “entangling alliances” and why Lord Palmerston declared that great powers do not have friends, only interests.

But since the June 2 speech says nothing about goals, problems to be addressed or any other long-range considerations, Clinton apparently views friendship as an end in itself. Friends make America great, and great is what America ought to be. It’s circular reasoning like this that continually leads Clinton astray.

Take the Middle East where the two dominant powers (and U.S. “friends”) are Israel and Saudi Arabia. Although they have certainly had their differences, for

the moment their governments' interests overlap particularly with regard to Syria, the great bleeding wound on the edge of Europe. But this is not the case with the U.S. Even though both Saudi Arabia and Israel are old, old friends of Washington, they are in fact sharply at odds with key American interests.

The chief reason has to do with Al Qaeda, known in Syria as the Al Nusra Front, and its offshoot Islamic State, the ultra-terrorist group also known as ISIS, ISIL, or Daesh. Saudi Arabia's attitude toward such groups is ambiguous. It is obviously hostile to ISIS since it calls for the overthrow of the Saudi monarchy. But it is not entirely unsympathetic either, especially in Syria and Iraq where the Islamic State is locked in combat with Shi'ite forces that Riyadh despises even more.

This is why the Saudi kingdom has taken part (albeit halfheartedly) in the U.S.-led bombing campaign against ISIS in Syria while at the same time allowing private donations to flow to the group via Kuwait. It's a hedge that allows Saudi Arabia to keep its options open.

Meanwhile, Saudi attitudes toward Al Nusra have been frankly positive ever since King Salman, a hardliner, ascended the throne in January 2015. Despite Saudi promises never to have anything to do with Al Qaeda, one of Salman's first acts was to meet with Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan and work out plans to supply it with U.S.-made TOW anti-tank missiles so that it could mount a major offensive in Syria's northern Idlib province, which it did just a few weeks later. [See Consortiumnews.com's "Climbing into Bed with Al-Qaeda."]]

The reason for the rapprochement is clear: Al Nusra is the most effective force against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, whom the Saudis regard as part of a great Iranian-Shi'ite conspiracy stretching from Yemen to Bahrain and the kingdom's own oil-rich, Shi'ite-dominated Eastern Province. This makes Assad public enemy number one. Since Al Nusra is the enemy of Saudi Arabia's enemy, it must to a degree be Saudi Arabia's friend.

Israel's Reasons

Israel is more or less in the same boat. It has fought three wars with Syria and one with its close ally Hezbollah, and it regards Iran as a long-term threat to its very existence. Thus, it regards Assad as the prime enemy as well. For that reason, it "prefers IS to Iran," as then-Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon remarked at a conference last January, and Israel is so friendly to Al Nusra that it has taken in its wounded for treatment in Israeli hospitals.

But the U.S. does not quite agree since the American people still recall Al Qaeda as the villains of 9/11 and ISIS chopping off the heads of Western

hostages (and claiming credit for Sunday's massacre of some 50 people at an Orlando, Florida night club). Various neocons and neolibers have tried to confuse matters by arguing that Al Qaeda and longtime bêtes noires like Saddam Hussein were essentially the same, the "logic" that helped trick many Americans into supporting the Iraq War even though the secular Hussein was a bitter enemy of Al Qaeda.

Along those lines, Clinton, in her October 2002 speech endorsing an invasion of Iraq, accused Hussein of "giv[ing] aid, comfort, and sanctuary to terrorists, including Al Qaeda members, though there is apparently no evidence of his involvement in the terrible events of September 11, 2001." (Clinton's claim about aiding "Al Qaeda members" apparently was a reference to Jordanian terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi supposedly going to a hospital in Baghdad although there was never any evidence that Iraqi authorities were aware of Zarqawi's whereabouts if indeed he did seek treatment at a Baghdad hospital. Still the canard worked as an effective way to confuse the American people.)

But when push has come to shove regarding these terrorists, official U.S. policy since 9/11 has been that the fight against Al Qaeda and its spinoff ISIS must take top priority. So if Israel and Saudi Arabia are both soft on Al Nusra and even to a degree on ISIS, the U.S., at least on paper, is committed to being ultra-hard, a dilemma that Clinton's speech ignored.

But this paradox is a problem that no amount of fancy footwork can get around. Consequently, the White House dithers, stalls and generally ties itself up in knots trying to do the impossible. It bombs ISIS except when ISIS is locked in battle with Assad's troops, at which point the U.S. military holds its fire so as not to offend Saudi sensibilities.

The U.S. government supports Sunni extremists such as the fighters of Ahrar al-Sham who fight alongside Al Nusra in the Saudi-and-Turkish-backed Army of Conquest. The Obama administration even suggested at one point that Russia refrain from bombing Nusra forces in Aleppo since they are so intermingled with U.S.-backed fighters that it is all but impossible to pry them apart. But sometimes the U.S. bombs Al Nusra as well just to keep up appearances.

The Obama administration continues to call for Assad's removal even though the effect would be to clear a path for ISIS and Al Nusra straight through to the presidential palace in Damascus. When Assad recently vowed to "rip out terrorism from its root wherever it exists," State Department spokesman Mark C. Toner replied that the "remarks show once again how delusional, detached and unfit he is to lead the Syrian people."

Since Israel and the Saudis regard Assad as an enemy, the U.S. feels obliged to

follow suit. But since Assad also battles ISIS and Al Nusra on a daily basis, no one can quite figure out why the Obama administration continues with this contradictory policy. (The best the State Department and the mainstream U.S. media can come up with is a claim that somehow Assad is to blame for Al Qaeda and ISIS although the terror groups trace their origins back to U.S. military interventions in Afghanistan in the 1980s, the Persian Gulf War in the 1990s and the Iraq War last decade.)

As Secretary of State, Clinton helped engineer this incomprehensible and incoherent policy by leading the charge against Assad on Saudi Arabia and Israel's behalf. She called for his ouster in July 2011, a full month before Obama got around to declaring that "the time has come for President Assad to step aside."

Dooming Peace Talks

As Jeffrey Sachs points out, her insistence on Assad's resignation as precondition for peace talks insured that negotiations would die aborning. Although she insists in *Hard Choices*, her 2014 memoir of her State Department years, that the U.S. provided the rebels only with nonlethal aid, she had to be aware that, with the death of strongman Muammar Gaddafi in October 2011, U.S. officials began shipping large amounts of Libyan weaponry – including hundreds of sniper rifles, RPG launchers, and howitzer missiles – from Benghazi to the ports of Baniyas and Borj Islam, Syria.

Since Saudi Arabia is committed to the violent overthrow of Assad, how could the U.S. say no? Isn't that what friends do – stand by one another regardless of the consequences?

Libya is yet another example of the horrors that this Clinton doctrine of "entangling alliances" leads to (with France and other European "allies" eager to oust Gaddafi and thus strengthen their influence in oil-rich northern Africa).

According to a State Department memo, the Secretary of State spent much of late March 2011 persuading Qatar to contribute to the anti-Gaddafi effort. She was therefore overjoyed when Doha at last agreed, as was her boss. Welcoming Qatar's dictatorial leader Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani to the White House the following month, a grateful Obama said:

"We would not have been able I think to shape the kind of broad-based international coalition that includes not only our NATO members but also includes Arab states without the Emir's leadership. He is motivated by a belief that the Libyan people should have the rights and freedoms of all people."

Or as Obama put it a bit more candidly a few hours later in front of what he didn't realize was an open mike: "Pretty influential guy. He is a big booster, big promoter of democracy all throughout the Middle East. Reform, reform, reform – you're seeing it on Al Jazeera. Now, he himself is not reforming significantly. There's no big move towards democracy in Qatar. But you know part of the reason is that the per capita income of Qatar is \$145,000 a year. That will dampen a lot of conflict."

Evidently, Al-Thani's enormous oil wealth (and his willingness to host U.S. military bases) gave him a free pass as far as democracy is concerned. But no matter. Qatar is a friend, so what could go wrong? A great deal as it turned out.

A longtime patron of the Muslim Brotherhood, Qatar turned out to have priorities that were separate and distinct from Washington's. Of the \$400 million that it pumped into Libya, most wound up in the hands of Islamist militias that soon spread anarchy from one side of the country to the other.

Their pockets stuffed with Qatari cash, fundamentalists set about removing "pagan" symbols – i.e. flags of NATO members engaged in driving Gaddafi out – from public squares where daily group prayers were held and encouraging local imams to issue fatwas ordering rape victims not to report such crimes to the police.

A few days after Al-Thani's meeting with Obama in the White House, Qatar organized a secret meeting in Istanbul bringing Libya's Islamist factions together in a united Islamic Front. (For more information, see Ethan Chorin's *Exit the Colonel: The Hidden History of the Libyan Revolution* and Jason Pack's *The 2011 Libyan Uprisings and the Struggle for the Post-Qadhafi Future*, published in 2012 and 2013 respectively.)

But Secretary Clinton still didn't recognize the dangers. "For the first time we have a NATO-Arab alliance taking action, you've got Arab countries who are running strike actions," Clinton burbled. What she didn't realize was that she and Obama had been outfoxed (or perhaps were more interested in helping out NATO allies which wanted a bigger share of Libyan oil and France which feared that Gaddafi would create a pan-African currency that would supplant the French franc).

Today, Libya is a lawless zone with ISIS controlling miles of coastline around the city of Surt, a scant 300 miles from Europe, and literally thousands of other Islamist militias rampaging across the rest of the country. Three rival governments are now vying for control while vast amounts of weaponry have gone to fuel other conflicts in North Africa and the Middle East.

One might be inclined to call the Libyan mess the worst disaster in the Middle East – except for all the other disasters that Clinton has helped engineer. Concerned about Qatar’s role in fueling Libyan chaos, Obama administration officials batted around ideas about how to show Qatar that they were displeased with its support for extremists in Libya. Suggestions were floated to trim military aid or perhaps transfer U.S. military assets to other locations.

According to a major takeout in *The New York Times*: “But Middle East hands at the State Department pushed back, saying that pressuring the gulf monarchy would only backfire. And the Defense Department strongly objected: It had a 20-year history of close cooperation with Qatar, which hosted critical American military bases. In the end, there was no appetite for anything beyond quiet diplomacy... Only last year did President Obama rebuke the nations meddling in Libya, and by then it was too late.”

After all, as presumptive Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton now says, America must stand by its “friends.” Meanwhile, Qatar has contributed more than \$1 million to the Clinton Foundation, which makes it not just a friend of the U.S. but a friend of Bill and Hillary – and thus doubly precious.

As Americans march to the polls on Nov. 8, voters should keep in mind Hillary Clinton’s dictum that friends like these are what make America great.

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Going Global: Bernie Sanders’s Challenge

As Bernie Sanders ponders his next step, he could fall in line behind the Clinton bandwagon or break free and take his critique of economic injustice to a global stage, starting with a challenge to Brazil’s pro-corruption coup, writes Sam Hussein.

By Sam Hussein

This past week, many eulogists lauded Muhammad Ali, noting that Ali’s greatest contribution was not being a talented athlete and heavyweight champion. After all, there are many prominent sports figures, but they don’t play the historic role that Ali did.

Ali’s true greatness came because at the height of his fame and powers, he

challenged an oppressive system: He refused to go into the Army during the Vietnam War. It cost him a great deal of money and popularity (at the time) – but tremendously helped the world and resulted in his canonization as a global hero.

Bernie Sanders has a similar opportunity now. As pundits are voicing alleged ecstasy over Hillary Clinton “shattering the glass ceiling” by becoming the first female presidential nominee of a major political party, the first female president in Brazil, Dilma Rousseff, has been ousted in a defacto coup.

This was fostered by establishment media in Brazil, as for-profit media often plays the role of kingmaker in ways stark and subtle in every country, including the U.S., as we’ve seen in this current election. Rousseff’s cabinet was diverse, both in terms of gender and ethnically. The new government is all white males.

Rousseff was set to investigate corruption, including in the Brazilian Senate, and the coup was planned by corrupt senators. Indeed, the anticorruption minister in the new coup government was recently forced to resign when a tape was leaked about how he was trying to cover up corruption. All this and more is being done with U.S. government’s silence and tacit support.

Certainly, Sanders has challenged the power of Wall Street and America’s “billionaire class” from within the Democratic Party. But, with the media placing a mantle of celebrity around Hillary Clinton (and Donald Trump for that matter), they are the likely nominees.

But perhaps, for all the good that Sanders did, he might feel a measure of remorse for what he didn’t do: He hasn’t spoken seriously or consistently about the U.S. government’s role in the world. Even in his discussions of inequality, he’s confined himself to inequality inside the U.S. But what about global poverty?

Has Sanders been moved by slums in Latin America? Refugee camps in the Mideast? Stark poverty in Africa? Sweatshops in Asia? He went to a Vatican conference where Bolivian President Evo Morales also spoke. They chatted. What can be built from that? How can progressive leaders work together globally? How can movements cross boundaries? Are not movements weakened when they confine themselves to national barriers?

Ali took himself out of his comfort zone. He focused not just on getting a seat on a bus for himself, and not just for African-Americans, but spoke against the Vietnam War (and made a point of holding high-profile fights in Zaire – “the rumble in the jungle” – and the Philippines – “the thrill in Manila.” By

contrast, Sanders has not transcended his domestic critique, transforming it into a fully formed global analysis.

As Ben Jealous has said – in praising the Vermont senator’s consistency – Sanders “has been giving the same damn speech for 50 years.” Well, that’s not necessarily or entirely a good thing. There are people living in horrible conditions around the world, in large part because of economic, political and military policies determined in marble-façade buildings in Washington, D.C. Sanders has been remarkably mute about that.

Global Power

The power of the Establishment rests in large part on its global interconnections. But progressive forces have been reluctant to build and wield similar power. Recall shortly before the invasion of Iraq, there were quasi-global protests against the war on Feb. 15, 2003. Just after that, the *New York Times* called the peace movement “the second super power.” Yes, that didn’t stop the war, but that was because there was only some global solidarity late in the day. The answer is more solidarity sooner.

And now, Sanders has mounted a campaign in all 50 states. It’s late in the day, but not too late for him to break down the wall that has kept him focused on domestic American issues and seriously engage the rest of the world. That should start with going to Brazil and meeting with Rousseff. By doing so, Sanders could help overturn the coup, providing a tremendous service to the people of Brazil and it would put the heat on the U.S. government regarding its behind-the-scenes machinations.

It would also highlight the fake feminism that surrounds the Clinton campaign. Do we want women in officialdom simply so that they can be as murderous and corrupt as men have been? Or do we want a different kind of politics that is inclusive in terms of gender, but that is based on solidarity and uplift rather than “I got mine”?

Clinton’s crimes on foreign policy constitute quite a rap sheet. In mildly criticizing her, Sanders has at best scratched the surface. From voting for the Iraq War to bombing Libya, from backing Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s repression of the Palestinian people to backing the Honduran coup which contributed to the killing of Berta Cáceres, Clinton has compiled a gruesome record which rarely is referenced or examined in detail.

Perhaps Sanders, struck by fear of Donald Trump, desperately wants to look away from Clinton’s history because to do otherwise might improve Trump’s electoral chances. But does Sanders want to be just another cog in the Clinton machine?

Does he want to slip into the subservient roles of other past “insurgent” candidates, such as Howard Dean, Jesse Jackson and Dennis Kucinich.

They are now “sheepdogging,” in the phrase of black commentator Bruce Dixon, herding progressives into the camp of the Democratic Party establishment. That same fate, as accessory to an increasingly pro-corporate Democratic Party, could now await Bernie Sanders.

The “consultants” and “advisers” whom he’s meeting with this weekend in Vermont are probably pushing Sanders to accept what bread crumbs he can get from Clinton & Co. After all, they are political professionals who have their careers to think about, and their careers are with the Democratic Party machine or some appendage of it.

But real power, real greatness, doesn’t come from accepting such a role. That’s why we remember the name Muhammad Ali and forget many, many others.

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Did Big Media Do in Sanders?

Many Bernie Sanders backers feel that the mainstream media did its best to marginalize the Vermont senator’s campaign and clear the way for Hillary Clinton’s coronation – and they’re not all wrong, says Neal Gabler.

By Neal Gabler

Earlier this week, even before Hillary Clinton’s primary victory in California assured her the Democratic presidential nomination, the Associated Press had already declared her the presumptive nominee. [Bernie Sanders and his supporters were sore](#), and they had a right to be.

Although [the AP defended its decision](#), saying that Clinton’s crossing the delegate threshold was news and they had an obligation to report it when they did (the day before the clinching primaries) the timing and the circumstances were suspicious. It appears that AP had been hounding superdelegates to reveal their preferences, and blasting that headline just before those primaries threatened either to depress Sanders’ vote or Hillary’s or both because the contest was now for all intents and purposes over.

Sanders has never been much of a media fan. Last October, Mother Jones reported that way back in 1979, he wrote in Vermont's *Vanguard Press*, an alternative newspaper, that "with considerable forethought [TV capitalists] are attempting to create a nation of morons who will faithfully go out and buy this or that product, vote for this or that candidate and faithfully work for their employers for as low a wage as possible." He said TV was America's "drug." On another occasion, he took a *60 Minutes* crew to the AP office in Burlington and, in a bit of turnabout, began interrogating their reporters. So perhaps the AP's announcement this week was a bit of long-simmering retribution.

Payback or not, Sanders and his supporters are justified in saying the mainstream media have not been entirely fair to him. But that isn't because Sanders was anti-establishment or because he has attacked the media's monopolistic practices or because he claimed to be leading a revolution or even because he was impatient with reporters who asked idiotic questions – though he had done all of those things.

Sticking to the Script

Sanders was the victim of something else: the script. The media have a script for elections, and in that script the presumed losers are always marginalized and even dismissed. The script, then, dictated that Sanders wasn't going to get favorable coverage. Or, put more starkly, the MSM pick the losers and then vindicate that judgment.

From the moment he announced his candidacy in April 2015, the media treated Sanders as if he were unlikely to win. In *The New York Times*, that announcement was printed on page A-21, calling him a "long shot" but saying that his candidacy could force Hillary Clinton to address his issues "more deeply." The article ended with a quote from Sanders: "I think people should be a little bit careful underestimating me," which is exactly what *The Times* seemed to be doing.

By contrast, Hillary Clinton's announcement two-and-a-half weeks earlier got prime real estate in *The Times* and the judgment that the "announcement effectively began what could be one of the least contested races, without an incumbent, for the Democratic presidential nomination in recent history." So already the roles had been cast – though, of course, the perception that Sanders wasn't likely to beat Clinton was all but a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In his essential book, *Out of Order* – still, 23 years after publication, the best analysis of election coverage – Harvard political scientist Thomas Patterson said there are only four press narratives in an election campaign: "a candidate is leading, or trailing, or gaining ground or losing ground." And: "The press dumps on losers and those who are losing support, criticizes front-

runners and praises those who catch fire – at least as long as the bandwagon lasts.”

As the presumed loser from the outset, Sanders didn't get negative coverage so much as he got negligible coverage. An analysis by the TV News Archive of cable television coverage since January 2015 provides graphs of Clinton's and Sanders' mentions that look alike, save for one thing: Clinton was getting vastly more coverage than Sanders.

How much more? On CNN, Clinton got more than 70,000 of the Democratic-candidate mentions, while Sanders got just under 42,000. On MSNBC, Clinton got more than 93,000 mentions to Sanders' roughly 51,000. On Fox News, she got more than 71,000 mentions to his more than 28,000. The numbers are similar on the Lexis-Nexis database of newspapers. In the past 30 days, Clinton received 2,591 mentions, Sanders only 922. By comparison, Trump got 5,568.

The numbers, of course, are constantly being updated. But the ratios remain more or less constant.

Media's Excuses

I suppose journalists would argue that time and space are inelastic; choices have to be made as to who receives coverage. If we give it to Bernie Sanders, they might say, why not Martin O'Malley, Jim Webb or even Lincoln Chafee? Putting aside whether there really is too little time (on cable where the same stories are repeated endlessly?), the decision over whom to cover and whom not to cover is determinative. By placing bets on one candidate over another, the media virtually prevent that disfavored candidate from gaining ground.

But in spite of the dearth of MSM coverage, Sanders *did* gain ground. That may have been due to his very active social media presence, which assured that the Sanders name and message were being promulgated via the ether if not on the page or on the air.

Though Trump clearly mastered how to turn social media into MSM coverage by tweeting absurdities the press couldn't resist, Sanders used social media to mobilize support, so that he was able to rustle up a crowd for a rally at a moment's notice, and a whole lot of money.

This may be the first time that social media compelled the MSM to change its narrative – from losing candidate to gaining candidate, or what Patterson calls the “bandwagon effect.” In turn, Sanders' crowds were huge. His fundraising was large and notable for the number of small donations. And most of all, his poll numbers began rising.

It is now a truism of election coverage that since the coverage often contorts itself to justify them, you follow the polls. Poll numbers are everything. As Sanders' numbers climbed, and especially after he trounced Clinton in New Hampshire, the story was suddenly that Sanders was leading a movement of young people dissatisfied with the old politics represented by Clinton, and angry with the system.

Of course, even as the MSM called Sanders "aspirational" and "inspirational" and "idealistic" compared to Clinton, the praise was then undercut when pundits compared him to another tribune of the disaffected, Donald Trump. "[Sanders] and Trump are peas in a pod," wrote *The Washington Post's* Dana Milbank, as late as last April.

None of this reluctant praise was because the press particularly liked Sanders. I think they still thought of themselves as realists while Sanders was something of a political Don Quixote – an old crank. But the media are in the drama business, and the story of Sanders' energized youth army taking on Clinton's tired apparatchiks was a compelling one, and a whole lot better than Clinton marching over Sanders like Sherman through Georgia. Indeed, nothing stirs the media like a good fight. The amount of Sanders' coverage appreciably rose.

Stressing the Math

The problem was, to use the buzzword of this election, the math. No matter how much money Sanders raised, how many caucuses and primaries he won or how much enthusiasm he stirred, he couldn't beat the delegate math – which is to say, he was a loser. To the media, his rise was a plot twist before the narrative wound its way to the inevitable conclusion.

And, as Patterson wrote of the media, "What is said of the candidate must fit the plot." Here the plot was that Sanders was not going to win because he was not good enough to win.

Sanders' coverage in *The New York Times* is a case in point, and an important one because *The Times* drives so much of the MSM's coverage. It is hardly a secret that *The Times* has had a jones for Hillary Clinton, but that doesn't excuse its coverage of Sanders, which even included an article criticizing him for not doing more of the baby-kissing and hand-shaking that candidates usually do.

Matt Taibbi of *Rolling Stone* wrote a scathing takedown of *The Times'* most egregious offense: a March article by Jennifer Steinhauer on how Sanders functioned as a legislator. Headlined "Bernie Sanders Scored Victories for Years Via Legislative Side Doors," as originally published, the article recounted how effective Sanders was at attaching amendments to pieces of legislation, both

Republican and Democratic, and forging coalitions to achieve his ends. The piece was bandwagon stuff.

But then something happened. The original article, already published, underwent a transformation in which Sanders suddenly wasn't so effective a legislator. Even the headline was changed to "Via Legislative Side Doors, Bernie Sanders Won Modest Victories." And this paragraph was added: "But in his presidential campaign Mr. Sanders is trying to scale up those kinds of proposals as a national agenda, and there is little to draw from his small-ball legislative approach to suggest that he could succeed."

Responding to angry Sanders supporters, The Times' own public editor, Margaret Sullivan, asked why the changes were made and wrote, "Matt Purdy, a deputy executive editor, said that when senior editors read the piece after it was published online, they thought it needed more perspective about whether Mr. Sanders would be able to carry out his campaign agenda if he was elected president." Yeah, right.

Exasperation Boils Over

You might note how short a step it is from losing to deserving to lose. The media always seem willing to take that step, not only when it comes to Sanders but to any presumed loser. It may also explain why the media were so hard on Sanders' policies, ridiculing them as pie-in-the-sky.

On the other hand, *Times* columnist Paul Krugman, once a liberal hero, took a lot of flak from Sanders supporters for criticizing several of the senator's proposals and favoring Clinton's. Sandernistas couldn't accept the possibility that Krugman, whose liberal bona fides are pretty sound, was backing Clinton *because* he thought Sanders' proposals didn't add up – and not that he thought they didn't add up because he was backing Clinton. Even if Sanders was treated unfairly, he didn't deserve to escape scrutiny just because he was a maverick.

By the same token, the press's presumption that Sanders was a loser wasn't wrong either. Sanders' claim that the system was somehow rigged against him because of superdelegates proved not to be true. Sanders received far fewer votes than Clinton, 3.7 million less, and he would have lost the nomination even if there had been no superdelegates, not to mention that he lost the basic Democratic constituencies to her.

What we will never know is if the race might have been different had the coverage been different – that is, if Sanders hadn't been considered some outlier and preordained loser from the very beginning.

Another thing we will never know is how the coverage would have differed if it hadn't been so poll – or delegate-driven. Candidates won't arrive at the finish line at the same time, but the media should at least let them begin at the starting line together. And the voters should be the ones to winnow the field, not the press.

Now that Sanders has played his part juicing up the nominating drama, the media seem as eager to dispose of him as the Democratic establishment does. They're ready to relegate him to his next role: confirmed sore loser.

A front-page story in Thursday's edition of *The New York Times* griped, "Hillary Clinton Made History, but Bernie Sanders Stubbornly Ignored it," opening with the line, "Revolutions rarely give way to gracious expressions of defeat."

No, they don't, and I don't think it is the business of the press to tell candidates when to or how to concede, much less complain about it. The article went on to call Sanders' address after Tuesday night's primaries "a speech of striking stubbornness," as if *The Times* and its barely pent-up exasperation with Sanders finally broke the dam.

But again, this isn't just what the MSM think of Bernie Sanders. It is what the media think of losers. They don't like them very much, and they seem determined to make sure that you don't like them either – unless they beat the press's own odds and become winners.

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Two Bigots Running for US President

It's easy to spot Donald Trump's crude bigotry but harder to detect Hillary Clinton's more subtle variety since it pertains mostly to Palestinians and people pressuring Israel to respect Palestinian rights, explains Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

To find bigots in political office in the United States is not historically

unusual. In fact, up until the 1960s and the Civil Rights Movement, publicly recognizable bigots in office were the norm in many parts of the country. Even in the post-1960s era, we find presidents such as Nixon and Reagan who could be openly bigoted. However, most recent office holders have known enough to keep their prejudices off of the public airwaves.

It is a sign of the fragility of the changes in national character wrought by the Civil Rights Movement that the inhibitions holding back public expressions of bigotry are wearing thin. And that has set the scene for the current contest for the presidency in which both major parties have thrown up (no pun intended) bigoted candidates. Yes, that is right, two of them, not just one.

On the Republican side the bigot is easy to spot. That is because Donald Trump wears his bigotry on his sleeve, so to speak. He can't help but display it because, apparently even at this late date, he doesn't understand what the big deal is.

On the campaign trail he has insulted Mexicans, Muslims and "our African-Americans," and gotten away with it because millions of his supporters are also bigots. A common bigotry is one of the reasons they cheer him on. However, now that he is the "presumptive" Republican candidate for president, much of that party's leadership and their media allies have begun to call him on these problematic public expressions.

They want to see Trump act "presidential," hiding away his prejudices for the sake of achieving maximum appeal. Alas, this is not easy for a man who, all of his life, said what he thought, no matter how improper. He sees it as "just being honest," and up until the run for president, his wealth had helped forestall most public criticism.

Hillary Clinton's Bigotry

On the Democratic side the bigot is not so easy to spot, but the problem exists in any case. Hillary Clinton may not be a bigot in the same way as Trump. She certainly isn't going to go about insulting ethnic groups with large numbers of potential voters. Indeed, she has cultivated many minority groups and is supported by them.

But such outreach has its limits, and in one important case she is willing to act as a de facto bigot in order to cater to a politically powerful interest group. Having actively done so, the difference in ethical behavior between her and Mr. Trump starts to blur.

In what way is Hillary Clinton, now the "presumptive" presidential candidate of the Democratic Party, behaving like a de facto bigot? She does so in her open,

prosecutorial hostility toward the fight to liberate Palestinians from the racist oppression of Israel and its Zionist ideology.

Clinton, having in this case traded whatever principled anti-racist feelings she has for a fistful of campaign dollars, has openly sided with the Zionists. And, as she must well know, they are among the world's most demonstrative bigots.

Having made this alliance, she praises Israel as a democratic state upholding the highest ideals and ignores or justifies the illegal and blatantly racist treatment of its Palestinian population. In fact, she wants to reward Israel for its racist behavior and policies by pretending that to do so is to assist in the necessary self-defense of the Zionist state.

At the same time, former Secretary of State Clinton is willing to attack those who fight against Israeli bigotry, particularly in the form of the Boycott, Sanctions and Divestment (BDS) movement. Disregarding U.S. law, she has pledged herself to destroy the BDS movement even if she has to rip to shreds the First Amendment of the Constitution to do it.

And – here is the irony of it all – she claims she has taken this position in order to fight anti-Semitism, one of history's most pronounced bigotries.

This rationale, that she backs a state full of infamous bigots in the name of defending against bigotry, is just so much sophistry. If there is an increase in the number of anti-Semites in today's world, we can thank Zionist racism for that development.

However, anti-Semitism does not motivate the BDS movement, which in the U.S. is backed by a large and growing number of Jews. No, the reason Clinton has targeted BDS is because it has proved an effective weapon against Israeli racism, and therefore her Zionist allies have oriented her in that direction.

The problem for Hillary Clinton is that if you ally with bigots and actively do their bidding, you too become a de facto bigot. Unlike Trump, who may or may not understand the offensive nature of his behavior, Clinton knows exactly what she is doing. Trump is a bigot by upbringing and social conditioning. Clinton is a bigot by choice. I will leave it to the reader to decide who is worse.

Part of a Corrupt System

There are many considerations that go into choosing the candidate for whom to vote come November. If she plays her cards right, Hillary Clinton may win over enough of the Sanders supporters to defeat Trump. However, if you are inclined to vote for her, don't kid yourself that what you're going to get is an upright, ethical president unwilling to adopt openly bigoted policies against vulnerable

and long suffering peoples. Hillary Clinton has clearly abandoned such standards of behavior.

Many will respond that, political expediency aside, she is a viable woman candidate and that as such she opens the way for greater female access to the highest offices in the land. This is true. However, taken too far, it is also a naive argument. The U.S. political system is deeply mired in corrupt ways of doing business. At this time in its history, just about any citizen willing to follow these flawed pathways can operate successfully – be they women or ethnic minorities.

But adherence to rules of the political game is the price of playing the game. Former Secretary Clinton has paid her dues, she has proven herself a reliable supporter of this corrupt system. As a consequence, having her as president will not result in any significant changes to the system or its priorities. Her gender is immaterial to that result.

The truth of the matter is that Hillary Clinton, like her Republican opponent, has devolved into an unprincipled opportunist with a growing self-centered myopia thrown into the mix. If she becomes president, she will almost certainly be aggressive in her foreign policy, perhaps renewing the Cold War, undermining the Iran nuclear agreement, and embroiling the country in new wars.

If the Republicans maintain their hold on Congress, she will be just as stymied in her domestic policy as was President Obama. In her role as a system politician, she may not be dangerous to the nation in the same way as Donald Trump, but she will prove dangerous nonetheless.

And, as many have pointed out, choosing the alleged lesser of two evils still means choosing evil.

Lawrence Davidson is a history professor at West Chester University in Pennsylvania. He is the author of *Foreign Policy Inc.: Privatizing America's National Interest*; *America's Palestine: Popular and Official Perceptions from Balfour to Israeli Statehood*; and *Islamic Fundamentalism*.

Sen. Sanders Goes to Washington

Exclusive: A sampling of Bernie Sanders backers at a Washington D.C. rally found many ready to vote for Hillary Clinton over Donald Trump but others still angry over how the Democratic establishment sabotaged their cause, reports Chelsea Gilmour.

By Chelsea Gilmour

At a Bernie Sanders rally ahead of Washington D.C.'s last-in-the-nation June 14 primary, I wanted to get a sense of how his supporters would vote in the fall with Hillary Clinton now the presumptive Democratic nominee.

Based on media accounts of how "unruly" Sanders supporters are supposed to be, I was, frankly, somewhat surprised by the number of attendees who said they would vote for Clinton, although this could partly stem from the fact that the rally on Thursday took place in Washington, D.C. which is, by definition, more comfortable with establishment politics.

Many stated they would have no problem voting for Clinton in the general election especially in contrast to the Republican presumptive nominee Donald Trump. "I will vote for Hillary in the fall as a vote against Trump but also as a vote for Clinton," said one young woman from Maryland.

"I have no qualms voting for Hillary Clinton," said another young woman from D.C., but she added, "I think Sanders's campaign has been very important to the country during this critical moment."

"I'll absolutely vote for Clinton in the fall," said a government employee originally from Iowa and now residing in Virginia.

Some people were more hesitant about Clinton, such as Kevin Hensler from Maryland, who said he would vote for her, but less enthusiastically than he would vote for Sanders.

Others were not yet ready to commit to voting for Clinton. "I'm an Independent voter. I have a preference towards Hillary at this point but I'm undecided," said a middle-aged government worker who was attending the event with his 14-year old son, Ryan.

"If I could vote, I would vote for Jill Stein [from the Green Party]," said Ryan. "I think the mainstream media and the DNC [Democratic National Committee] have done a very unfair job" of covering the Democratic primaries.

"I'm still undecided," said a 22-year old man. "I think the media has not been fair towards Sanders. They showed a preference towards Clinton and Trump."

Still others completely rejected the idea of voting for Clinton in November. "I would rather eat my own hand than cast a vote for Hillary Clinton, and you can quote me on that," said Nikki Diamantopoulos from Baltimore County, Maryland.

A socialist since she was 17, Diamantopoulos said this was her first time getting actively involved in a presidential campaign. She started a Facebook

group called Forward Movement to facilitate a nonpartisan civil discussion about political and social issues. She also designed a Bernie Sanders T-shirt which she gave away to people who made a donation to the Sanders campaign. Through this exchange, she helped raise \$2,000-\$3,000 in donations to Sanders.

Diamantopoulos said she has been verbally advocating for Sanders in her rural part of Baltimore County, where a number of her neighbors and family members are Republicans and Libertarians. Through open and civil conversations, she said she shared Sanders's platform and many of her neighbors have switched to supporting him. If he were to get the nomination, her lifelong Republican mother has pledged she would vote for Sanders.

Although rejecting Clinton, Diamantopolous did not indicate whom she might favor in the fall, but she did not seem to support Trump either.

Revolutionary Change

One young man named Adam, who recently moved to D.C. from Virginia, told me that he would vote for Trump if Clinton becomes the nominee: "The way I see it, either Bernie fixes it, or Trump breaks it. I'd rather it be broken than continue on with the status quo under Hillary. ... We need a change so people realize the system is broken."

"My game plan in November is exactly the same as before [if Clinton takes the nomination] – I'm voting for Bernie Sanders," said Sean Simmons, 27. "We fought to protect a democracy that isn't even a democracy. ... Maybe I'm being stubborn, but I couldn't vote for any candidate who thinks it's perfectly okay to cheat in elections. I know people who died for that."

Sean said he would write in Sanders. He said he wouldn't be badgered into voting for the so-called lesser-of-two evils, adding: "The American spirit is not one run by fear. This is a revolution – I'm not afraid."

In a speech to the rally of several thousand supporters, Sanders repeated his warnings about income inequality and the need for fundamental change to put the government back on the side of the people. He also called for D.C. residents to turn out and vote in the primary on June 14.

"It would be extraordinary if the people of Washington, our nation's capital, stood up and told the world that they are ready to lead this country into a political revolution," Sanders said.

Sanders made no mention of his meeting with President Barack Obama earlier in the day or the President's decision to endorse Hillary Clinton. That prompted Huffington Post to criticize Sanders's speech for being "divorced from reality."

But Sanders was making a larger point, that real change always happens from the bottom up, never from the top down – and requires commitment and determination: “What seems radical today will seem mainstream tomorrow, if we stand together and make those changes.” He referenced past fights for women’s suffrage and gay marriage and his current call for a \$15 minimum wage, adding:

“What people also understand is that no president, not Bernie Sanders or anybody else, can do it alone. That what we need in this country are millions of people standing up, fighting back, and demanding a government that represents *all of us*, not just the one percent.”

While Sanders never mentioned Clinton by name, activist and academic Cornel West’s opening remarks alluded to the likely choice ahead: Clinton or Trump.

“In regard to this election, we know that brother Trump is a narcissistic neofascist,” West said. “And don’t let corporate media convince you that simply because you’re not crazy about the milquetoast neoliberal Sister Hillary that something’s wrong with you. But we know the difference between a neoliberal and a neofascist so *you* make your own decision.”

Other Sanders supporters looked at the bigger picture as they reflected on Sanders’s extraordinary campaign which excited millions of Americans, particularly young people. Ben Jealous, former president and CEO of the NAACP, said in his opening remarks, “The future of America is represented by Bernie Sanders and his run for the presidency.”

At several points during the rally, attendees started chants of “Bernie or Bust” and “Stay in the race.”

An earlier version of this article incorrectly identified Simmons as a veteran.

Chelsea Gilmour is an assistant editor at Consortiumnews.com. She has previously published [“The Mystery of the Civil War’s Camp Casey”](#); [“Jeb Bush’s Tangled Past.”](#); and [“The Clintons’ Paid-Speech Bonanza.”](#)]

The US-Russia Info-War: What’s Real?

The Obama administration is dangling the possibility of real peace progress in Ukraine to convince the Europeans to renew sanctions on Russia, but is that just a bait-and-switch trick to keep Europe in line, asks Gilbert Doctorow.

By Gilbert Doctorow

The ongoing information war between Russia and the U.S.-led West creates moments that are paradoxical if not downright confusing. But confusion may be the prime objective of both sides, following the old maxim: if you cannot convince, confuse. But confusion can be dangerous, too.

This week, National Security Adviser Susan Rice expressed hope that the Ukraine crisis could be resolved by the time President Barack Obama leaves office on Jan. 20, 2017, citing redoubled efforts by U.S., French and German officials to complete implementation of the Minsk-2 agreement signed in February 2015.

“This is something that could get done between now and the end of the administration if the Russians in particular exhibit sufficient political will,” Rice said at a Washington Post event. “We are hopeful if the Russians want to resolve this – and we have some reason to believe they might – we have the time and the wherewithal and the tools to do so.”

Though Rice’s comments got scant attention in the U.S. news media, Russians picked them up presumably because they offer hope of an end to anti-Russian sanctions before the end of Obama’s term. But was Rice serious or was she just dangling some false optimism to ensure that the European Union doesn’t disrupt this supposed peace progress by failing to renew sanctions against Russia that are otherwise set to expire at the end of June?

The timing for this optimistic prediction from one of Obama’s closest advisers on security matters was well chosen to influence opinions within the E.U. in the next couple of weeks when the 28 Member States take a decision whether or not to extend the present sanctions for another six months.

After all, the thinking would go, if the pressure on Russia has brought the Kremlin to the point of implementing fully the Minsk-2 terms, why let up. Rice’s overture seems especially designed to shut up Hungary, Italy and most recently France, countries that have raised their voices in recent weeks. These waverers have suggested that the sanctions deserve an open discussion now and that some softening should be implemented without delay.

The underlying assumption in Rice’s statement is that Washington can break the deadlock on the Ukrainian side that has held up progress on implementation of Minsk-2, namely the passage through the Rada (Ukraine’s parliament) of laws for holding elections in the breakaway republics of the Donbass expected in July. However, given the present configuration of power in Kiev, nationalist radicals are in a position to block any meaningful concessions.

Russia’s Wishful Thinking

Meanwhile, the wavering within Europe has been wildly exaggerated, partly with

the help of the self-deluding Russian media which gave intensive coverage to the near unanimous vote earlier this week by the French Senate to soften sanctions, thereby putting both houses of the French legislature on record as opposing the policy of President Francois Hollande and the E.U. leadership to punish Russia over Ukraine. By contrast, French major media largely overlooked the vote in its own Senate.

These alternative interpretations of what's important and what isn't also influence the people of both Russia and the West. This pattern of contradictory emphasis is not propaganda in the classic sense, but it has the effect of muddling minds and contributing to the misreading by one side of the other.

That, in turn, can contribute to very real dangers. The West insists that NATO's war games, code-named Anaconda, very close to Russia's borders are simply intended to deter "Russian aggression." But these largest maneuvers since the Cold War are rehearsing, we are told, the capture of Russia's Kaliningrad enclave.

So, Moscow sees the West threatening Russia by expanding NATO right up to Russia's border, placing anti-ballistic missiles in Romania, and orchestrating the 2014 coup in Ukraine that installed a virulently anti-Russian regime.

This divergence of opinion about who's threatening whom creates genuine – not just theoretical – danger. And the last thing we need at this moment is muddled minds.

Gilbert Doctorow is the European Coordinator of The American Committee for East West Accord Ltd. His most recent book, *Does Russia Have a Future?* was published in August 2015. © Gilbert Doctorow, 2016

Venezuela's Struggle to Survive

Amid a reassertion of U.S.-backed neoliberal policies in Latin America, Venezuela's socialist government totters at a tipping point, beset by a severe economic crisis, but Lisa Sullivan sees a ground-up struggle of Venezuelans to survive.

By Lisa Sullivan

For 32 years I have called Venezuela home. Its mountains have given me beauty, its barrios have given me music, its struggles have given me purpose, and its people have given me love. Its Bolivarian Revolution gave me hope.

How could I not feel hope when most of my neighbors –ages 2 to 70, were studying, right in our little potato-growing town in the mountains of western Venezuela. How could I not be hopeful when 18 neighbor families received new homes to replace their unhealthy, crowded living spaces?



How could I not be grateful when my partner received life-saving emergency surgery? Or when my blind friend Chuy had his sight restored. Both for free.

But today, this is what I see from my porch: neighbors digging frantically in barren, already-harvested potato fields, hoping to find a few overlooked little spuds. *Rastreando* they call it. It is an act of desperation to find any food source to keep the kids from crying, because for months, the shelves of the stores have been bare.

How did this happen? That is the question that I bolt awake to every morning.

As I watch Juan Carlos claw the fields for potatoes; as I embrace a tearful Chichila – up and waiting in line since 2 a.m., searching, unsuccessfully, to buy food for her large family; as I see the pounds shed before my eyes from 10-year-old Fabiola. I am glad that my mangos are ripening now. They take some of the empty glare from Fabi's eyes.

It is often in the deep of the night that I am kept awake by the burning question: *When and how will all this end?* Followed by: *And what should I be doing?*

When I keep thinking it can't get any worse, it does. When friends from the U.S. write to ask if they should believe the scary articles about Venezuela's crisis in the press, I *want* to say no. Because I know that global vultures are circling my adopted nation, waiting for us to fall. Venezuela is, after all, home to the planet's largest reserves of oil.

Much of their suspicion of the barrage of articles about Venezuela's crisis is the fact that almost every article begins and ends with the same mantra: Socialism = Hunger. A good example is a recent article in Town Hall entitled:

“Venezuelan Socialism Fails at Feeding the Children.” The article goes on to elaborate that between 12 and 26 percent of Venezuelans kids are food insecure (depending on their geography), which would average 19.3 percent childhood hunger in the country.

Just for a comparison, I looked up child hunger in the U.S. and found that most sites use the figure one in five. Or 20 percent. So, in the world’s most prosperous nation 20 percent of children face hunger, while in Venezuela the number is 19.3 percent . Since these statistics are so close, I suggest that Town Hall publish a more accurate and equally urgent article entitled: “US Capitalism Fails at Feeding the Children, and Venezuelan Socialism Does only Slightly Better.”

But most of our caution with these stories comes because we smell danger. How many times have we seen the first step on that well-traveled road to U.S. intervention paved by these heart-wrenching stories rammed 24/7 by the media. They lay the groundwork, help to justify almost anything.

However, in spite of awareness of *why* we are being bombarded with stories of Venezuela’s crisis, out of respect for friends, neighbors and family in Venezuela, I must acknowledge that this crisis is real and is brutal. It is a crisis of critical shortages of food and medicine. Its reasons are extremely complex and fall on many shoulders. And it threatens the health, well-being and future of too many Venezuelans today, especially the poorest ones, such as my neighbors.

What Happened?

How did the nation with the world’s largest reserves come to this, a nation of hungry and desperate people? Well, that depends on who you ask. The opposition blames President Nicolas Maduro. Maduro blames the U.S. The press blames socialism. Maduro’s ruling party blames capitalism. Economists blame price controls. Businesses blame bureaucracy. Everyone blames corruption.

Most would agree, however, that the underlying culprit is a three letter word. OIL – the source of 95 percent of Venezuela’s exports. OIL – the cash cow that funds easy, cheap imports. OIL- the export giant that deters domestic production.

Living in a rural community that actually *does* produce food, and having also traveled extensively in this lush and fertile country, it is sometimes hard to believe that Venezuela imports more than 70 percent of its food. But I shouldn’t be surprised. Quite simply, for decades, it has been much cheaper to import food than to produce it.

At least that was the case when oil prices were up. And they were up for a long time. As recently as two years ago, the price of oil was about \$115 per barrel. This February, Venezuelan crude plummeted to barely \$23 a barrel. That is only \$3 more than the approximately \$20 cost of extracting it.

So, when the profit per barrel of oil goes from \$95 to \$3, it's like your salary going from something like \$50,000 a year to \$1,600. Could you feed your household?

Well, if you were wise, you would have saved for a rainy day, or not put all your eggs in one basket, or at least grown some food in your backyard in case you couldn't get to the supermarket. Indeed, the late President Hugo Chavez talked a lot about this. And he even took some steps to set this in motion.

But somehow, economic diversification never happened. Oil became a larger share of the economy under the Bolivarian revolution. Imports grew. Some say this was because Chavez was too preoccupied with the task of providing healthcare, education and shelter to a previously-abandoned household before launching on major home repairs.

Some say because *chavismo* made it very hard for businesses to produce (although in reality, most large businesses in Venezuela don't actually *produce*, they just import things already produced. And, then – to boot – they actually purchase them with dollars provided almost for free by the government.) That puts a little perspective on their rants.

With oil prices crashing to the basement this winter, Venezuela could no longer afford to import food. And to make matters worse, most of the imported trickles of food and medicine that *do* reach Venezuela these days, never actually reach the average person. Especially the average *poor* person. A good chunk of this food and this medicine ends up in the greedy hands of corrupt businesses, bureaucrats, military, ruling party members, and black-marketers.

Scarcity almost always leads to hoarding and scalping products. But add to that mix the fact that most basic food and medicines are price-controlled by the government. A kilo of corn flour costs about 2 cents at the regulated price, and can easily fetch at \$2 – or much, much more – on the black market. Who wouldn't want to get their hand in this business of hoarding and reselling? Especially considering that the salary of even an engineer hovers around \$30 – \$40 a month.

And I haven't even talked about the dysfunctional currency system that contributes to the diminishing power of salaries. There is only too much bad economic stuff to stomach.

The Harsh Reality

No matter what the reason, the result that matters now is this: Venezuela depends almost totally on imports for most items of basic necessity, and it has almost run out of money to buy these imports, which these days mostly end up in the wrong hands anyway.

Obviously, getting the motors of domestic agriculture and production up and running is the long-term solution. But while all this will take years – perhaps decades – Fabi is hungry.

So, is it true that Venezuela is about to go over the edge? Well, it may, even before I finish this article. My partner just texted to say that roads to our town are blocked with hunger protests and he is returning to the city.

But to me, the extraordinary thing is that Venezuela *has not* exploded until now. This crisis is now several years old really, depending on how you measure it.

The fact that the upper echelons of Venezuelan have not exploded is because many have given up on their country and left: two million, mostly young professionals. They are the ones who can qualify for the visas and afford the plane tickets. Some with fewer resources have also left, like those who are paddling to neighboring islands in handmade rafts, including a few whose lifeless bodies drifted to the shores of Aruba.

The fact that those at the lower economic rung have not yet exploded (until now) has different reasons. Venezuelans are an extremely generous people, with a natural sense of solidarity. Whenever those few small spuds are culled from neighboring fields by Rafa, he places a bag of them at my doorstep. I pass bananas to Jenny over my fence. She passes pinto beans to Erica over hers. Erica passes yucca next door to Chichila, Fabi brings me fish that she caught when skipping school, I provide the oil in which to fry it.

This solidarity and natural bartering system that has unfolded in our Venezuela-in-crisis is beautiful, and it is what has allowed us to survive until now. These good-news stories can't compete with the bad news that the press loves, you have to come and see with your own eyes.

The second reason for delayed explosion is this: Most Venezuelans know that *chavismo* has (or had) their back, and are very reluctant to give it up. President Chavez very concretely and very pro-actively *cared* about them. He reduced poverty dramatically and created the most economically equal society in the Americas.

In contrast, the opposition is widely perceived as caring only about themselves.

Probably this is because their only agenda item over the years was to topple the government. Small wonder they rarely won the many national elections over the past 17 years.

The opposition did, however win December's parliamentary elections. Decisively so. But many see this as less a vote of confidence *for* the opposition, than one of punishment *against* the Maduro administration, perceived as tone-deaf to their suffering. Although many share Maduro's belief that the crisis is caused by the right-wing-led economic war, they wonder why he hasn't done more to combat it.

But this is my sense of the moment: The majority of Venezuelans today are not fans of the opposition. *Nor* are they fans of the current administration. However (to the chagrin of the State Department) this doesn't mean that the majority of Venezuelans are not fans of *chavismo*).

Solutions, Anyone?

So, what is to be done? The solutions to the crisis are as conflicting as the causes. The three major players (Venezuelan government, opposition, and the U.S.) spend endless amounts of time and resources pointing fingers of blame to one another, while doing a poor job of hiding their real political and economic interests. Meanwhile, the losers are the people of Venezuela, who grow hungrier and hungrier.

Somewhat better solutions are coming from Latin America itself. The region has become far more integrated and vastly more independent from the U.S. than previously (and many believe this to be Hugo Chavez's greatest legacy). This was clear when OAS Secretary General Luis Almagro tried to set into motion Venezuela's removal from the organization. He received resounding *no* from its members, including those of the new emerging right. Instead, the OAS member states opted to give support to an ongoing process of dialogue between the government and the opposition. The idea of government-opposition dialogue is not a bad idea. It's just not enough.

The long-term solution to Venezuela's problems must come from all sectors of Venezuela. Not just from two polar opposites who have driven Venezuelans to hunger in their pursuit of political and economic power.

Many, but not all, of those excluded identify with *chavismo*. But there is no political space for them in the tightly controlled hierarchical ruling party structure, nor room for them on the ballot (the largest political party that identifies with *chavismo* was excluded from elections because the electoral board did not like their name.) Some identify more with the opposition, especially certain pragmatic administrators willing to listen to and accommodate ideas from

across the aisle.

Most of these in-between sectors, that I believe make up Venezuela's majority, want to see less political rhetoric and more economic action. The currency system must undergo radical change. The poor must be guaranteed access to food, but not by subsidizing the product (which ends up in the hands of the corrupt and not the mouths of the poor), but subsidizing their families.

And finally, there is a treasure trove of creative grassroots initiatives and productive solutions that this crisis has unleashed and that merit attention. While Maduro prays for higher oil prices and markets his nation's pristine lands to Canadian mining companies in a desperate lunge for dollars; and while the U.S. and the Venezuelan opposition push for social explosion and/or military uprising; the people of Venezuela are busy.

They are busy planting food in their backyards and patios, using alternative medicine, sharing with one another, developing a barter system, and creating hundreds, or maybe thousands of products from recycled or locally-sourced renewable sources. These may not totally solve the immediate food crisis but, in the long run, they may actually be opening the door to the kind of society in which we can all survive and thrive.

And back to that 3 a.m. question of what can I do. I guess just more of the same, writing down my thoughts and ripping up more of my lawns to plant food with my neighboring children. Two more hours and I'll be up with the dawn, awaiting Fabi and friends with shovel and hoe in hand.

Lisa Sullivan has lived in Latin America since 1977. She was a Maryknoll lay worker in Bolivia and Venezuela for over 20 years, coordinator for School of the Americas Watch and founder of grassroots leadership group, Centro de Formación Rutilio Grande. She has three children, raised in Barquisimeto Venezuela.

Why US Politics and Policy Are Adrift

The U.S. system of politics and public policy is in disarray awash with elites trying to manipulate the public and the public drifting away from any factual grounding, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

By Paul R. Pillar

Christopher Preble has given us some interesting thoughts about foreign policy elites and the U.S. public and how the interplay of the two figures into bad

foreign policy. He captures accurately some recent patterns of ends being ostensibly pursued without the means being employed to accomplish those ends. But in the course of criticizing elites he probably lets the public off too easily.

Preble and others have argued that leaders can sway the public more easily on national security matters than on domestic issues because members of the public have direct first-hand experience with what is working or not working domestically (e.g., a person has a job or doesn't have a job) while they lack comparable direct contact with the results of foreign policy.

But the domestic-vs.-foreign distinction breaks down because having direct experience with the results of policy is not the same as having a good sense of what particular policies bring good results. In fact, the public often is woefully ignorant about the latter. What is good for an individual or family does not necessarily scale up into what is good at the level of national policy.

Although fiscal restraint is good for family financial health, for example, in a time of insufficient demand it is bad for the health of the national economy (and for creating jobs). Yet many members of the American public mistakenly believe otherwise.

Certainly there are instances of determined elites getting the public to believe certain things so that the elites can achieve foreign policy objectives they have set for themselves; the launching of a major offensive war in Iraq in 2003 is an extreme example of this, just as it is an extreme example of some other things.

But one can also easily point to examples of elites swaying the public in domestic policy as well. The Donald Trump phenomenon has partially unmasked what Republican Party elites have been doing for some time in this regard. They have helped to maintain a constituency by stoking some of the fears and attitudes that Trump is now expressing, while also encouraging the mistaken belief that they are pursuing economic policies that serve the interests of that constituency rather than the one percent – and then not delivering on that false premise, a fact that Trump also is exploiting.

The disconnect between ends and means in something like the application of military force to countering terrorism in places such as Syria is not primarily a matter of elites determining the ends and the public being stingy about providing the means. The primary disconnect instead comes from the public often being inconsistent and illogical when it comes to matching ends and means. Again, this arises in domestic as well as foreign policy, as in the frequently observed pattern of wanting to maintain popular programs X, Y and Z but not

wanting to pay the taxes necessary to finance them.

If there are halfway and ineffective measures currently used against terrorism in Syria or elsewhere, that is not because the Obama administration has established an objective of defeating terrorist groups but is encountering public resistance in mustering the means to do so. It would be more accurate to say that the American public demands that a fearsome terrorist group such as ISIS be defeated – and so the administration has to accept that objective and to do something about it – while a president who takes a more sober and careful approach to assessing costs and benefits is trying to limit the drain on blood and treasure along the way.

Any public claim to having a higher wisdom than elites when it comes to resisting costly and unwise foreign interventions is vitiated by the public's inconsistency in mounting such resistance. The resistance tends to come only (as with now) from the fatigue of prolonged overseas commitments, or even more so after especially costly fiascoes such as the one in Vietnam.

Speaking of the Vietnam War, that is an example of how the misconceptions of elites and the public sometimes exist in tandem. They can arrive at a misconception together, without one necessarily leading the other. On Vietnam, misconceptions about falling dominoes and U.S. credibility being at stake were a widely shared conventional wisdom, not a Saddam-will-give-WMD-to-terrorists manipulation by a particular elite of the public.

There certainly is good reason to agree with Preble in believing that some who currently function as foreign policy elites in the United States should be retired. What President Obama is resisting in trying to limit expenditure of blood and treasure in a place like Syria is pressure not just from public fears about terrorism but also from what his aide Benjamin Rhodes would call the blob. But there is still plenty of blame left over to assign to the public.

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