

Russia-gate Flops as Democrats' Golden Ticket

Exclusive: The national Democrats saw Russia-gate and the drive to impeach President Trump as their golden ticket back to power, but so far the ticket seems to be made of fool's gold, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The national Democratic Party and many liberals have bet heavily on the Russia-gate investigation as a way to oust President Trump from office and to catapult Democrats to victories this year and in 2018, but the gamble appears not to be paying off.

The Democrats' disappointing loss in a special election to fill a congressional seat in an affluent Atlanta suburb is just the latest indication that the strategy of demonizing Trump and blaming Russia for Hillary Clinton's 2016 defeat may not be the golden ticket that some Democrats had hoped.

Though it's still early to draw conclusive lessons from Karen Handel's victory over Jon Ossoff – despite his raising \$25 million – one lesson may be that a Middle America backlash is forming against the over-the-top quality of the Trump-accusations and the Russia-bashing, with Republicans rallying against the image of Official Washington's "deep state" collaborating with Democrats and the mainstream news media to reverse a presidential election.

Indeed, the Democrats may be digging a deeper hole for themselves in terms of reaching out to white working-class voters who abandoned the party in Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin to put Trump over the top in the Electoral College even though Clinton's landslide win in California gave her almost three million more votes nationwide.

Clinton's popular-vote plurality and the #Resistance, which manifested itself in massive protests against Trump's presidency, gave hope to the Democrats that they didn't need to undertake a serious self-examination into why the party is in decline across the nation's heartland. Instead, they decided to stoke the hysteria over alleged Russian "meddling" in the election as the short-cut to bring down Trump and his populist movement.

A Party of Snobs?

From conversations that I've had with some Trump voters in recent weeks, I was struck by how they viewed the Democratic Party as snobbish, elitist and looking

down its nose at “average Americans.” And in conversations with some Clinton voters, I found confirmation for that view in the open disdain that the Clinton backers expressed toward the stupidity of anyone who voted for Trump. In other words, the Trump voters were not wrong to feel “dissed.”

It seems the Republicans – and Trump in particular – have done a better job in presenting themselves to these Middle Americans as respecting their opinions and representing their fears, even though the policies being pushed by Trump and the GOP still favor the rich and will do little good – and significant harm – to the middle and working classes.

By contrast, many of Hillary Clinton’s domestic proposals might well have benefited average Americans but she alienated many of them by telling a group of her supporters that half of Trump’s backers belonged in a “basket of deplorables.” Although she later reduced the percentage, she had committed a cardinal political sin: she had put the liberal disdain for millions of Americans into words – and easily remembered words at that.

By insisting that Hillary Clinton be the Democratic nominee – after leftist populist Bernie Sanders was pushed aside – the party also ignored the fact that many Americans, including many Democrats, viewed Clinton as the perfectly imperfect candidate for an anti-Establishment year with many Americans still fuming over the Wall Street bailouts and amid the growing sense that the system was rigged for the well-connected and against the average guy or gal.

In the face of those sentiments, the Democrats nominated a candidate who personified how a relatively small number of lucky Americans can play the system and make tons of money while the masses have seen their dreams crushed and their bank accounts drained. And Clinton apparently still hasn’t learned that lesson.

Citing Women’s Rights

Last month, when asked why she accepted hundreds of thousands of dollars for speaking to Goldman Sachs, Clinton rationalized her greed as a women’s rights issue, saying: “you know, men got paid for the speeches they made. I got paid for the speeches I made.”

Her excuse captured much of what has gone wrong with the Democratic Party as it moved from its working-class roots and New Deal traditions to becoming a party that places “identity politics” ahead of a duty to fight for the common men and women of America.

Demonstrating her political cluelessness, Clinton used the serious issue of women not getting fair treatment in the workplace to justify taking her turn at the Wall Street money trough, gobbling up in one half-hour speech what it would

take many American families a decade to earn.

While it's a bit unfair to personalize the Democratic Party's problems, Hillary and Bill Clinton have come to represent how the party is viewed by many Americans. Instead of the FDR Democrats, we have the Davos Democrats, the Wall Street Democrats, the Hollywood Democrats, the Silicon Valley Democrats, and now increasingly the Military-Industrial Complex Democrats.

To many Americans struggling to make ends meet, the national Democrats seem committed to the interests of the worldwide elites: global trade, financialization of the economy, robotization of the workplace, and endless war against endless enemies.

Now, the national Democrats are clambering onto the bandwagon for a costly and dangerous New Cold War with nuclear-armed Russia. Indeed, it is hard to distinguish their foreign policy from that of neoconservatives, although these Democrats view themselves as liberal interventionists citing humanitarian impulses to justify the endless slaughter.

Earlier this year, a Washington Post/ABC News poll found only 28 percent of Americans saying that the Democrats were "in touch with the concerns of most people" – an astounding result given the Democrats' long tradition as the party of the American working class and the party's post-Vietnam War reputation as favoring butter over guns.

Yet rather than rethink the recent policies, the Democrats prefer to fantasize about impeaching President Trump and continuing a blame-game about who – other than Hillary Clinton, her campaign and the Democratic National Committee – is responsible for Trump's election. Of course, it's the Russians, Russians, Russians!

A Problem's Deep Roots

Without doubt, some of the party's problems have deep roots that correspond to the shrinking of the labor movement since the 1970s and the growing reliance on big-money donors to finance expensive television-ad-driven campaigns. Over the years, the Democrats also got pounded for being "weak" on national security.

Further, faced with Republican "weaponization" of attack ads in the 1980s, many old-time Democrats lost out to the Reagan Revolution, clearing the way for a new breed of Democrats who realized that they could compete for a slice of the big money by cultivating the emerging coastal elites: Wall Street, Silicon Valley, Hollywood and even elements of the National Security State.

By the 1990s, President Bill Clinton and the Democratic Leadership Council

defined this New Democrat, politicians who reflected the interests of well-heeled coastal elites, especially on free trade; streamlined financial regulations; commitment to technology; and an activist foreign policy built around spreading “liberal values” across the globe.

Mixed in was a commitment to the rights of various identity groups, a worthy goal although this tolerance paradoxically contributed to a new form of prejudice among some liberals who came to view many white working-class people as fat, stupid and bigoted, society’s “losers.”

So, while President Clinton hobnobbed with the modern economy’s “winners” – with sleepovers in the Lincoln bedroom and parties in the Hamptons – much of Middle America felt neglected if not disdained. The “losers” were left to rot in “flyover America” with towns and cities that had lost their manufacturing base and, with it, their vitality and even their purpose for existing.

Republican Fraud

It wasn’t as if the Republicans were offering anything better. True, they were more comfortable talking to these “forgotten Americans” – advocating “gun rights” and “traditional values” and playing on white resentments over racial integration and civil rights – but, in office, the Republicans aggressively favored the interests of the rich, cutting their taxes and slashing regulations even more than the Democrats.

The Republicans paid lip service to the struggling blue-collar workers but control of GOP policies was left in the hands of corporations and their lobbyists.

Though the election of Barack Obama, the first African-American president, raised hopes that the nation might finally bind its deep racial wounds, it turned out to have a nearly opposite effect. Tea Party Republicans rallied many white working-class Americans to resist Obama and the hip urban future that he represented. They found an unlikely champion in real-estate mogul and reality TV star Donald Trump, who sensed how to tap into their fears and anger with his demagogic appeals and false populism.

Meanwhile, the national Democrats were falling in love with data predicting that demographics would magically turn Republican red states blue. So the party blithely ignored the warning signs of a cataclysmic break with the Democrats’ old-time base.

Despite all the data on opioid addiction and declining life expectancy among the white working class, Hillary Clinton was politically tone-deaf to the rumbles of discontent echoing across the Rust Belt. She assumed the traditionally

Democratic white working-class precincts would stick with her and she tried to appeal to the “security moms” in typically Republican suburbs by touting her neoconservative foreign policy thinking. And she ran a relentlessly negative campaign against Trump while offering voters few positive reasons to vote for her.

Ignoring Reality

When her stunning loss became clear on Election Night – as the crude and unqualified Trump pocketed the electoral votes of Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin – the Democrats refused to recognize what the elections results were telling them, that they had lost touch with a still important voting bloc, working-class whites.

Rather than face these facts, the national Democrats – led by President Obama and his intelligence chiefs – decided on a different approach, to seek to reverse the election by blaming the result on the Russians. Obama, his intelligence chiefs and a collaborative mainstream media insisted without presenting any real evidence that the Russians had hacked into Democratic emails and released them to the devastating advantage of Trump, as if the minor controversies from leaked emails of the Democratic National Committee and Clinton’s campaign chairman John Podesta explained Trump’s surprising victory.

As part of this strategy, any Trump link to Russia – no matter how inconsequential, whether from his businesses or through his advisers – became the focus of Woodward-and-Bernstein/Watergate-style investigations. The obvious goal was to impeach Trump and ride the wave of Trump-hating enthusiasm to a Democratic political revival.

In other words, there was no reason to look in the mirror and rethink how the Democratic Party might begin rebuilding its relationships with the white working-class, just hold hearings featuring Obama’s intelligence chieftains and leak damaging Russia-gate stuff to the media.

But the result of this strategy has been to deepen the Democratic Party’s reliance on the elites, particularly the self-reverential mavens of the mainstream media and the denizens of the so-called “deep state.” From my conversations with Trump voters, they “get” what’s going on, how the powers-that-be are trying to negate the 63 million Americans who voted for Trump by reversing a presidential election carried out under the U.S. constitutional process.

A Letter from ‘Deplorable’ Land

Some Trump supporters are even making this point publicly. Earlier this month, a

“proud deplorable” named Kenton Woodhead from Brunswick, Ohio, wrote to The New York Times informing the “newspaper of record” that he and other “deplorables” were onto the scheme.

“I wanted to provide you with an unsophisticated synopsis of The New York Times and the media’s quest for the implosion of Donald Trump’s presidency from out here in the real world, in ‘deplorable’ country. ... Every time you and your brethren at other news organizations dream up a new scheme to get Mr. Trump, we out here in deplorable land increase our support for him. ...

“Regardless of what you dream up every day, we refuse to be sucked into your narrative. And even more humorously, there isn’t anything you can do about it! And I love it that you are having the exact opposite effect on those of us you are trying to persuade to think otherwise.

“I mean it is seriously an enjoyable part of my day knowing you are failing. And badly! I haven’t had this much fun watching the media stumble, bumble and fumble in years. I wonder what will happen on the day you wake up and realize how disconnected you’ve become.”

So, despite Trump’s narcissism and incompetence – and despite how his policies will surely hurt many of his working-class supporters – the national Democrats are further driving a wedge between themselves and this crucial voting bloc. By whipping up a New Cold War with Russia and hurling McCarthistic slurs at people who won’t join in the Russia-bashing, the Democratic Party’s tactics also are alienating many peace voters who view both the Republicans and Democrats as warmongers of almost equal measures of guilt.

While it’s certainly not my job to give advice to the Democrats – or any other political group – I can’t help but thinking that this Russia-gate “scandal” is not only lacking in logic and evidence, but it doesn’t even make any long-term political sense.

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

Trump Embraces GOP Tax-Cut Orthodoxy

Exclusive: Not even five months into his presidency, Donald Trump has retreated from key populist promises by moving to slash taxes on the rich and throw

millions of Americans off health insurance, writes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

President Trump earned headlines – and worldwide condemnation – for his announcement June 1 that he was pulling the United States from the Paris climate accord, an agreement signed by 195 nations to fight runaway global warming.

Just a week later, however, Trump attracted almost no attention when he rejected another important Paris accord – this one to fight international tax avoidance by multinational corporations.

The landmark agreement, signed by more than 70 countries, including members of the European Union, India and China, sets certain minimum standards for tax treaties. In particular, it curbs the abusive practices of companies that manipulate the flow of their income between subsidiaries to take advantage of low tax rates in jurisdictions like Luxembourg, where secret tax rulings have helped hundreds of multinational firms drastically reduce their payments.

One such firm was Amazon, which candidate Donald Trump accused of “getting away with murder tax-wise,” before he abandoned his populist pretenses. This March, a U.S. tax court judge upheld as legal a \$1.5 billion tax dodge by the online retailer, which developed an initiative called Project Goldcrest to shift billions of dollars of profits into Luxembourg.

After the second Paris no-show, critics denounced the Trump administration for once again abdicating its responsibilities. “By retreating from the agreement at this point, the U.S. is forfeiting leadership in yet another forum,” said Clark Gascoigne, deputy director of the Financial Accountability and Corporate Transparency Coalition.

But Gascoigne had it wrong. Trump *is* leading – in the opposite direction. In late April, he signed an executive order seeking to delay or suspend any significant tax regulations issued by the Obama administration in 2016 that “impose an undue financial burden on United States taxpayers.”

Experts pointed out that the chief targets of Trump’s order were rules imposed by President Obama to make it tougher for American companies to move headquarters abroad to pay lower U.S. taxes. These rules helped kill a merger last year between U.S. pharmaceutical giant Pfizer and an Irish company, Allergan, which was driven by the prospect of saving tens of billions of dollars in U.S. taxes.

Even without its merger, Pfizer managed last year to keep \$194 billion in

profits offshore, with the help of 181 subsidiaries in various tax havens, according to U.S. PIRG. Apple beat even that record, reportedly avoiding more than \$65 billion in U.S. taxes by parking \$215 billion in profits offshore. A 2014 study of 307 large American companies determined that they had collectively stashed two trillion dollars abroad.

Tax avoidance by multinational firms costs the United States Treasury roughly \$190 billion a year, according to new estimates published by the World Institute for Development Economics Research.

Rates of corporate tax avoidance are soaring. A 2014 study by Gabriel Zucman, an economist at the London School of Economics, estimated that a fifth of all U.S. corporate profits are now booked in offshore tax havens. That represented “a tenfold increase since the 1980s,” Zucman observed. “Over the last 15 years, the effective corporate tax rate of US companies has declined from 30 to 20 percent, and about two-thirds of this decline can be attributed to increased profit-shifting to low-tax jurisdictions.”

Individuals Evade Taxes, Too

Zucman also estimated—as a lower bound—that wealthy U.S. households had parked about \$1.2 *trillion* in cash, stocks, and bonds in foreign tax havens. Counting art, jewelry, gold, real estate and other real assets, would almost certainly multiply that number, he added.

These estimates are highly uncertain, of course, since owners generally don't disclose such holdings to the authorities, and “strikingly, more than 20 percent of the world's cross-border equities have no identifiable owner,” Zucman noted. But the notorious “Panama Papers” leak, as well as leaked documents from Luxembourg and Swiss banks, make Zucman and other researchers confident that tax avoidance and illegal evasion by the ultra-rich are flourishing as never before.

A great deal of tax evasion goes on simply through non-reporting of income, without the use of foreign banks or tax shelters. A reputable 2011 study of America's “underground economy” estimated that nearly a fifth of reportable income was not, in fact, disclosed to the IRS. The loss to the Treasury from such cheating amounts to a staggering \$500 billion annually, equal to all non-military discretionary federal spending combined.

Instead of combating such abuses, President Trump and Congressional Republicans are doing everything in their power to cut tax rates on the rich and undercut enforcement of existing tax laws.

The Republican-sponsored American Health Care Act, for example, is a \$700 billion tax cut for the rich dressed up as an alternative to President Obama's

Affordable Care Act. Forty percent of the tax savings would accrue to the top one percent of earners, according to a study by the Tax Policy Center.

Trump's proposal to scrap the estate tax would benefit only the very wealthiest individuals – about 5,500 per year – whose estates exceed the \$5.5 million federal exemption enough to be taxable. Many of the prospective beneficiaries, of course, are the same billionaires who lavish so much money on GOP candidates and political action committees.

“In a major jolt of support for President Trump, the powerful political network overseen by conservative billionaire Charles Koch is launching a multimillion-dollar campaign to drive Trump's tax plan through Congress,” USA Today reported in May. The Kochs' network, which pools contributions from 550 super-rich donors, “plan(s) to spend \$300 million to \$400 million on policy and political campaigns ahead of the 2018 elections,” the paper said.

More Tax Cuts

Trump and House Speaker Paul Ryan also propose to slash tax rates on personal business income, from a top rate of 39.6 percent to as little as 15 percent. The plan, if passed, would cost the Treasury nearly \$2 trillion over the next decade, while a major share of the benefits would go to households with incomes of more than \$1 million a year (including Donald Trump), according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

The plan would also encourage widespread tax avoidance by individuals who would try to reclassify their salaries as “business income” to pay lower rates.

The IRS, for its part, would be nearly powerless to stop such abuses. Over the past five years, the *New York Times* reports, “congressional Republicans have taken out their anti-tax wrath on the Internal Revenue Service, cutting its budget by nearly \$1 billion, reducing its staff by about 17,000, and even threatening to impeach its chief.”

Their goal is not to reform the IRS but to cripple it so wealthy tax evaders have nothing to fear. The agency has lost 5,000 revenue agents and investigators since 2012, allowing numerous cases of suspected fraud to go unchecked and tens of billions of dollars in revenue to go uncollected.

“I'm appalled, that's all I can say,” said Lawrence B. Gibbs, who served as IRS Commissioner under President Reagan from 1986 to 1989. In light of the nation's challenges, he added, “the one thing people ought to agree on is that we should have a revenue system that works and works well.”

Most Americans do indeed agree, even if Republican legislators and President

Trump do not. The latest Pew Research Center survey found that six in 10 Americans were bothered “a lot” by the failure of some corporations and wealthy people to pay their fair share of taxes. Reflecting that sentiment, 56 percent of respondents said the federal tax system is unfair, the highest recorded in two decades.

Perhaps more surprisingly, Americans also feel in general that they are not overtaxed. There’s a good reason for that: Americans have one of the lowest tax burdens of any developed country. Of 36 developed nations, only Korea, Chile, and Mexico tax a smaller share of their total national income.

We’ve come a long way in the two years since economist and columnist Paul Krugman, while harboring no illusions about candidate Trump, praised his professed “willingness to raise taxes on the rich” and his “positive words about universal health care.” Along with most of his other promises, Trump shelved those popular notions when he took office. Today, the billionaire tax dodger pursues only the most orthodox of all Republican agendas: make the rich richer, at the expense of everyone else.

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Europe Discovers a Volatile Populism

Exclusive: European politicians are finding it tricky to “play the populist card,” as U.K. Prime Minister May discovered when her Conservative Party stumbled over its support for more austerity, writes Andrew Spannaus.

By Andrew Spannaus

Last week’s elections in the United Kingdom were a fiasco for Prime Minister Theresa May, whose Conservative Party lost 12 seats in Parliament, weakening the government just ahead of crucial negotiations on the U.K.’s exit from the European Union. The elections had been called by May with the hope of an opposite outcome; the goal was to take advantage of the Tories’ strong lead in the polls to strengthen the Conservative majority and increase May’s power.

One factor in this evaluation was the hope that voters would see Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn as a radical leftist, and in particular as a weak leader compared to the current Prime Minister. Yet Corbyn is the one who succeeded in exploiting the political situation in recent weeks, leading to a gain of 32 seats for Labour, and forcing May into a precarious situation where she must

rely on votes from small Northern Ireland parties to obtain a majority in Parliament.

Theresa May came to power thanks to the Brexit vote held one year ago, when the people of the U.K. voted to leave the European Union (E.U.), leading to the resignation of then-Prime Minister David Cameron. The referendum had originally been called by Cameron as a way to beat back growing internal pressure from the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), led by Nigel Farage.

The political élites lost that battle, as the British population sent a strong message not only to the E.U. institutions in Brussels and Frankfurt, but principally to its own political representatives, who were seen as pursuing their own interests, while ignoring those of large segments of the population.

Immigration was a major issue in the Brexit vote, leading many commentators to brand Leave voters as racists, as has happened with anti-establishment (or populist) movements across the Western world; the same line was used in the U.S. elections, in an attempt to downplay any legitimate reasons to vote for an outsider candidate.

There is no doubt that racism is present with regard to immigration, but academic research has shown that economic difficulties exacerbate racial attitudes, even changing people's visual perception of others. [See A. Krosch, and D. Amodio, Economic scarcity alters perceptions of race. PNAS, May 6, 2014.]

This aspect can feed into a larger mix that leads voters to support candidates who are critical of the current political institutions. Another widely circulated study in Europe has shown that economic crises lead to the rise of more extreme political parties. [See M. Funke, M. Schularick, C. Trebesch, The political aftermath of financial crises: Going to extremes, VoxEU.org, November 21, 2015]

Through an analysis of 20 advanced democracies from 1870 to date, the authors found that, in addition to the obvious case of the 1930s, which saw the advent of Nazism and Fascism, another period of heightened support for far-right parties was precisely that after the crisis that began in 2008.

Weak Recovery

The recovery since that time has been weak, and particularly unequal among socio-economic classes, so it is not surprising that the underlying economic difficulties have fueled protest votes whenever the population is given the possibility to stick it to the politicians. The June 8 general election in the U.K. shows just how important it is to recognize these undercurrents, as opposed to seeking support on collateral issues that many voters may ultimately

recognize as superficial.

Given the victory of Leave in the Brexit vote last year, Theresa May sought to capitalize. Facing resistance in the Parliament, the Prime Minister thought that an election campaign focused on strong leadership to lead the U.K. out of the E.U. would naturally find a great deal of support.

What May ignored, however, is the need to link the political argument to people's basic economic needs. She paid lip service to the issue, promising benefits for the British people by leaving the European common market, and announcing new initiatives to expand trade. The voters didn't buy it though, because at the same time, May found herself on the wrong side of the all-important issue of austerity, leaving a massive flank open to Corbyn and Labour.

May took two significant hits on economic issues during the short campaign. First of all, she came under fire for cuts to the police budget, in the aftermath of recent terror attacks. May was Home Secretary – responsible for national security, policing, immigration and citizenship – from May 2010 to July 2016, during which time total police numbers in England and Wales fell by almost 20 percent. May's response to the accusation of having weakened public safety capacity to stop terror attacks was to brand Corbyn as unprepared for office, and claim that he would be even worse. Sound familiar to American voters?

May also boasted about giving police increased powers to deal with terrorists. The image that stuck, however, was that of having cut the budget in a key area when resources are needed to guarantee security.

The second instance in which May was pummeled was the so-called "dementia tax." The Conservatives presented their social manifesto in April, with a plan to change the rules about how the elderly pay for home care. Corbyn immediately branded the scheme a "tax on dementia," as people who need long-term care at home would be forced to use more of their assets to pay for it: the state would be allowed to draw on a pensioner's home equity to pay the bill.

May's stumble on this point played into the larger narrative of the negative effects of the Conservatives' austerity policies in recent years. In fact the backlash regarding social spending cuts had already become manifest at the time of the Brexit vote. The week the Brits went to the polls a year ago, newspapers ran headlines on poverty increasing for the first time in a decade, clearly linked to the social welfare cuts presented as "necessary" to deal with the economic crisis.

Fed Up with Austerity

Elsewhere in Europe, the U.K. has been presented as a success story, a country

that has made the “tough choices” necessary to fix the budget and allow for growth again. It’s a common refrain, based on the monetarist ideology, which holds that austerity is the magic formula that will create confidence and thus kick-start economic activity.

The reality is usually the opposite. Cuts to social services and investment hurt the population’s standard of living, and inhibit growth; papering over this by pointing to the rebound after the fall has become a favorite pastime of neoliberal economists and politicians.

What we have seen throughout the Western world in the past year is that the population is no longer buying it. The hollowing out of the middle class in the name of promoting economic and financial globalization has led to a revolt of voters against the Establishment.

Theresa May, who became Prime Minister thanks to last year’s first manifestation of this protest vote, approving the U.K.’s departure from the E.U., now risks becoming a victim of that same revolt.

May attempted to exploit nationalist support for Britain to strengthen her majority in Parliament, but she did so by focusing on issues that proved to be weaker than expected when not tied to the underlying discontent in the population, fueled by the reduction of living standards and the increase in economic insecurity.

Jeremy Corbyn, who campaigned unabashedly on a leftist, anti-austerity program, was able to intersect part of the same anti-establishment sentiment that fueled the Brexit vote, and turn it to his advantage. The results of the elections in the U.K. demonstrate once again that the “populist” revolt is not a one-way street.

The Conservatives are still the leading party in Parliament, but it is now clear that they need to review their own policies from recent years, and recognize that the protest vote will turn against whoever defends a status quo that is not working for a large part of the population.

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Trump Fans the Mideast Fires of Hate

President Trump's support for the Saudi blockade of Qatar – and his insult to Iran after it suffered an ISIS attack – reveal a dangerously shallow thinker eager to pour gas on the Mideast fires, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

By Paul R. Pillar

That “Arab NATO” didn't last very long, did it? The break with Qatar by some of its Arab brethren, including its nearest neighbors, is impressively comprehensive, involving a breach of diplomatic relations and an economic and transportation embargo. It reflects sharp divisions not only within the Arab world but even among the half dozen monarchies that constitute the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

The break is a resounding refutation of the notion, which was a leitmotif of President Trump's recent trip to the region, that significant lines of conflict in the region can all be reduced to some simplistic grand division, such as of evil versus good, Shia versus Sunni, or Iran versus everyone else.

The ostensible complaint about Qatar's financing of extremists is grounded in truth about that financing but is an unpersuasive instance of the pot calling the kettle black, given the Saudis' own record in furnishing such support to radicals. The actual grievances that the Saudis and others have with the Qataris involve the sorts of parochial, ignoble concerns that the United States does not share and should not act as if it does.

Qatar's sponsorship of Al Jazeera has long been a thorn in the side of the Saudi rulers, who dislike freewheeling journalism that addresses subjects of interest to the Saudis. Then there was the way in which, back in the 1990s, the father of the current Qatari emir deposed *his* father, an action that senior Saudi royals saw as a disturbing precedent for ruling families in the region and led to the Saudis reportedly attempting to foment their own coup in Qatar.

Policies toward the Muslim Brotherhood are an additional issue. Certainly it is misleading to throw the Brotherhood rhetorically into the same hopper as the much different violent extremists that are the object of counterterrorist efforts. The Brotherhood has represented in most places in the region the principal peaceful Islamist alternative to the violent extremism of jihadists such as ISIS.

The Saudi royals have been wary of the Brotherhood because it represents a

popular way of incorporating Islam into politics that is quite different from the monarchical absolutism of the royals themselves; the Brotherhood thus constitutes a threat to the religiously based legitimacy of the house of Saud. Egyptian strongman Abdel Fatah al-Sisi opposes the Brotherhood because it represents a popular alternative to his increasingly harsh authoritarian rule; the democratically elected president whom al-Sisi deposed in a coup was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Punishing Pragmatism

For Qatar's rulers – even though they, like the Saudis, lead a very undemocratic and Wahhabi-based monarchy – dealing with the Brotherhood is a matter of recognizing social and political reality. Persian Gulf specialist Gerd Nonneman, of the Doha campus of Georgetown University, observes that Qatar's relationship with the Brotherhood and other Islamist organizations “was never driven by religious ideology but by a pragmatic calculation that these movements had considerable social traction and would likely become an important part of the post-Arab Spring era.”

Then there is Qatar's mostly normal relationship with Iran. This is the aspect of the intra-GCC dust-up that raises the most serious questions about the Trump administration's crudely simplistic way of defining lines of conflict in the region and in particular its automatic, nothing-but-confrontation-and-hostility posture toward Iran. Qatar has very practical reasons to conduct normal business with Iran. The two countries share the largest natural gas field in the world, a resource that is the key to Qatar's wealth and its status as the world's largest exporter of liquefied natural gas. The two countries peacefully exploit this resource, competing in terms of economics and technology and not in terms of bullets or subversion.

To those who habitually recite the mantra about Iran's “nefarious” behavior in the region, isn't its behavior vis-à-vis Qatar and the gas exactly the kind of peaceful, normal, behavior we want to encourage? And if it is to be encouraged, shouldn't we all conduct ourselves the way the Qataris have in this respect?

Such conduct need not erase or overlook other differences or conflicts of interests. As Nonneman notes, Qatar's posture toward Iran is as pragmatic as its posture toward the Muslim Brotherhood; Qatar is strongly opposed to Iranian policies in Syria, for example, but sees no good to be done by any attempt to isolate Iran totally.

Iran's immediate response to the embargo of Qatar by its Arab brethren was to offer food exports to make up for commerce interrupted by Saudi Arabia closing its land border with Qatar. Would export of food be another example of that

“nefarious,” “destabilizing” Iranian behavior we keep hearing about?

The Qatar experience raises another important point regarding conflict, stability and Iran. As has been mentioned by many observers while Trump has continued sword-dancing with the Saudis and been castigating the Qataris, Qatar hosts the largest U.S. military base in the Persian Gulf region. If having normal relations with Iran does not preclude a country from hosting even a large U.S. military installation – and one in the *Persian* Gulf, in Iran’s backyard, rather than, say, in the Gulf of Mexico – than why are we so afraid of anyone having normal relations with Iran, and are so vehement about trying to isolate Iran? Nothing could demonstrate more clearly the bankruptcy of a U.S. posture that assumes any dealings with, or activity of, Iran to be bad by definition.

An Appalling Statement

And nothing demonstrates the extremes to which the Trump administration goes in pushing its all-hostility-all-the-time policy toward Iran than the White House’s appalling statement about the ISIS terrorist attacks in Tehran, which reads in its entirety, “We grieve and pray for the innocent victims of the terrorist attacks in Iran, and for the Iranian people, who are going through such challenging times. We underscore that states that sponsor terrorism risk falling victim to the evil they promote.”

Shorten this by about a hundred characters and add some exclamation points, and this almost reads like one of those middle-of-the-night impulsive Trumpian tweets. It is all the more disturbing that this was instead an official White House statement, released by the press office – a reflection of how the extremes of current policy toward Iran are a function not just of Donald Trump’s urges but also of personal grudges found elsewhere at high levels of his administration, a party-wide impulse to do the opposite of whatever Barack Obama did, and other comparably bad bases for constructing foreign and national security policy.

The “evil they promote” language turns upside down, of course, the whole story of ISIS and of how Iran has been a major foe, not a supporter, of that group and similar brands of terrorism. But the heartlessness and ignorance of the White House statement have implications beyond policy toward Iran. Just imagine what our own reaction would be if a similar “they had it coming” statement were made by any other government, in response to a terrorist attack by any group made against any other country. The reaction quite properly would be that the government making the statement was irresponsibly condoning terrorism.

For the United States to make such a statement subjects it to a very unfavorable comparison with Iran, which responsibly reacted with compassion and support

following the most serious terrorist attack against the United States. Donald Trump likes to pose, as he tried to do during his recent trip to the region, as a leader in the fight against terrorism. Anyone who declares that the target of an ISIS attack had it coming to them is not qualified to be such a leader.

Favoring Escalation

Everyone except hardline trouble-makers has an interest in de-escalation, rather than escalation, of tension and conflict in the Persian Gulf. Everyone includes the United States, the GCC countries, and the global economy. It is not just the leaders of Qatar who recognize that. Oman has carefully maintained smooth relations with all of its neighbors, including Iran, and for the most part Kuwait has tried to do so as well. That's half of the GCC. Even the Saudis, when they are not seized with shorter term preoccupations such as new leaders trying to make marks for themselves, have from time to time seen the value of rapprochement with Iran.

There has been an opportunity just within the past few months, based on a GCC proposal for dialogue that the Kuwaiti foreign minister carried to Tehran, for significant de-escalation of cross-Gulf tension. The proposal was well-received in Iran. President Rouhani, with a strengthened mandate after a landslide re-election victory, has expressed willingness to discuss without preconditions the full range of differences between Iran and the Gulf Arabs. Iran and Saudi Arabia already, earlier this year, held talks that reached a compromise to resolve some differences regarding Iranian pilgrims making the Hajj to Mecca.

Then along comes Donald Trump, preaching a message not of rapprochement and reconciliation, not of the need for countries that live in the same neighborhood and are not going anywhere to share that neighborhood, but instead a message of militancy, hostility, and isolation. He has been appealing to, and bolstering, all the worst, most parochial inclinations of the Saudis and others, and opposing inclinations based on their better judgment.

The Saudi-led move against Qatar was not initiated by Trump but was in effect encouraged by him (and not just because he has bragged of being responsible for it), with its mishmash of anti-Iran, anti-Muslim Brotherhood tones resembling the music that Trump had been singing. All the issues about the Brotherhood and other intra-GCC disputes had been around for a long time; it is no accident that the move against Doha was made when it was.

In the narrow perspective of Donald Trump, when his simply drawn lines of conflict – of good and evil, of winners and losers – cause him problems because reality is more complicated, his usual response is to draw the lines even more narrowly. Something of this has been happening with relations in the Persian

Gulf.

As of the time of his trip, the projected image was of a grand coalition that could join in eternal hostility toward the forces of evil, with Iran at the center of those forces. When the more complex reality soon reasserted itself in the Qatar imbroglio, Trump's immediate inclination was to narrow the lines of conflict some more while keeping them just as simple, and to side with the Saudis while dumping on the Qataris.

There is a parallel with how Trump responds to challenges domestically and within his own administration – always narrowing, and casting out those whom he may have lauded before but then no longer fit the simple vision. If Qatar, notwithstanding that U.S. military base, has to go the way of Chris Christie and Michael Flynn, then, in Trump's view, so be it.

Discourse in Washington, especially at its partisan and blame-shifting worst, has long found ways to attribute conflict and disorder in the Middle East to this or that U.S. president. Often, as is true as well of events in other regions, the attribution of events, for good or for ill, to the U.S. president gets overstated.

But it is not an overstatement that a posture of stoking tensions and division rather than of encouraging their de-escalation, of swearing eternal hostility to a major regional state, of screwing up opportunities for rapprochement within the region, and of forgoing the United States' own opportunities by bad-mouthing the nuclear agreement with Iran and refusing to build on it in addressing other issues, is making the security situation in the Persian Gulf worse. That's bad for the denizens of the Gulf and bad for the United States.

Paul R. Pillar, in his 28 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, rose to be one of the agency's top analysts. He is author most recently of *Why America Misunderstands the World*. (This article first appeared as a blog post at The National Interest's Web site. Reprinted with author's permission.)

ISIS Attack Exposes Anti-Iran Propaganda

An ISIS-claimed terror attack in Iran killing a dozen people shows how dishonest the U.S. government has been in lumping Iran in with terror groups that it has aggressively fought, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

By Paul R. Pillar

For Americans fed a diet of rhetoric about Iran that constantly links it to the sending, not the receiving, end of terrorism – in which “the leading state sponsor of terrorism” is the adjectival phrase routinely affixed to Iran, and in which official rhetoric such as President Trump’s speech in Riyadh mashes Iran together with Sunni Islamist terrorism of the ISIS variety into one undifferentiated blob of evil – the deadly attacks today in Tehran generate much cognitive dissonance.

But however disorienting this news may have been, it is true. An obviously well-planned operation struck at the heart of Iran, at its parliament and the monument to the Islamic Republic’s founder. At least a dozen people were killed and dozens more injured. The credibility of the claim of responsibility by ISIS is enhanced by the group’s posting of video footage from the attack.

For anyone looking beyond rhetoric and at reality, the attack is no surprise. Iran has been one of the staunchest and most active foes of ISIS. Probably the main reason an attack like this had not happened any earlier is the difficulty that ISIS has had in finding recruits among Iranians.

Iran has, partly with its own personnel but mainly through material support of clients and allies, been a leader in combating ISIS, especially in Iraq and to a lesser extent in Syria. Many Iraqis give Iran, with good reason, the main credit for saving Baghdad from ISIS when the group was making its dramatic territorial gains in northern and western Iraq in 2014.

If the United States could overcome its current hang-up about doing any business with Iran, it would find a worthwhile partner in many aspects of counterterrorism, especially as far as the fight against ISIS is concerned.

There has long been a willingness, and a necessary awareness of shared interest, on the Iranian side.

In September 2001, immediately after the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington, both Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and then-President Mohamed Khatami strongly condemned the attacks. Expressions of sympathy in Iran for the American victims included candlelight vigils and observing a minute of silence by tens of thousands of people at a sporting event.

Two weeks after the attack, Khatami stated, “Iran fully understands the feelings of the Americans about the attacks in New York and Washington.” Khatami correctly noted that American administrations had been at best indifferent about terrorist attacks in Iran since the revolution of 1979, but that Iranians felt differently and were expressing their sympathies accordingly.

Condolences or Sanctions?

We wait to hear from the Trump administration the kind of expression of sympathy and solidarity that commonly is offered to foreign nations that have become victims of major terrorist attacks. We should not hold our breath while waiting.

The Iranians certainly aren't. They have experienced a long history of American postures toward Iran, in the context of a common terrorist threat, that have ranged from indifference at best to door-slamming at worst. In the first few months after 9/11, Iranian officials worked cooperatively and effectively with U.S. officials to midwife a new regime in Afghanistan to replace the Taliban.

The Iranians thought this could be the beginning of further cooperation against a common threat. But then the United States slammed the door shut, as George W. Bush declared an "axis of evil" in which Iran was lumped together with North Korea and Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

The principal perpetrator of terrorism in Iran over the past four decades has been the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK), the Marxist/Islamist cult/terrorist group that prior to the revolution had claimed Americans among its victims. Thanks largely to the MEK's activity, Iran necessarily has had much experience in countering terrorism. Khamenei lost the use of his right arm when he was injured by an MEK bomb in an assassination attempt in 1981.

The U.S. handling of the MEK in recent years has seen the U.S. Government succumbing to a well-financed lobbying campaign on behalf of the group, with that campaign winning much support for the group in the U.S. Congress and the group eventually being removed from the U.S. list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations. If the crippled Khamenei exhibits some reflexive anti-U.S. sentiments, do you suppose this history has something to do with it?

Right now, on the very day of the terrorist attacks in Tehran, the United States Senate is scheduled to take its first vote on a bill that would impose still more sanctions on Iran. It appears the most immediate American response to the attacks will be sanctions on, not sympathy for, the victim.

In the months ahead, Iran may take actions outside its borders in response to the attacks. The United States, ever since 9/11, has claimed a right for itself to be ruthlessly aggressive in the name of responding to terrorism, lashing out with force while sometimes being little restrained by collateral damage or international law (not to mention its own constitutional requirements).

Iran may see a need to be more aggressive in places such as Iraq or Syria in the interest of fighting back against ISIS. Will the United States grant Iran the same kind of slack it grants itself? Or, as has been customary in opposing anything Iran does and taking no account of exactly what interests are being

advanced or threatened, will the Iranian responses be denounced as more “nefarious,” “malign,” and “destabilizing” behavior?

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McMaster Urges Another Afghan ‘Surge’

Exclusive: The failure to hold the Iraq War perpetrators accountable has led to false narratives about “successful surges” that never really succeeded – and now may allow the Afghan slaughter to escalate, reports James W Carden.

By James W Carden

Over the weekend, the *New York Times* reported that President Trump’s National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster will soon be proposing yet another troop increase in Afghanistan. According to the Times, “The White House shelved the deliberations over Afghanistan three weeks ago, after an initial Pentagon proposal to deploy up to 5,000 additional American troops ran into fierce resistance” from White House chief strategist Stephen K. Bannon and other advisers.

But McMaster, reports the *Times*, is “undeterred” and “plans to bring the debate back to the front burner this coming week,” according to an anonymous U.S. official.

The current debate recalls the early days of the Obama administration when President Obama was basically railroaded by Secretary of Defense Bob Gates, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Generals David Petraeus and Stanley McChrystal into sending over 30,000 U.S. troops in an ill-fated “surge” that was advertised by its supporters as the answer to the Afghan quagmire. But the “surge,” rather than resulting in victory, produced a rash of “green on blue” attacks by our alleged Afghan allies upon U.S. troops.

It is worth recalling that the Afgha “surge” was a policy that was enthusiastically endorsed by the U.S. Establishment. As the editorial board of the New York Times wrote in May 2009: “We hope... that the president and his team have come up with a strategy that will combine aggressive counterinsurgency tactics with economic development.” Washington think tanks, such as the Center

for a New American Security and the Brookings Institution, also lined up in support. Yet the results were abysmal: more U.S. troops died in Afghanistan under Obama than under George W. Bush. Overall, the war in Afghanistan, which is now in its 16th year, has taken the lives of over 31,000 Afghani civilians – and by some estimates perhaps 10 times over – and over 3,500 members of the U.S.-led coalition at a cost of over \$1 trillion.

But never mind this uncomfortable and tragic history. For the *Times*, what's important is that Trump's Defense Secretary James Mattis and H.R. McMaster "are steeped in counterinsurgency doctrine – the strategy that helped lead Mr. Obama to order a deployment of 30,000 troops to Afghanistan in 2009." And judging by much of the literature and reportage on the decade-and-a-half-long war in Afghanistan, counterinsurgency doctrine (or COIN) has, despite zero success, never lost its luster inside the Beltway.

Bad Habits

When it comes to COIN, old habits die hard. The Brookings Institution's Michael O'Hanlon, a stalwart supporter of counterinsurgency doctrine in Iraq and a cheerleader for the 2009 Afghan "surge," is now calling for a "mini-surge" in Afghanistan. According to Hanlon, the war may not end anytime soon, "**but maybe that's okay**, given how relatively modest in scale and risk the mission has become, and how modest it will remain even if President Trump adds several thousand more troops to the mix." [Emphasis mine].

"An increase of several thousand U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan," says O'Hanlon, "has a sound logic behind it."

The misplaced enthusiasm for sending evermore troops to Afghanistan is predicated in large part by an almost religious faith in counterinsurgency doctrine, which is often cited as the key to General David Petraeus's (allegedly) "successful surge" in Iraq in 2007.

Yet as the historian and retired Army colonel Andrew Bacevich has pointed out, COIN has "enabled senior civilian and military officials to sustain the pretense of having reasserted a measure of control over a situation in which they have exercised next to none." [For why the "successful surge" myth has been so popular in Official Washington, click here.]

Having failed on its own terms, that is, to bring a measure of political stability to Iraq and Afghanistan, COIN's proponents nevertheless persist. Indeed, counterinsurgency expert and former president of CNAS John Nagl was quoted in the Times asking "what is the alternative?" to McMaster's proposed troop increase.

Actually, there *are* alternatives (there always are). It's just that these tend not to have the institutional backing of Washington's policy/think tank community which, because it is deeply compromised by its defense industry funders, rarely given them voice or consideration.

For example, Professors Stephen Walt and John J. Mearsheimer have proposed an eminently sensible strategy of "offshore balancing" which would forgo the use of U.S. ground forces and instead rely on an "over the horizon" force that would serve as a deterrent to the rise of potential regional hegemony while "eschewing social engineering and minimizing the United States' military footprint."

According to Walt and Mearsheimer, the U.S. is currently committed to "spreading democracy in unfamiliar places, which sometimes requires military occupation and always involves interfering with local political arrangements."

Fresh Thinking

The problem with this approach – which, as it happens, is the most serious objection to McMaster's plan – is that ever greater number of boots on the ground "invariably foster nationalist resentment."

"In addition to inspiring terrorists," write Walt and Mearsheimer, "using regime change to spread American values undermines local institutions and creates ungoverned spaces where violent extremists can flourish."

MIT's Barry Posen has proposed a strategy along similar lines. In his 2014 book *Restraint: A New Foundation for US Strategy*, Posen correctly observes that U.S. objectives in Afghanistan are "probably unachievable." After all, "despite much US and NATO instruction" Afghanistan's "military, and police remain poorly trained, inadequately armed, sometimes corrupt, and only intermittently motivated."

What to do? Send in more troops, as per Mattis and McMaster? No: the wisest course of action would be for the U.S. to moderate its goals, which, according to Posen, "means ratcheting down the US counterinsurgency, nation-building project in Afghanistan at the earliest possible time."

As the latest iteration of the counterinsurgency debate kicks off this week, the time to consider serious alternatives to America's current (and failed) strategy in Afghanistan is now.

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Democrats Chase Red Herring of Russia-gate

The Democrats' demagogic use of Russia-gate to "resist" President Trump is putting progressives in league with warmongers and war contractors while postponing a serious assessment of the party's political problems, warns Norman Solomon.

By Norman Solomon

The Trump administration has already done enormous harm to the United States and the planet. Along the way, President Trump has also caused many prominent progressives to degrade their own political discourse. It's up to us to challenge the corrosive effects of routine hyperbole and outright demagoguery.

Consider the rhetoric from one of the most promising new House members, Democrat Jamie Raskin, at a rally near the Washington Monument over the weekend. Reading from a prepared text, Raskin warmed up by declaring that "Donald Trump is the hoax perpetrated on the Americans by the Russians."

Soon the congressman named such varied countries as Hungary, the Philippines, Syria and Venezuela, and immediately proclaimed: "All the despots, dictators and kleptocrats have found each other, and Vladimir Putin is the ringleader of the unfree world."

Later, asked about factual errors in his speech, Raskin floundered during a filmed interview with The Real News. What is now boilerplate Democratic Party bombast about Russia has little to do with confirmed facts and much to do with partisan talking points.

The same day that Raskin spoke, the progressive former Labor Secretary Robert Reich featured at the top of his website an article he'd written with the headline "The Art of the Trump-Putin Deal." The piece had striking similarities to what progressives have detested over the years when coming from right-wing commentators and witch-hunters. The timeworn technique was dual track, in effect: *I can't prove it's true, but let's proceed as though it is.*

The lead of Reich's piece was clever. Way too clever: "Say you're Vladimir Putin, and you did a deal with Trump last year. I'm not suggesting there was any such deal, mind you. But if you are Putin and you *did* do a deal, what did Trump agree to do?" From there, Reich's piece was off to the conjectural races.

Propaganda Techniques

Progressives routinely deplore such propaganda techniques from right-wingers, not only because the Left is being targeted but also because we seek a political culture based on facts and fairness rather than innuendos and smears. It's painful now to see numerous progressives engaging in hollow propaganda.

Likewise, it's sad to see so much eagerness to trust in the absolute credibility of institutions like the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Agency – institutions that previously earned wise distrust. Over the last few decades, millions of Americans have gained keen awareness of the power of media manipulation and deception by the U.S. foreign-policy establishment. Yet now, faced with an ascendant extreme right wing, some progressives have yielded to the temptation of blaming our political predicament more on a foreign “enemy” than on powerful corporate forces at home.

The over-the-top scapegoating of Russia serves many purposes for the military-industrial complex, Republican neocons, and kindred “liberal interventionist” Democrats. Along the way, the blame-Russia-first rhetoric is of enormous help to the Clinton wing of the Democratic Party – a huge diversion lest its elitism and entwinement with corporate power come under greater scrutiny and stronger challenge from the grassroots.

In this context, the inducements and encouragements to buy into an extreme anti-Russia frenzy have become pervasive. A remarkable number of people claim certainty about hacking and even “collusion” – events that they cannot, at this time, truly be certain about. In part that's because of deceptive claims endlessly repeated by Democratic politicians and news media.

One example is the rote and highly misleading claim that “17 U.S. intelligence agencies” reached the same conclusion about Russian hacking of the Democratic National Committee – a claim that journalist Robert Parry effectively debunked in an [article](#) last week.

What Americans Want

During a recent appearance on CNN, former Ohio State Senator Nina Turner offered a badly needed perspective on the subject of Russia's alleged intrusion into the U.S. election. People in Flint, Michigan, “wouldn't ask you about Russia and Jared Kushner,” she [said](#). “They want to know how they're gonna get some clean water and why 8,000 people are about to lose their homes.”

Turner noted that “we definitely have to deal with” allegations of Russian interference in the election, “it's on the minds of American people, but if you want to know what people in Ohio – they want to know about jobs, they want to

know about their children.” As for Russia, she said, “We are preoccupied with this, it’s not that this is not important, but every day Americans are being left behind because it’s Russia, Russia, Russia.”

Like corporate CEOs whose vision extends only to the next quarter or two, many Democratic politicians have been willing to inject their toxic discourse into the body politic on the theory that it will be politically profitable in the next election or two. But even on its own terms, the approach is apt to fail. Most Americans are far more worried about their economic futures than about the Kremlin. A party that makes itself more known as anti-Russian than pro-working-people has a problematic future.

Today, 15 years after George W. Bush’s “axis of evil” oratory set the stage for ongoing military carnage, politicians who traffic in unhinged rhetoric like “Putin is the ringleader of the unfree world” are helping to fuel the warfare state – and, in the process, increasing the chances of direct military conflict between the United States and Russia that could go nuclear and destroy us all.

But such concerns can seem like abstractions compared to possibly winning some short-term political gains. That’s the difference between leadership and demagoguery.

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Trump Isolates America from the World

In 2016, American voters faced a painful dilemma, electing a proven war hawk or a climate-change denier – and somehow the climate denier won – as Donald Trump just reminded the world, notes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Donald Trump’s inexcusable withdrawal from the Paris climate change agreement was widely expected and amply telegraphed by Trump himself, of course. And yet, there were reasonable grounds for hope that this might have been one place where Trump would move from being a demagogic campaigner to being a real president, one who deals not just with applause lines but with real U.S. interests and with America’s place in the world.

The substantive importance of the issue is unsurpassed, involving the fate of the planet. The main reasons to stay with the agreement are compelling, involving not only the habitability of Earth but also economic dynamism, U.S. leadership, and U.S. credibility. The non-binding nature of the agreement meant that there was not some unbearable onus that could be removed only through withdrawal.

And even though Trump has made much of fulfilling campaign promises, he already has allowed himself to be deflected from some such promises when they have collided with reality. He has not torn up the nuclear agreement with Iran, in the face of Iran's compliance with that accord. And on the very day Trump announced the pull-out from the Paris agreement, he signed a paper that keeps the U.S. embassy to Israel in Tel Aviv, in the face of what would be certain uproar, deleterious to any prospects for peace, if he had moved the embassy as promised to Jerusalem.

The withdrawal from the Paris agreement is indefensible, and thus Trump's statement announcing the move has much hot air, foreshadowing the increased hot air that everyone will be feeling without increased efforts to arrest global warming. There is, for example, the usual Trumpian assertion about being able to get a better deal, as if this were possible with an agreement that has 195 signatories and with respect to which, given Trump's withdrawal, the United States is now virtually alone.

He harangues about how the Green Climate Fund that the agreement established is "costing the United States a vast fortune." Barack Obama committed \$1 billion to the fund and promised a total of \$3 billion through 2020; for comparison, the proposed increase in military spending in Trump's budget for fiscal 2018 is \$53 billion.

Trump repeatedly complains about what China will be allowed to do while ignoring completely the leadership role that China is assuming in moving to clean energy. He predicts economically crippling blackouts and brownouts under the agreement while ignoring completely the rapid progress in implementing generation of renewable energy. He avows that he "cares deeply about the environment," which is a laughable claim in light of what Trump has been doing not only to climate change but also to the Environmental Protection Agency and to stewardship of public lands.

Ideology Over Realism

Opposition to the Paris agreement reflects, as Heather Hurlburt observes, some larger patterns within American political ideology that go beyond the President himself and that Trump has exploited. Those patterns, as Hurlburt notes, are

related to the unusual American experience of being a superpower, an experience that also underlies several other unconstructive American habits of perceiving and dealing with the outside world.

But the President's withdrawal is also very much a statement about Trump himself. Given the reasons that one might have expected a better decision on this issue, the decision demonstrates that Trump's worst and most destructive qualities are deeply entrenched. It demonstrates that things are unlikely to get much better, with many other issues, under Trump.

The episode shows that Trump will continue to play to a narrow base that squeaked him through to victory last November rather than being president of all the people, let alone a leader of the free world. It shows that campaign themes and the urge not to do whatever Obama did will continue to be more important to him than will enlightened interest, even enlightened self-interest.

It shows that he will continue to shove aside even the most glaring and indisputable facts if they conflict with the themes. It shows that his capability to focus is very short in terms of both time and space. And it shows a deficient moral sense, including in the respects in which morality is involved in what a generation bequeaths to future generations.

As citizens brace and prepare for three years and seven plus months more of this, the problem of climate change itself should be at the top of issues that require not just bracing and preparation but also creative thinking about how to deal with the issue as long as this kind of destructive force is in control of the U.S. government. A reminder is in order that Americans are citizens not only of the United States but also of states, localities, and civil society and also – uniquely important to this issue – citizens of the world, the same world that climate change endangers.

Regarding the smaller units, what states, cities and the private sector are doing to transition to clean energy deserves all the support it can get. Regarding citizenship of the world, Americans will have to consider carefully how to respond to the rest of the world's response to the irresponsibility on this issue in Washington.

The responsible posture may entail not just respect and understanding but also support for some of those responses. Martin Wolf of the *Financial Times* has even written about sanctions as a response to U.S. withdrawal from the Paris agreement. More plausible, more worthy of support from individual Americans, defensible under the rules of the World Trade Organization, and already talked about among foreign government officials, would be a carbon tariff applied to U.S. exports.

Our children and grandchildren, feeling increasingly the effects of climate change, will read about what Trump did and wonder how our generation could have placed such a small-minded man in such a position of power with such lasting and damaging consequences.

Paul R. Pillar, in his 28 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, rose to be one of the agency's top analysts. He is author most recently of *Why America Misunderstands the World*. (This article first appeared as a blog post at The National Interest's Web site. Reprinted with author's permission.)

Trump Tosses Red Meat to Red States

Cornered by the expanding Russia-gate investigation, President Trump reached back to his hardcore "base" by tossing out the Paris climate accord, but the move may hurt U.S. interests, says JP Sottile.

By JP Sottile

President Trump just yanked the Yanks from a treaty that was intentionally designed to be mostly non-binding because the Senate would never pass a binding treaty on climate. It was, however, a significant global political agreement to move toward goals that would create a working framework built on an unprecedented consensus. Mostly, Paris was an important admission that there is a problem ... like an environmental AA meeting.

So, what just happened?

Trump used the Paris Climate Agreement as a buttress. This was a political ploy to shore up support among his loyalists out in the vast swath of Red on that electoral map he recently hung in the White House. This was a move meant to give the President a chance to say he's fulfilling promises. This was about serving red meat to demoralized Trumpist media outlets. This is about generating a much-needed point of agreement with increasingly uncomfortable conservatives in Congress. This is about selling a new catchphrase: "Pittsburgh before Paris." And this speech signaled the return of Steve Bannon.

Trump rehashed the grievances of his campaign with all its incessant whining about the ways the world is taking advantage of America. It doesn't matter that the global system was constructed by the U.S. ... in the interest of the U.S. ... and with American corporations and financial "leaders" always benefiting from this system.

It doesn't matter that the American people have benefited mightily from this system, too. America is less than 5 percent of the global population, but it consumes over 26 percent of the world's resources. America's middle class was enriched by America's domination of the global system it created. But now the world is leveling out a bit and Trump is telling the people they should moan and groan because the benefits of the post-World War II system are waning ... because America isn't getting everything.

Yet the truth is that America's wealth isn't being stolen by wily Chinese or shady Indians or conniving Europeans. The people who've hoarded the wealth are not only a lot like the people in Trump's cabinet ... some of them are in Trump's cabinet. Ivanka and Jared are hoarders, too. And so, too, have the oil industry and the defense industry held a death-lock grip on this system. In fact, the intersection of weapons and crude is the nexus of the system Trump slugs-off as some global conspiracy to deny Americans their birthright. And it is a big reason why the Paris Agreement was needed in the first place.

But that's okay. Why? Because Trump is unintentionally creating space for the rest of the world to finally have a real say in the way the global system works. He's catalyzing even more leveling-off of an imbalanced system long tilted by America in America's favor.

Trump has been totally played by President Xi of China. Outmaneuvered by Vladimir Putin of Russia. Dismissed by Chancellor Merkel of Germany. And now he's shown the world that America is more fallible than ever. It is moving backwards. It is retreating. And that's more room for China and Europe and Russia.

Maybe that's not so bad. Maybe it is a good thing that America is the laughingstock that Trump, in a perfect moment of solipsistic irony, said he wanted to forestall. One thing is for sure, the rest of the world shouldn't wait around for America to clean up its own mess ... because that's something it was loath to do well before Trump body-slammed the body politic and put the future in a headlock. Alas, that's a wrestling match America is now having with itself ... and the rest of the world should just head for the exits.

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

Cumulative Costs from Global Warming

While it's impossible to precisely calculate the costs from global warming, they range from macro threats such as massive shore erosion and mass dislocations of people to micro ones like lost sleep, writes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Resistance to arresting human-caused warming of Earth is politically entrenched in personnel and policies of the Trump administration. This makes the United States a conspicuous delinquent among advanced industrialized countries, as highlighted at the recent G-7 summit meeting, and among the community of nations generally, as highlighted by Trump's refusal to commit to adherence to the Paris climate change agreement and by the United States surrendering leadership to the likes of China and even India.

The reasons for such resistance are multiple, and even uncovering all of them would not stop perverse refusal to help save the planet. Reflecting on what appear to be the main reasons, however, may help point to strategies for overcoming the resistance.

Probably the principal belief – a mistaken belief – that accounts for the absence of what ought to be a groundswell of condemnation of the administration's climate policies by earthlings who live in the United States is the notion that there is a zero-sum trade-off between economic well-being and action to curb global warming. Even if the notion were true, there still would be ample grounds to condemn the selfishness and short-sightedness involved in much of the resistance to action.

And even though the notion is false, politicians will exploit the notion, as Trump does in trying to reduce the issue to a question of coal-mining jobs in Appalachia. He does so even though the jobs in question were lost to technological change and will not be coming back, even though those jobs always will be a relatively small part of employment in the parts of Appalachia Trump is politically targeting, and even though economic growth in the United States would be helped much less by clinging to retrograde burning of fossil fuel than by being in the forefront of developing and implementing advanced forms of renewable energy generation.

False Choice

Notwithstanding such political exploitation of misbelief, it would be wise to highlight the falsity of the notion that mankind faces a choice between economic

well-being and preventing a further rise of a few degrees in global temperatures. The prospects for economic well-being worsen with that temperature rise. This is a matter not only of the economics of energy generation but of far broader and greater consequences.

The positive consequences (longer growing seasons at the higher latitudes, new opportunities for maritime transportation in the Arctic) are vastly outweighed by the negative ones, which are centered on, but not limited to, the impact on agriculture of drought and desertification, huge displacements caused by rising sea levels, and damage from increased extreme weather.

The enormity of the consequences, and the multiplicity of ways in which they will be felt, make it difficult for even the most diligent analysis to come up with an accurate translation of those consequences into dollar costs. Don't expect something like a Congressional Budget Office scoresheet. But to use this difficulty as a reason not to embrace understanding of the consequences would be no more justified than is the posture of Scott Pruitt, the eviscerator (a.k.a. the administrator) of the Environmental Protection Agency, that the reality of climate change should not be accepted because it cannot be calculated with "precision." The very enormity of the likely consequences is all the more reason to focus on them.

It behooves us to consider and to highlight all the likely consequences having economic impact (which is not to suggest that consequences that are at least as political and societal as economic, such as ones stemming from mass migration from increasingly uninhabitable areas, aren't just as important), to chip away at the main misbelief about the economic trade-offs.

Sleep Deprivation

Here's a recent bit of research to add to the mix. It's a study of how climate change is increasing sleep deprivation in the United States. Using large-scale data collected by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention about self-reported sleep habits, and correlating the data with weather records, the researchers calculated that every increase in nighttime temperature of one degree Celsius leads to an additional three nights of restless sleep per 100 people per month.

For the entire United States, this means a one degree increase causes an additional 110 million nights of insufficient sleep each year. If current climate trends continue, there would be an additional six nights of insufficient sleep per 100 people per month by 2050, and 14 more such nights by 2099.

The impact on productivity and thus on the economy of the United States, from

having so many more groggy and sleep-deprived people going to work the next day, cannot be calculated with precision but surely is substantial.

This is just one more reason, among many, not to let economic concerns be an excuse for inaction about climate change. And we shouldn't have to sleep on that.

Paul R. Pillar, in his 28 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, rose to be one of the agency's top analysts. He is author most recently of *Why America Misunderstands the World*. (This article first appeared as a blog post at The National Interest's Web site. Reprinted with author's permission.)
