

Trump's Soft-Shoe on Racist Violence

On Monday, President Trump did a second take on his remarks about the white-nationalist-sparked violence in Charlottesville, but his tepid first take offered a troubling look into his soul, says Michael Winship.

By Michael Winship

Enough. We have a president who is emotionally challenged and empathy-free, who on Saturday read from a prepared statement of concern and condemnation, incapable of speaking genuinely from the heart, apparently because he knows that those who speak racist hate and commit acts of deadly violence are a portion of his "base."

Witness Ku Kluxer David Duke declaring in Charlottesville, Virginia, before Saturday's violence, "We are determined to take our country back. We are going to fulfill the promises of Donald Trump. That's what we believed in, that's why we voted for Donald Trump. Because he said he's going to take our country back."

It's true that you can't always choose those who want to march in support of you, although Trump's refusal to condemn his backing from white supremacists is appalling. Nor can it be denied that on the extreme left there are a few, like so many on the extreme right, who see violence as a means to an end. But Trump not only has failed to speak out against white nationalists, he allows them to work in his White House and mutter seditious nonsense into his all-too-susceptible ears.

As he spoke on Saturday afternoon he was unable to out-and-out condemn the neo-Nazis in Charlottesville without diluting his censure, saying there was "hatred, bigotry and violence" but adding "on many sides, on many sides." And then he tweeted, "Condolences to the family of the young woman killed today, and best regards to all of those injured, in Charlottesville, Virginia. So sad!"

Best regards? So sad? So lame. A woman died, a paralegal named Heather Heyer, and others were wounded at the hand of what appears to be a racist murderer using a car as a deadly weapon. This is a national tragedy, Mr. President. It is domestic terrorism and your reaction must be one of outrage, not left-handed sympathy.

On Saturday, Trump said, "It's been going on for a long time in our country. Not Donald Trump. Not Barack Obama. It's been going on for a long, long time." He's right about the long, long time part but as Richard Cohen, president of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) wrote on Saturday:

"[F]rom the day he came down the escalator in the tower that bears his name, Trump consciously poured fuel on the fire. He ran a racist, xenophobic campaign that energized the radical right... Trump calls for the country to unite. But he is still ducking responsibility for his role in dividing it."

Domestic Terrorism

Many Republican senators denounced Saturday's fascist extremists more strongly and explicitly than the President, including Colorado's Cory Gardner, who tweeted, "Mr. President – we must call evil by its name. These were white supremacists and this was domestic terrorism."

But in the not-so-distant past, out of fear of alienating some conservative voters, Republicans have condemned groups like the SPLC for calling out the growing threat of the extreme right and white supremacy, just as those Republicans so vehemently attacked a 2009 report from the Department of Homeland Security on rightwing domestic terrorism that it was withdrawn from circulation. That analysis found that every year, with the exception of 2001 and the 9/11 attacks, right-wing extremism was responsible for more violence in the United States than radical Islamic terrorism.

The report's findings were backed up by an FBI analysis last year that hate crimes were up and by a 2015 survey conducted with the Police Executive Research Forum. Two of those involved, Charles Kurzman of the University of North Carolina and David Schanzer of Duke University, wrote in *The New York Times*, "The main terrorist threat in the United States is not from violent Muslim extremists, but from right-wing extremists..."

"An officer from a large metropolitan area said that 'militias, neo-Nazis and sovereign citizens' are the biggest threat we face in regard to extremism," they wrote. "One officer explained that he ranked the right-wing threat higher because 'it is an emerging threat that we don't have as good of a grip on, even with our intelligence unit, as we do with the Al Shabab/Al Qaeda issue, which we have been dealing with for some time.'"

President Trump, you reap what you sow and boilerplate statements of sorrow ring hollow. Presidents are supposed to bring us together. Your predecessors, Republicans and Democrats, have done so with grace. But this President says he loves all Americans while working to deprive them of their freedoms. And keeps within his circle of advisors those for whom hate is an asset and not a dagger to the heart of democracy.

Fire Sebastian Gorka, the bogus security advisor who earlier this week told *Breitbart News Daily* that white supremacists are not a problem. Fire

Stephen Miller, who seems to think the Statue of Liberty is more a symbol of exclusion than welcome. And fire Steve Bannon and his off-the-wall, destructive theories of white nationalism.

Their dismissals would be a start. But on Saturday, we saw into your soul, Donald Trump. And there was nothing there.

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The Thankless Task of ‘Saving’ Trump

President Trump appears lost in the swamp of his own shallow mind, pulling down the “adults” around him more than they can lift him up, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

By Paul R. Pillar

Optimism has repeatedly been expressed, especially after any qualified and respected person has been appointed to a senior position in the current administration, that the “adults in the room” will check the excesses and compensate for the deficiencies of a blatantly unqualified president.

Hope placed on the four-star shoulders of John Kelly as he assumed duties of White House chief of staff is a recent example. Such optimism has proven to be largely unfounded.

Repeatedly the excesses of Donald Trump have escaped any attempt to check them. Trump’s fire-and-brimstone threats against North Korea, which surprised his foreign policy advisers, are the latest example. Trump’s emulation of Kim Jong-un’s scary rhetoric played into the hands of Kim’s regime, whose propaganda emphasizes threats from the United States, and escalated tensions to the point of shaking global stock markets. The rhetoric was the sort of thing Trump turns to when he evidently does not have any better ideas for addressing a problem.

Even when the adults do seem to have had some restraining influence on their boss, the effect is likely to be limited and temporary. Last month Trump’s advisers got him grudgingly to recognize reality and to certify that Iran is complying with the agreement that restricts its nuclear program. But since then, Trump has repeatedly asserted that Iran is not in compliance.

In other words, Trump is disseminating another of his lies. We know it is a lie because with the highly intrusive monitoring provisions of the agreement, international inspectors get to see first-hand whether Iran is complying.

Clean-up by his subordinates after Trump's rhetorical excesses has become a common pattern. This past week we had the remarkable case of the U.S. Secretary of State seeing it necessary to urge his fellow citizens to get a good night's sleep despite the inflammatory rhetoric of their own President about North Korea.

But clean-up duty can only accomplish so much. Where the damage extends beyond rhetoric to actions, such as withdrawal from the global climate change agreement, it cannot do much of anything.

The reasons the adults do not have any greater influence in preventing or limiting the damage Trump inflicts are centered primarily on the qualities of Donald Trump himself. An insecure narcissist who has used demagoguery to get where he is today is not a good subject for guidance and restraint by subordinates. Trump's lack of self-control, and resistance to anything that looks like control by others, manifests itself especially in how much his presidency is defined by after-hours tweets.

Never Wrong

The absolute refusal to admit in public that he is ever wrong is probably mirrored in how Trump interacts with advisers in private. His narrow and self-referential notion of loyalty, which is hard to distinguish from sycophancy, implies an unwillingness to listen to contrary opinions from subordinates and an inclination to remove subordinates who persist in offering such opinions.

Some additional explanations for the adults' failure to rein in Trump pertain not just to characteristics of the President but to the thinking of the adults themselves. Awareness of how insecure is the job of any senior official in this administration who dares to differ with the President can lead to punches being pulled. This is not necessarily a selfish and cowardly clinging to a job. With such officials being aware of how much additional damage might be done by this President, it can be unselfish and patriotic to put up with the stresses and compromises necessary to work for him, in the interest of trying to inject prudence into this administration from the inside.

This may be the thinking of the national security adviser, H.R. McMaster, who has had a previously stellar reputation soiled by episodes of sycophancy. This process began soon after McMaster took the job, when he was trotted out to the White House driveway to try to justify to reporters Trump's disclosure of third-

party classified information to the Russian ambassador and foreign minister.

Retired Army officer John Nagl, who knows McMaster well, sees what McMaster is doing in such terms. Nagl said, "The administration is clearly in free fall, and McMaster is exactly the man the nation needs to have ... to hold all the pieces together." Nagl added that "his friends and I believe" that it is worth McMaster giving up some of his "well-earned reputation for integrity."

Such reasoning is valid, and even high-level resignations are not apt to have as much impact on policy as is often alleged by observers criticizing such officials for not resigning. But in the meantime other damage is done. Tenuously situated subordinates have to pick their battles, and on the subjects on which they do not choose to fight, much bad policy and nonsense can ensue.

A Bad Mix

Maintaining standing and influence with the President can lead to subordinates publicly voicing notions that make adoption of bad policy all the more likely. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, although he reportedly was one of those who urged Trump in July to certify Iran's compliance with the nuclear agreement, has been saying publicly some of the very falsehoods that Trump would use in trashing the agreement.

Sometimes some of the adults, although useful restraints on the President on most matters, share his predilections and prejudices on others. This is true of Secretary of Defense James Mattis, particularly on anything having to do with Iran, against which he is waging almost a personal vendetta.

On some issues, adults may not see things the same way as Trump but there is a sort of malevolent convergence in which the President and his advisers go along with the same unproductive policy for different reasons.

This may be true of policy toward Afghanistan. Trump, who once averred that the United States "should have kept the oil" from Iraq, is now interested in getting U.S. hands on Afghanistan's mineral resources. It is unlikely that most of the adults share that kind of crude mercantilist view, and they probably see the major downside of the United States presenting its overseas military operations as intended to grab other people's mineral wealth. But the same adults, including Mattis and McMaster, favor continuation of the U.S. military expedition in Afghanistan to achieve something that can be called "victory" and to pursue the obsolete notion that Afghanistan is a unique key in determining terrorist threats in the West. Thus America's longest war continues, with Trump craving minerals and his generals wanting to continue the effort for other reasons.

Trump, in imitating Kim Jong-un's incendiary rhetoric, is still a long way from duplicating the ruthless North Korean dictatorship, in which even family members get executed when they fall out of favor. But there is some further resemblance in the difficulty in speaking truth to power, and in the likelihood that such speaking will make a difference. Even if surrounded by able hands, much policy will still reflect the whims and weaknesses of the man at the top.

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How Obama, Trump Had Their Wings Clipped

Presidents Obama and Trump contrast sharply on foreign policy, but share a common denominator: they faced resistance to smoothing relations with a key power, Obama on Iran; Trump on Russia, Andrew Spannaus noted at Aspenia.

By Andrew Spannaus

President Donald Trump was backed into a corner in late July, forced to sign a bill imposing new sanctions on Russia, despite opposing it on substance and form. Trump issued a signing statement, claiming that the new law impinges on "the President's constitutional authority to recognize foreign governments" (referring to the case of Crimea and Ukraine), limits the President's actions on sanctions, and violates "the President's exclusive constitutional authority to determine the time, scope, and objectives of international negotiations", among other things.

The overwhelming vote on the sanctions bill in both the House and the Senate (419-3 and 98-2, respectively) was a clear indicator of how much of official Washington sees the White House's attempts to improve relations with Russia: as a dangerous goal that needs to be stopped as soon as possible, lest the apparently bumbling, self-absorbed and ineffective President actually succeed in implementing a major change in U.S. foreign policy, one with repercussions on numerous areas of global geopolitics.

Influential Republicans in the Senate such as John McCain and Lindsey Graham have never hidden their disdain for Trump's anti-neocon positions, and now they find themselves with the almost unanimous support of their colleagues on the Democratic side of the aisle as well.

The constant churn of Russiagate scandals, although they have yet to turn up a smoking gun, has created an environment in which politicians and major press outlets have decided that Russia is Trump's weak point, on which a strong defeat can neuter his effectiveness and potentially even lead to his impeachment.

The White House's isolation on a point of foreign policy that would represent a major strategic shift recalls another situation not too many years ago, that of Iran, when then-President Barack Obama found himself in a difficult battle with the overwhelming majority of Congress apparently opposed to his plan to shift gears in the Middle East. Obama ultimately won that battle, succeeding in reaching a historic deal regarding Iran's nuclear program, after adopting a strategy of secret negotiations, clear goals, and an explicit definition of the choices to be made.

Trump differs considerably from Obama on Iran, instead following the traditional Israeli-Saudi line to date, but the clash with Congress and the power of neoconservative foreign policy is an area where the two Presidents definitely have something in common; in this case, Trump could draw on aspects of Obama's strategy, although the circumstances are undoubtedly different, and the stakes possibly even higher today.

Obama's Iran Initiative

President Obama's first attempt at reaching an agreement with Iran, in 2009, failed miserably due to a series of circumstances, some under the White House's responsibility, and others not. The events of the Green Revolution, the substantial opposition within his own Administration – Hillary Clinton spoke openly of negotiations merely as an excuse to then slap more sanctions on Iran – and a lack of a solid strategy all doomed the first round of negotiations, making some believe Obama never really intended to go all the way.

At the start of his second term though, Obama began to lay the groundwork for a major shift in foreign policy. One of the key aspects was the renewed push for an agreement with Iran. Secret negotiations began in Oman in the spring of 2013, leading to the initial Joint Plan of Action adopted in November of that year. Over the subsequent two years negotiations continued with the other members of the P5+1 (the permanent five members of the U.N. Security Council plus Germany, as well as the European Union), until the accord was finalized in July 2015.

In order for the United States to fulfill its commitments, it was sufficient for the President to begin waiving sanctions, but the anti-Iran forces within the United States were determined to block the deal, and thus pushed for a Congressional vote to prevent the President from moving forward. The attempt failed, as the Senate voted 58-42 to close debate on the resolution, just shy of

the 60-vote threshold needed for final passage.

Despite the widespread commentary about how the Democrats predictably handed their President a victory, success was far from assured in this case. As a matter of fact, by any historical standard, the failure of a vote against Iran, presented to members as a way to express support for Israel, was a startling achievement.

Just consider the vote totals for similar bills in years past, or even on the same issue. In May 2015, as negotiations were ongoing, the Senate voted on the "Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act", which required the President to submit the agreement to Congressional review, setting up the vote which Obama eventually won. That bill passed 98-1 in the Senate, and 400-25 in the House of Representatives.

These are common numbers for legislation that is considered pro-Israel and has the backing of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), whose widespread influence on U.S. politicians has been well chronicled in recent years. AIPAC did everything it could to win the vote against the Iran deal, but failed spectacularly, in a defeat that not only tarnished the group's invincible image, but also contributed to the rise of other pro-Israel groups on the U.S. political scene whose policies are not necessarily aligned with the right-wing governments led by Benjamin Netanyahu – who still happens to be in power.

Challenging the Establishment

In addition to working behind the scenes to assure Senators' votes, Obama also made his case for the Iran deal publicly. His most effective intervention came in August 2015 when speaking at American University in Washington, D.C. He put the choice in stark terms, rather than attempting to woo lawmakers with a soft approach: a vote against the Iran deal was a vote for war in the future. And he drew a clear parallel with the decision to invade Iraq in 2002, that in hindsight many Congressmen have been forced to admit was wrong, and avoidable.

Defining the Iran deal as a vote for or against conflict was obviously not what Obama's opponents expected. Consider the response from Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell at the time: "This goes way over the line of civil discourse... The President needs to retract his bizarre and preposterous comments."

Laying out the consequences so directly went against the normal rules of politics, but it was precisely what Obama needed to ensure that the stakes would be clear to everyone before the fact, not afterwards if the pro-war faction had won the day once again.

At the time the initial understanding was reached with Iran, in the fall of

2013, Obama was beginning his attempt at a wholesale change in U.S. foreign policy. Not only did he work with Russia and China on the nuclear deal, but he decided not to bomb the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad, accepting Russian President Vladimir Putin's offer of a deal to remove chemical weapons from Syria.

Still today this decision is seen in the U.S. establishment as a disastrous capitulation after having drawn the infamous "red line" regarding chemical weapons attacks. Yet Obama, who pulled back after hearing doubts about the intelligence and recognizing that Congress was unlikely to support action, later defined that as one of the most important moments of his presidency, when he broke with the "Washington playbook" of automatic military response.

The attempt to move away from the policies of "regime change," drawing down support for extremist groups linked to Al Qaeda and ISIS while seeking different alliances, would ultimately be too little, and too late.

In 2014 cooperation with Russia was derailed due to the crisis in Ukraine – a situation where the Washington playbook remains intact – and by the time Obama and Putin were able to begin working together in Syria again, through the activism of John Kerry and Sergei Lavrov, time had essentially run out.

In 2016, the U.S. foreign policy establishment wasn't willing to follow Obama towards cooperation with Russia, as most anticipated the more hawkish Hillary Clinton would win in November.

Obama moved quickly to embrace the new Cold War posture permeating Washington in the final months of his presidency, but his original goal of rebalancing the U.S. presence in the Middle East and cooperating with Vladimir Putin's Russia in the fight against terrorism provides a direct link to the challenges facing the Trump Administration today.

The current President has openly declared his intentions with respect to Russia, which Obama rarely did. Despite numerous setbacks – some of his own making, of course – Trump has continued to seek better relations with Putin; yet the overwhelming pressure from both inside and outside of the Administration has heavily scaled back expectations of how far he can go, and thwarted cooperation on numerous fronts.

If Donald Trump wants to truly reach his goal of better relations with Russia, he could look to the successful aspects of Obama's victory on the Iran deal. Not only is it essential to work behind the scenes, through back channels that avoid sabotage from within his own Administration, but the President could potentially go back on the offensive if he were to define the issue publicly on his own

terms.

It won't be easy to convince the American people, and a considerable part of the institutions, given the current environment; however, a clear and honest accounting of our relations with Russia, including the unthinkable dangers of conflict, could go a long way towards inaugurating a more rational discussion of Trump's desired foreign policy shift.

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Trump's Shallow Thinking on 'Terrorism'

Israel typically makes its enemies America's enemies – think Lebanon's Hezbollah and Iran – and few U.S. politicians dare step out of line. But hypocritical talk about "terrorism" has consequences, says ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Last month, President Trump made a [joint appearance](#) at the White House with a visiting head of government, during which Trump spoke of the visitor's country being "on the front lines in the fight against" an organization that is part of that same country's governing coalition. The visitor was Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri and the organization was Hezbollah. Members of Hezbollah are ministers in Hariri's cabinet. Hezbollah has the fourth largest bloc of seats among the two dozen parties that are represented in Lebanon's parliament.

Trump's comment could be dismissed as an unsurprising gaffe from someone whose ignorance of the outside world is well known (and whose disorganized White House might have contributed to lousy staff work in preparing the President's notes for the appearance with Hariri). Even if Trump had been better informed about current Lebanese politics, he might not have backed off from his comment. The United States does not have governing coalitions in the same sense as countries with parliamentary systems, but the nearest equivalent might arise with any glimmers of bipartisan cooperation on, say, health care.

Imagine that a foreign visitor came to the White House and praised the United States for being “on the front line in the fight against Democrats.” Although most observers would consider this to be a ridiculous and outrageously inappropriate remark, Trump might accept it smilingly as a personal compliment.

Where terrorism is involved, however, a simplistic approach often prevails that is broadly held and goes far beyond Trump. The problem arises in failing to recognize that terrorism is not some fixed set of people, groups, or states. It instead is a tactic that has been used by many different people and organizations in the pursuit of varying objectives. Yet the fixed-group attitude persists and frequently is visible in policy discussion and media coverage.

The official U.S. list of foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs) is treated as if it were a master roster of organizations that we should never countenance, even though it was created 20 years ago only as a legal necessity to add precision to legislation that criminalized material support to terrorism.

If the United States supposedly were never to do any business with anyone who had used terrorism, it would somehow have to explain away the extensive business it has done with leaders who had been up to their eyeballs in terrorism, including Gerry Adams, Menachem Begin, and Yitzhak Shamir. The same is true not only of individual leaders but also some groups, such as the African National Congress.

We decide which of the users of terrorism we will countenance and which ones we won't according to criteria other than terrorism itself. Only we don't admit that we're doing that, so as to preserve the fiction of being steadfastly opposed to terrorism wherever it arises. And this inconsistency doesn't even take account of the U.S. acceptance of other applications of political violence that, although they do not meet the formal definition of terrorism because they involve overt use of force by a state, are just as deadly to many innocent civilians (such as the force that Saudi Arabia uses in Yemen, or that Israel regularly uses in the West Bank).

Differences Among Groups

The simplistic view of terrorism fails to distinguish among the vastly different interests and objectives of groups that have used terrorism and that may appear on the FTO list. This failure was prominent in Trump's comment at his press conference with Hariri, in which the President listed as the groups that Lebanon supposedly was on the front lines against as “ISIS, Al Qaeda, and Hezbollah”.

There is no comparison between the first two of those and the third. ISIS and Al Qaeda are transnational terrorist organizations that seek to overturn governing

structures in the Muslim world and to impose an extreme form of rule throughout that world. Hezbollah, by contrast, is focused mainly on sectarian politics and the distribution of power in Lebanon and its environs. Hezbollah's participation in a governing coalition with other parties in an existing nation-state is far beyond the realm of anything possible with ISIS or Al Qaeda.

Hamas is another group that undeniably has used terrorism but otherwise has very little in common with the likes of ISIS and Al Qaeda. Like Hezbollah, it is focused primarily on more parochial political objectives – in Hamas's case, on self-determination and political power in Palestine. It has demonstrated its ability and willingness to use peaceful means to pursue those objectives by winning a free and fair election among Palestinians.

The simplistic view tends to disregard the circumstances leading to the use of terrorism and to the emergence of groups that have used the tactic. Hezbollah was born in the early 1980s in the midst of a civil war in Lebanon. A major cause of both the war and the birth of the group was strong sentiment among Lebanon's growing Shia population that it was underprivileged and unfairly underrepresented in Lebanese politics.

A more immediate circumstance underlying the emergence of Hezbollah was Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982. The invasion was intended to chase the Palestine Liberation Organization to the ends of the earth – or at least to Tunisia, to which it decamped. A salient episode in the Israeli military expedition was the Sabra and Shatila massacre, in which Israel's army aided its Phalangist militia allies in the slaughter of hundreds and probably thousands of civilians, including Palestinian refugees and Lebanese Shia – Hezbollah's constituency. Any reference to Hezbollah's hostility toward Israel needs to recall these events for a full understanding.

Hezbollah terrorism against U.S. interests consisted of opposition to a foreign military presence. This was the case with the anti-U.S. terrorism in Lebanon in the 1980s (following a U.S. military intervention there, which came after the Israeli intervention), as well as with the one later attack against U.S. forces in which Hezbollah played a role: the bombing of Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia in 1996.

These events are consistent with Robert Pape's research finding that suicide bombings are motivated by opposition to the presence of foreign military forces. It is not consistent with any notion that Hezbollah is determined to kill Westerners or to attack U.S. interests in perpetuity.

Policy Implications

Failure to take into account the actual motivations, methods, objectives, and standing of a group such as Hezbollah leads to poor policy on problems that involve such groups. It leads to lack of awareness of how others perceive such groups and thus to what is or is not feasible as a U.S. policy objective.

These patterns are reflected in much of what is said in the United States about Hezbollah's most important ally, Iran. "Number one state sponsor of terrorism" is part of the litany of labels that routinely are affixed to Iran in American discourse. But consult the State Department's official justification for continuing to designate Iran as a state sponsor, and the gruel one sees is thinner than the discourse would suggest.

Most important, it is hard to see feasible changes from any Iranian regime that really did not want to be a state sponsor of terrorism. Much of what is in the U.S. official statement reflects history, which cannot be changed. Much of it involves Iran's support, along with Russia, for the incumbent regime in Syria against a rebellion in which terrorist groups have played prominent roles. And much of it involves nonstate groups with which Iran does business, and especially its most important nonstate ally, Lebanese Hezbollah.

Whether we like it or not, Hezbollah is a well-established political actor in Lebanon, with its participation in Hariri's government being part of that position. Most other political actors in Lebanon, even the group's rivals, consider Hezbollah to be a legitimate and established actor that is here to stay, as do many other political actors elsewhere in the region. There is no way any Iranian regime would abandon its relationship with the group, which Iran sees as a major defender of Shia interests, let alone to try to justify to its Iranian constituents such a move as necessary to fight terrorism.

There cannot be, nor should there be, any forgiving or forgetting what Hezbollah did to Americans in the 1980s. The bombing of the Marine Corps barracks in Beirut in 1983 was, until 9/11, the deadliest terrorist attack ever against U.S. citizens. But not forgetting and not forgiving does not imply adopting the simplistic approach toward any group that is on our terrorist list. [Editor's Note: The designation of the Marine barracks bombing as "terrorism" is itself questionable because the Reagan administration had militarily intervened in Lebanon by having the USS New Jersey shell targets on land and because the Marines were not civilians. The classic definition of "terrorism" is a willful attack on civilians to achieve a political goal.]

The current arrangements in Lebanon are probably the least bad way to keep that country from succumbing to full-scale civil war of the sort that afflicted it in the past and that afflicts Syria today. Prime Minister Hariri put it this way: "My job and my task as prime minister of Lebanon is to shield Lebanon from any

instability like in Syria or Iraq or any other country that surrounds us. . . . The political positions between us and Hezbollah are very well known. They don't agree on my policies, and I don't agree on their policies. But when it comes for the sake of the country, for the economy, how to handle those 1.5 million refugees, how to handle the stability, how to handle the governing our country, we have to have some kind of understanding, otherwise we would be like Syria. So, for the sake of the stability of Lebanon, we agree on certain things."

Not seeing Lebanon fall into renewed civil war is in U.S. interests, so the arrangement Hariri describes is probably in U.S. interests as well. Many who find Hezbollah reprehensible are not aware that the United States provides financial assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces, which in turn has operational coordination with Hezbollah on some armed operations. Even some informed observers in quarters whose opposition to Hezbollah is unquestioned and usually don't want to have anything to do with any ally of Iran see benefit in continuing that assistance.

These complexities are beyond the comprehension of Donald Trump. But what is at stake is not just the avoidance of gauche presidential statements but also the designing of prudent policy toward troublesome groups in troublesome regions, without making the mistake of treating all such groups as the same.

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.)

Education or Brainwashing?

Inculcating youngsters with national myths is a key way for societies to control their populations – as is clear in how Israel defines acceptable history – in defiance of educational ideals, says Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

Education is one of those words that has a positive connotation for almost everyone – usually generating a warm and fuzzy feeling that suggests a richer and brighter future. But that is just an idealization of the concept. As I have stated before, as far as the state is concerned, education has two major

purposes: to fulfill the vocational needs of the economy and the political need for ideologically loyal citizens. It is in the pursuit of this last goal that education can reveal a darker side.

Here are a few stories concerning the interface between education and political ideology. I take them from the annals of Israeli/Zionist education, but one can certainly find other examples worldwide.

Story One: David Sarna Galdi is an American Jew who attended Jewish schools in New York City, went to Jewish summer camps, attended synagogue regularly, and vacationed often in Israel with his parents. In his own words he had “a quintessential Zionist Jewish-American upbringing,” and as a result, “I never heard one word about the [Israeli] occupation [of Palestinian territory], or even the actual word, ‘occupation.’” Only after immigrating to Israel did he “become aware of the occupation and all its ramifications.”

The Israeli occupation is 50 years old and ongoing. Can Galdi’s story really be true? It certainly can be true if you grow up within a closed information environment – an environment where elements of non-local reality are simply left out of the educational process. That seems to be the case when it comes to Zionist Jewish-American education.

Story Two: Holocaust Memorial Day in Israel, which this year was on April 24, is a time for remembering the Holocaust and learning its historical lessons. Yet there are two ways of approaching those lessons – one is universal and the other particular.

Most of Israel’s educational system has chosen to forgo the universal message of the need to promote human rights and stand up against oppression wherever it is practiced. Instead the particularistic message Israeli schoolchildren have always received is that the Jews are eternal victims. Indeed, “Israel and its strong army are the only things preventing another genocide by non-Jews.”

Emphasis on Consensus

Very few Israeli educators have dared break with this official point of view. However, those few who have describe a systematic “misuse of the Holocaust [that is] pathological and intended to generate fear and hatred” as an element of “extreme nationalism.”

Again the key to such a process of indoctrination embedded within the educational system is the maintenance of a closed information environment. As one Israeli educator, who has grown uneasy with the propagandistic nature of his nation’s schooling, puts it, “increasingly they [the students] receive no alternative messages in school.”

Story Three: Finally, let us take a comparative look at two reports on Israel's educational system. One is a 2009 Palestinian report (PR) entitled "Palestinian History and Identity in Israeli Schools." The other is a 2012 report (IS) produced by the Institute for Israeli Studies at the University of Maryland and is entitled, "Education in Israel: The Challenges Ahead." What strikes the reader of these reports is how much *they agree* on the nature of specific problems having to do with the education of minority groups in Israel.

Here are a few of the problems both reports highlight:

(1) Both the IS and the PR reports agree that the Israeli educational system is at once a segregated and highly centralized affair controlled by the Israeli government's Ministry of Education. As a consequence, according to the IS report, "Arab schools are significantly underfunded compared to Jewish schools," and this is reflected in an unfavorable "differential student-teacher ratios in Arab schools" (IS report, p. 12). The PR adds the following information: "Public education for Palestinians [one quarter of all students in Israel] is administered by the Department for Arab Education, which is a special administrative entity within the Ministry of Education and under its direct control. The Department for Arab Education has no autonomous decision making authority" (PR, p. 1).

(2) As described in the IS report, because curriculum in Arab-Israeli schools is controlled by the Ministry of Education, sensitive subjects such as Palestinian history are censored (not allowed to be "openly discussed"). The PR elaborates: Israeli textbooks are highly selective in their "choice of facts and explanations, ignoring contradictory arguments, especially facts connected to Arab-Palestinian history." Ultimately, "they erase modern Palestinian history" (PR, p. 1). Arab-Israeli students are forced, at least superficially, to absorb a Zionist interpretation of history because without being able to repeat it on their graduation exam they cannot successfully finish high school. Palestinian students do, of course, know their own version of history, which they get from numerous non-school sources.

However, the Israeli Jewish students also are deprived. They are systematically kept away from this same Palestinian narrative – one ardently believed in by over 20 percent of their nation's population. Under these circumstances, as the IS report points out, "national cohesion" is hard to build.

The IS report recommends "strengthening within the schools the democratic and pluralistic view embodied in Israel's Declaration of Independence, focusing on building shared values and acceptance of diversity. To strengthen communal understanding and build a stronger common identity" (IS, p. 21).

Unfortunately, these recommendations are impossible to implement, and I suspect that the authors know that this is so. In the case of Israel, education has been subordinated to ideology to such an extent that it cannot promote diversity, shared values and a common identity with non-Jews. Thus, given the Zionist ethic as practiced by Israelis and their diaspora supporters, the Palestinian identity and values are anathema and represent threats. Thus, IS recommendations become the equivalent of taking poison.

Ideology Bests the Ideal

Any ideology represents a closed information environment. By definition it narrows reality down to a limited number of perspectives. Ideology also invites hubris, rationalized by nationality or religion and their accompanying peculiar take on history. It becomes the goal of an ideologically managed educational system to promote political loyalty and the hubris it seems to justify. The current terminology for this condition is "exceptionalism."

All of this is a far cry from the way education is idealized:

According to Aristotle, "it is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it." Thanks to the Zionist educational system both in Israel and the diaspora, there are many otherwise educated Jews who cannot even entertain the thought of shared values and common identity with Palestinians.

According to Malcolm X, "Education is the passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to those who prepare for it today." However, those being educated are usually passive and someone else has prepared what they will learn, and therefore has prepared their future.

According to Martin Luther King, Jr., "The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically." In an ideal situation that may be true, but in practice it runs against the historical political mission of post-industrial educational systems.

Finally, one might consider this observation by Albert Einstein: "Education is what remains after one has forgotten what one has learned in school." This is a welcome insight, yet the problem is that relatively few people forget the political and cultural imperatives of their education. Those who do, including Einstein himself, are often considered by their fellows as "social mistakes."

Now we know why it is so hard for Israelis to embrace the imperatives of peace, or for the rest of us to go beyond our present era of nation-states be they democratic or otherwise. Our self-destructive stubbornness is a function of a successful, ideologically managed education.

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The Source of Trump's Real Clout

The image of Donald Trump's "deplorables" – as Hillary Clinton dubbed them – is a bunch of bigoted blue-collar whites waving Confederate flags, but the secret of Trump's real power lies elsewhere, says historian Keri Leigh Merritt.

By Keri Leigh Merritt

Since before the election, poor white voters largely have been blamed for the rise of Donald Trump. Although their complicity in his election is clear and well established, they're continually targeted as if their actions are the primary reason Trump won. But in fact, higher-earning, college-educated whites supported him at even greater rates.

It's quite easy to brand the working class as the most rabidly xenophobic and racist group of whites. Whether they're brandishing Confederate flags or vociferously vowing to "Make America Great Again," their beliefs about white supremacy are completely exposed for the world to witness. It's much harder to see how those atop the economic pyramid not only greatly benefit from white supremacy but actually use racism to their advantage – generally from behind the scenes.

In short, when we hold the working class responsible for white supremacy, other whites are absolved of racial wrongdoing. By allowing the spread of civic ignorance, by propagating historical lies and political untruths, and by engendering an insidious form of racism, upper-class whites are undoubtedly just as culpable – if not more so – than working-class whites in the quest to maintain white supremacy.

Certainly, there is no apology for the racism of working-class whites, nor any excuse; but we should seek to understand the ways in which white supremacy and power are completely intertwined. Throughout American history, the economic elite have used vile forms of racism to perpetuate the current hierarchy – politically, socially and economically. White supremacy is most commonly conceptualized as a way for lower-class whites to feel socially superior to

people from other ethnic backgrounds. More important, though, white supremacy is a tried-and-tested means for upper-class whites to grow their wealth and power.

Whether pitting laborers of different races against each other, stoking racial fears through a sensationalistic and profit-driven media or politically scapegoating entire nationalities, America's white elite have successfully modernized age-old strategies of using racism to prevent the formation of a broad coalition of people along class lines.

The Goal of Manipulation

To be sure, the concept of white privilege must seem far-fetched to working-class whites who come from generations of cyclical poverty. They constantly are told that African-Americans are the primary recipients of welfare and social benefits, and that policies like affirmative action are greatly detrimental to all whites. By controlling key aspects of the economy, especially education, politics and the media, the white elite often very easily manipulate less affluent whites.

First, by governing and managing the education system in this country, the upper classes remain in control of the equality of *opportunity*. While much of America is plagued by an underfunded, failing public school system that gets exponentially worse the deeper the area's poverty, the affluent live in areas with higher property taxes, and thus, better local school systems. Despite this disparity, the rich also are always able to send their children to private (and increasingly, "charter") schools, escaping the bleak educational realities that most Americans are left to suffer.

As the abolitionist Henry Ward Beecher wrote about the lack of public education in the slave South, "[I]gnorance is an institution. They legislate for ignorance the same way we legislate for schoolhouses." Today, as Republicans continue slashing education funding at the federal, state and local levels, they legislate for ignorance. They fear statistics and facts, realizing what may follow the political enlightenment of the lower classes. "Knowledge is not only power," Beecher aptly concluded, "but powder, also, liable to blow false institutions to atoms." ["Anti-Slavery Lectures," *The New York Times*, Jan. 17, 1855, 5.]

Second, elite authority over the educational system also means regulation over the teaching of subjects like history, government and civics. An overwhelming majority of Americans have shockingly little understanding of our own past and our own government, often leading to lower-class political apathy.

Third, a small number of extremely wealthy white men control and operate much of

the American media. With just a handful of corporations owning the majority of our country's media, it is worth remembering that news today is essentially a product to be sold, a commodity. Trump himself has created a political firestorm by branding certain news outlets as "fake news," but the media monopoly obviously presents valid concerns about fair and balanced reporting. Each of the few very powerful, rich men have their own reasons for deciding what qualifies as "news."

Divide and Conquer

Finally, business owners and corporate leaders have historically sought to keep workers segregated, either physically or by job. Since antebellum times, masters attempted to engender racism between poor white laborers and enslaved blacks, trying to keep each side distrustful of the other.

By perpetuating and encouraging a vile form of racism, they attempted to establish psychological segregation, ultimately thwarting the prospect of an interracial coalition. Today, elites use white supremacy as a powerful tool in preventing unionism – as just witnessed with the failure of the United Auto Workers election at a Mississippi Nissan factory.

Thus, even though working-class whites certainly support Trump and his policies, it is important to remember why. Indeed, poorer whites may be the ones branded as hardened white supremacists, but let's not forget who benefits the most from racism: the white economic elite.

"You are kept apart that you may be separately fleeced of your earnings," the famous populist leader Tom Watson once told a gathering of white and black laborers. "You are made to hate each other because upon that hatred is rested the keystone of the arch of financial despotism which enslaves you both." With a few short breaths, Watson had laid bare the most important reason why white supremacy has always thrived in this country, especially during times of severe economic inequality.

Many vestiges of the past – including a long history of upper-class whites using racism to their advantage – have re-emerged in Trump's America. As our nation impetuously tumbles toward a very uncertain future, we must take heed that the racist rhetoric and divisive political issues have only just begun. The millionaires and billionaires of this country literally have a fortune to protect, and white supremacy has always helped assure their place at the apex of society.

As Watson rightfully crowed to his interracial crowd, "You are deceived and blinded that you may not see how this race antagonism perpetuates a monetary

system which beggars both.”[Thomas E. Watson, “The Negro Question in the South,” *The Arena* (Boston), VI, Oct. 1892, 540-550.]

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Trump’s Deceptive Drive to Kill Iran-Nuke Accord

President Trump rarely lets facts get in the way of a political agenda as he has demonstrated in his drive to destroy the Iran-nuclear accord – despite grave risks to U.S. interests, reports ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

The biggest current threat to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the agreement that limits Iran’s nuclear program, comes from Donald Trump’s obsession with killing the accord. That obsession is driven by his impulse to undo whatever Barack Obama did and to fulfill campaign rhetoric based on such contrarianism.

The power of that impulse should not be underestimated, no matter how much it collides with truth, reason, and the best interests of the United States. Trump has demonstrated parallel obsessions in pulling out of the Paris climate change agreement in the face of an overwhelming scientific and global political consensus, and in his current posture on health care, in which he evidently is willing to harm the health of the American people in an effort to make his rhetoric about Obamacare appear to come true.

Perhaps the best hope for slowing Trump’s pursuit of his obsession about the JCPOA is the transparently ham-handed way he is going about it. His own statements have corroborated the gist of other reporting that Trump has made up his mind to kill the agreement and will bend whatever facts he needs to bend, and try whatever stratagems he needs to try, to achieve that result. Those stratagems include asserting Iranian compliance even though international inspectors say Iran is complying with the agreement, or demanding inspections of non-nuclear sites in Iran even without reason to believe that any prohibited activity is occurring there. The game being played is so obviously concocted to

get a predetermined result that anyone, either foreign or domestic, with a sense of integrity ought to have a hard time going along with it while keeping a straight face.

Yet another technique is to make the United States so noncompliant with its obligations under the agreement that the Iranians will get sufficiently fed up to abandon the JCPOA. With Iran filing a formal complaint about the newest U.S. sanctions against it, the Trump White House probably has its hopes up that this path toward killing the agreement may work.

Oppose Obama

Trump's pursuit exploits a much larger opposition to the JCPOA that goes back more than two years to when the agreement was still under negotiation. As with Trump, little of this opposition has to do with nuclear weapons or with the terms and purpose of the JCPOA.

Also as with Trump, some of the opposition, including in much of the Republican Party in Congress, is based on an oppose-anything-Obama-did posture. Much of the opposition has to do with a desire to keep Iran in the status of a perpetually isolated and castigated adversary that is blamed for all or almost all of the ills in the Middle East. That desire characterizes certain other regimes in the Middle East (especially Israel and Saudi Arabia) that are rivals of Iran, want outside powers to take their side, and want international scrutiny diverted from their own contributions to regional instability.

The opposition to the JCPOA became a major, well-funded movement that came close to killing the JCPOA in its infancy. Well-rehearsed talking points, including misleading or false ones, had ample opportunity to gain air time and column space. The opposition offensive slackened once the JCPOA took effect and was no longer a front-page item. Then the election of Trump, with his campaign rhetoric including excoriation of the agreement, re-energized the opposition to the JCPOA. Many of the same old themes, notwithstanding the agreement's success in the meantime in being implemented and maintaining its tight restrictions on, and scrutiny of, Iran's nuclear program, are being repeated.

And like Trump, who keeps repeating falsehoods about crowd sizes, voter fraud, and much else regardless of how many times his assertions are disproved and debunked, the anti-JCPOA themes that are misleading or false keep getting repeated despite having been refuted long ago. The sheer repetition gets many people believing what is repeated.

Trump's Rallies

Trump himself is one of the offenders in using such themes about the JCPOA. Last

week at a campaign-style rally in Ohio, for example, he repeated one of the hoariest of the anti-JCPOA assertions: that the United States “gave” Iran between \$100 and \$150 billion in assets under the agreement and separately “gave” Iran \$1.7 billion in cash. In fact, the United States has not given Iran a penny.

All of the money was Iran’s in the first place. Most of the assets in question had been frozen in foreign financial accounts. The separate cash payment was resolution of a very old claim dating back to the time of the shah, in which Iran paid for some airplanes that the United States did not deliver. Pallets of cash were used because sanctions continued to shut Iran out of the international banking system.

Trump ought to be familiar with such situations from his business career, given the number of times he reportedly stiffed suppliers and sub-contractors. The only difference is that with Trump’s business, goods were delivered but never paid for. In the aircraft deal with Iran, the Iranians paid but the United States never delivered the goods.

Much faith has been placed in the “adults” in the administration to rein in Trump’s worst tendencies. Reportedly the adults, including Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, and National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster, last month urged a resistant Trump to recognize reality and certify that Iran was complying with the JCPOA. One’s faith ought to be weakened by how Tillerson, at a press briefing this week, voiced some of the same old, familiar, and thoroughly refuted falsehoods and misleading themes.

More Whoppers

The biggest outright whopper was Tillerson’s assertion that “they [Iran] got the immediate lifting of the sanctions before they ever had to deliver on anything.” Any look at the history of implementation of the JCPOA, according to the carefully negotiated schedule, shows how drastically false that statement is.

In fact, the asymmetry in the implementation of the agreement worked in the opposite direction. Iran had to do nearly all it was going to do to curtail its nuclear program and significantly extend the “breakout” time to a possible nuclear weapon before it got an ounce of new sanctions relief under the JCPOA.

This Iranian work included gutting its heavy water research reactor, disposing of excess heavy water, cutting back its uranium enrichment cascades, taking all excess centrifuges off line, ceasing uranium enrichment at the underground Fordow facility, providing international inspectors a comprehensive inventory of

centrifuge equipment, and many other measures.

It was only *after* the International Atomic Energy Agency certified that Iran had completed all these required steps that the parties moved to “Implementation Day,” which was when the United States and the Europeans began sanctions relief.

Not specifically a lie, but highly misleading about the nature and purpose of the JCPOA, was Tillerson’s comment that “there’s another part of that agreement that talks about the fact that with this agreement, Iran will become a good neighbor – now, I’m paraphrasing a lot of language – they’ll become a good neighbor, that Iran is called upon to no longer develop its ballistic missiles.” Tillerson accused Iran of violating “the spirit of the agreement” because of these issues.

Tillerson’s remark wasn’t a paraphrase; it was a fantasy expansion of the agreement that has been another favorite of the agreement’s opponents, who criticize the JCPOA for not causing peace to break out in the Middle East. Neither has it led to a cure for cancer.

It was clear to all parties from the beginning of the negotiation that no agreement, and no limitation of the expanding Iranian nuclear program, would be possible unless the agreement focused specifically on the nuclear issue and on sanctions that supposedly are about the nuclear issue.

If the United States or other Western governments brought into the negotiation other things they did not like about what Iran was doing, then Iran would raise all the other things it doesn’t like about what the United States is doing. And then nothing, including nothing about curtailing the nuclear program, would ever be agreed to.

Nothing in the JCPOA obligates Iran not to continue to develop, test, and possess ballistic missiles. Sanctions that involved materiel relevant to missiles were part of the sanctions that were supposed to be in place because of Iran’s nuclear activities. And from the standpoint of U.S. national interests, Iranian missiles are nearly irrelevant as long as nuclear weapons are not part of the picture, which is part of why preservation of an agreement preventing any Iranian development of a nuke is so important.

The implementing resolution of the United Nations Security Council makes a nod to the desirability of restraint in developing missiles, but this clause was by design a vague exhortation with no binding power. Iran – facing threats from neighbors with missiles and superior air power – would never have agreed to anything firmer than that.

When Tillerson says “while this agreement was being developed, it was kind of

like we put blinders on and just ignored all those other things,” this not only misrepresents what was in the field of vision and consciousness of the policy-makers and diplomats who negotiated the JCPOA. The comment also ignores how the very people who are leading the renewed charge against the JCPOA were, pre-JCPOA, singling out the Iranian nuclear program as the pre-eminent security issue towering above everything else.

Politicized Dispute

It wasn't Barack Obama who had elevated that specific issue. Mitt Romney, running for president against Obama in 2012, said an Iranian nuclear weapon was the greatest security threat the United States faced anywhere in the world.

The nuclear issue was the issue about which Bibi Netanyahu put on the first-ever cartoon show at the United Nations General Assembly. Then, when negotiations successfully resolved that issue, those whose true agenda was centered on other objectives, such as isolating Iran in perpetuity or bashing Obama, began talking about blinders and allegedly ignoring other things.

As for good neighborliness and observing the spirit of the JCPOA, there was not a hint of anything in Tillerson's remarks, just as there usually isn't in any of the comments of opponents of the agreement, about any obligations along those lines on the part of the United States. But one can get an idea of the symmetry involved by noting how the Iranian parliament, in response to action by the U.S. Congress on a "Countering Iran's Destabilizing Activities Act" (which included the sanctions later folded into another bill and leading to Iran's formal complaint), initiated action on its own "Bill Against U.S. Adventurist and Terrorist Activities in the Region". Although "destabilizing" would have been a more appropriate term than "terrorist" in this bill too, the Iranians have plenty to point to, such as the U.S. support for the highly destructive Saudi-led war in Yemen.

All this is happening in Iran's neighborhood, not America's. And it is accompanied by unrelentingly hostile rhetoric against Iran from the current U.S. administration, which also has been emboldening Iran's regional rivals to promote even more confrontation. If not being a good neighbor constitutes a violation of the spirit of the JCPOA, then the Trump administration would need to look in a mirror to see who is most in violation.

Donald Trump's serial lying, and his penchant for repeating lies long after they have been disproven, is in a class by itself regarding dishonesty by a top American leader. But the zombie-like continuation of some familiar but already disproven assertions about the JCPOA is very Trump-like. The drumbeat of even vague or discredited criticisms of the agreement may be enough to persuade many

people, including those who see through Trump's clumsy manipulations to kill the agreement, to accept that death.

If the adults in the administration want to keep that from happening, they will need to try harder and not say the sorts of things Tillerson is saying.

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.)

Neocons Leverage Trump-Hate for More Wars

Exclusive: The enactment of new sanctions against Russia and Iran – with the support of nearly all Democrats and Republicans in Congress – shows how the warmongering neocons again have come out on top, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

A savvy Washington observer once told me that the political reality about the neoconservatives is that they alone couldn't win you a single precinct in the United States. But both Republicans and Democrats still line up to gain neocon support or at least neocon acceptance.

Part of the reason for this paradox is the degree of dominance that the neoconservatives have established in the national news media – as op-ed writers and TV commentators – and the neocon ties to the Israel Lobby that is famous for showering contributions on favored politicians and on the opponents of those not favored.

Since the neocons' emergence as big-time foreign policy players in the Reagan administration, they also have demonstrated extraordinary resilience, receiving a steady flow of money often through U.S. government-funded grants from organizations such as the National Endowment for Democracy and through donations from military contractors to hawkish neocon think tanks.

But neocons' most astonishing success over the past year may have been how they have pulled liberals and even some progressives into the neocon strategies for war and more war, largely by exploiting the Left's disgust with President Trump.

People who would normally favor international cooperation toward peaceful resolution of conflicts have joined the neocons in ratcheting up global tensions and making progress toward peace far more difficult.

The provocative “Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act,” which imposes sanctions on Russia, Iran and North Korea while tying President Trump’s hands in removing those penalties, passed the Congress without a single Democrat voting no.

The only dissenting votes came from three Republican House members – Justin Amash of Michigan, Jimmy Duncan of Tennessee, and Thomas Massie of Kentucky – and from Republican Rand Paul of Kentucky and Independent Bernie Sanders of Vermont in the Senate.

In other words, every Democrat present for the vote adopted the neocon position of escalating tensions with Russia and Iran. The new sanctions appear to close off hopes for a détente with Russia and may torpedo the nuclear agreement with Iran, which would put the bomb-bomb-bomb option back on the table just where the neocons want it.

The Putin Obstacle

As for Russia, the neocons have viewed President Vladimir Putin as a major obstacle to their plans at least since 2013 when he helped President Obama come up with a compromise with Syria that averted a U.S. military strike over dubious claims that the Syrian military was responsible for a sarin gas attack outside Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013.

Subsequent evidence indicated that the sarin attack most likely was a provocation by Al Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate to trick the U.S. military into entering the war on Al Qaeda’s side.

While you might wonder why the U.S. government would even think about taking actions that would benefit Al Qaeda, which lured the U.S. into this Mideast quagmire in the first place by attacking on 9/11, the answer is that Israel and the neocons – along with Saudi Arabia and other Sunni-governed states – favored an Al Qaeda victory if that was what was needed to shatter the so-called “Shiite crescent,” anchored in Iran and reaching through Syria to Lebanon.

Many neocons are, in effect, America’s Israeli agents and – since Israel is now allied with Saudi Arabia and the Sunni Gulf states versus Iran – the neocons exercise their media/political influence to rationalize U.S. military strikes against Iran’s regional allies, i.e., Syria’s secular government of Bashar al-Assad.

For his part, Putin compounded his offense to the neocons by facilitating Obama's negotiations with Iran that imposed strict constraints on Iran's actions toward development of a nuclear bomb and took U.S. war against Iran off the table. The neocons, Israel and Saudi Arabia wanted the U.S. military to lead a bombing campaign against Iran with the hope of crippling their regional adversary and possibly even achieving "regime change" in Tehran.

Punishing Russia

It was in that time frame that NED's neocon President Carl Gershman identified Ukraine as the "biggest prize" and an important step toward the even bigger prize of removing Putin in Russia.

Other U.S. government neocons, including Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland and Sen. John McCain, delivered the Ukraine "prize" by supporting the Feb. 22, 2014 coup that overthrew the elected government of Ukraine and unleashed anti-Russian nationalists (including neo-Nazis) who began killing ethnic Russians in the south and east near Russia's border.

When Putin responded by allowing Crimeans to vote on secession from Ukraine and reunification with Russia, the West – and especially the neocon-dominated mainstream media – denounced the move as a "Russian invasion." Covertly, the Russians also helped ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine who defied the coup regime in Kiev and faced annihilation from Ukrainian military forces, including the neo-Nazi Azov Battalion, which literally displayed Swastikas and SS symbols. Putin's assistance to these embattled ethnic Russian Ukrainians became "Russian aggression."

Many U.S. pundits and journalists – in the conservative, centrist and liberal media – were swept up by the various hysterias over Syria, Iran and Russia – much as they had been a decade earlier around the Iraq-WMD frenzy and the "responsibility to protect" (or R2P) argument for the violent "regime change" in Libya in 2011. In all these cases, the public debate was saturated with U.S. government and neocon propaganda, much of it false.

But it worked. For instance, the neocons and their liberal-interventionist sidekicks achieved extraordinary success in seducing many American "peace activists" to support the "regime change" war in Syria by sending sympathetic victims of the Syrian government on speaking tours.

Meanwhile, the major U.S. media essentially flacked for "moderate" Syrian rebels who just happened to be fighting alongside Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate and sharing their powerful U.S.-supplied weapons with the jihadists, all the better

to kill Syrian soldiers trying to protect the secular government in Damascus.

Successful Propaganda

As part of this propaganda process, the jihadists' P.R. adjunct, known as the White Helmets, phoned in anti-government atrocity stories to eager and credulous Western journalists who didn't dare visit the Al Qaeda-controlled zones for fear of being beheaded.

Still, whenever the White Helmets or other "activists" accused the Syrian government of some unlikely chemical attack, the information was treated as gospel. When United Nations investigators, who were under enormous pressure to confirm the propaganda tales beloved in the West, uncovered evidence that one of the alleged chlorine attacks was staged by the jihadists, the mainstream U.S. media politely looked the other way and continued to treat the chemical-weapons stories as credible.

Historian and journalist Stephen Kinzer has said, "Coverage of the Syrian war will be remembered as one of the most shameful episodes in the history of the American press."

But all these successes in the neocons' "perception management" operations pale when compared to what the neocons have accomplished since Donald Trump defeated Hillary Clinton last November.

Fueled by the shock and disgust over the egotistical self-proclaimed pussy-grabber ascending to the highest office in the land, many Americans looked for both an excuse for explaining the outcome and a strategy for removing Trump as quickly as possible. The answer to both concerns became: blame Russia.

The evidence that Russia had "hacked our democracy" was very thin – some private outfit called CrowdStrike found Cyrillic lettering and a reference to the founder of the Soviet KGB in some of the metadata – but that "incriminating evidence" contradicted CrowdStrike's own notion of a crack Russian hacking operation that was almost impossible to trace.

So, even though the FBI failed to secure the Democratic National Committee's computers so the government could do its own forensic analysis, President Obama assigned his intelligence chiefs, CIA Director John Brennan and Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, to come up with an assessment that could be used to blame Trump's victory on "Russian meddling." Obama, of course, shared the revulsion over Trump's victory, since the real-estate mogul/reality-TV star had famously launched his own political career by spreading the lie that Obama was born in Kenya.

'Hand-Picked' Analysts

According to Clapper's later congressional testimony, the analysts for this job were "hand-picked" from the CIA, FBI and National Security Agency and assigned to produce an "assessment" before Obama left office. Their Jan. 6 report was remarkable in its lack of evidence and the analysts themselves admitted that it fell far short of establishing anything as fact. It amounted to a continuation of the "trust us" approach that had dominated the anti-Russia themes for years.

Much of the thin report focused on complaints about Russia's RT network for covering the Occupy Wall Street protests and sponsoring a 2012 debate for third-party presidential candidates who had been excluded from the Democratic-Republican debates between President Obama and former Gov. Mitt Romney.

The absurdity of citing such examples in which RT contributed to the public debate in America as proof of Russia attacking American democracy should have been apparent to everyone, but the Russia-gate stampede had begun and so instead of ridiculing the Jan. 6 report as an insult to reason, its shaky Russia-did-it conclusions were embraced as unassailable Truth, buttressed by the false claim that the assessment represented the consensus view of all 17 U.S. intelligence agencies.

So, for instance, we get the internal contradictions of a Friday column by Washington Post columnist David Ignatius who starts off by making a legitimate point about Washington groupthink.

"When all right-thinking people in the nation's capital seem to agree on something – as has been the case recently with legislation imposing new sanctions on Russia – that may be a warning that the debate has veered into an unthinking herd mentality," Ignatius wrote as he questioned the wisdom of overusing sanctions and tying the President's hands on when to remove sanctions.

Lost Logic

But Ignatius failed to follow his own logic when it came to the core groupthink about Russia "meddling" in the U.S. election. Despite the thinness of the evidence, the certainty about Russia's guilt is now shared by "all right-thinking people" in Washington, who agree that this point is beyond dispute despite the denials from both WikiLeaks, which published the purloined Democratic emails, and the Russian government.

Ignatius seemed nervous that his mild deviation from the conventional wisdom about the sanctions bill might risk his standing with the Establishment, so he added:

“Don’t misunderstand me. In questioning congressional review of sanctions, I’m not excusing Trump’s behavior. His non-response to Russia’s well-documented meddling in the 2016 presidential election has been outrageous.”

However, as usual for the U.S. mainstream media, Ignatius doesn’t cite any of those documents. Presumably, he’s referring to the Jan. 6 assessment, which itself contained no real evidence to support its opinion that Russia hacked into Democratic emails and gave them to WikiLeaks for distribution.

Just because a lot of Important People keep repeating the same allegation doesn’t make the allegation true or “well-documented.” And skepticism should be raised even higher when there is a clear political motive for pushing a falsehood as truth, as we should have learned from President George W. Bush’s Iraq-WMD fallacies and from President Barack Obama’s wild exaggerations about the need to intervene in Libya to prevent a massacre of civilians.

But Washington neocons always start with a leg up because of their easy access to the editorial pages of The New York Times and Washington Post as well as their speed-dial relationships with producers at CNN and other cable outlets.

Yet, the neocons have achieved perhaps their greatest success by merging Cold War Russo-phobia with the Trump Derangement Syndrome to enlist liberals and even progressives into the neocon drive for more “regime change” wars.

There can be no doubt that the escalation of sanctions against Russia and Iran will have the effect of escalating geopolitical tensions with those two important countries and making war, even nuclear war, more likely.

In Iran, hardliners are already telling President Hassan Rouhani, “We told you so” that the U.S. government can’t be trusted in its promise to remove – not increase – sanctions in compliance with the nuclear agreement.

And, Putin, who is actually one of the more pro-Western leaders in Russia, faces attacks from his own hardliners who view him as naïve in thinking that Russia would ever be accepted by the West.

Even relative Kremlin moderates such as Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, are citing Trump’s tail-between-his-legs signing of the sanctions bill as proof that the U.S. establishment has blocked any hope for a détente between Washington and Moscow.

In other words, the prospects for advancing the neocon agenda of more “regime change” wars and coups have grown – and the neocons can claim as their allies virtually the entire Democratic Party hierarchy which is so eager to appease its angry #Resistance base that even the heightened risk of nuclear war is being

ignored.

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's Buffoonish Presidential Act

There was a chance President Trump could have brought some positive change, especially in reeling in foreign wars, but his bizarre narcissism and flaming incompetence have overwhelmed everything else, as Michael Winship describes.

By Michael Winship

Donald Trump is not a president but he plays one on TV. And a terrible one at that.

Watching him last week during what were, arguably, the worst of many horrible days of this presidency, was to see pure, rampaging id. Aggressive, needy, without logic or reason, Trump continues to rule with ignorance and incoherence, seemingly oblivious to the havoc he causes or maybe just thoroughly enjoying it. Whether his new chief of staff John Kelly, a career Marine officer, can bring order and discipline – drop and give me 20, Trump – remains to be seen.

“Trump now has a chance at governing, but it may be only a slim chance,” Chris Whipple, author of a book about White House chiefs of staff, said in [an interview with *The New York Times*](#):

“The fundamental problem is that Donald Trump is an outsider president who has shown he has no idea how to govern – who, more than any of his predecessors, desperately needs to empower a chief of staff as first among equals to execute his agenda and tell him hard truths.

“But does anyone believe that this president wants such a person around?”

All of this is taking place at such a breakneck pace, trying to keep track feels a little bit like those guys who paint the George Washington Bridge from one end to the other and then start all over again. Speed that up multiple times without a moment's rest and you have life in the land of Trump.

For the moment, though, let's focus on three speeches delivered by Trump during

the last week of July that epitomize the depths to which the weight belts of this White House have sunk us.

On Monday, July 24, came that wildly inappropriate address to the Boy Scouts National Jamboree in West Virginia, at which he told 24,000 young people all about fake news and his stunning electoral victory and a rich friend who sold his business and bought a yacht to pursue a life of wine, women and song.

The scouts had been instructed beforehand to be “courteous” and many of them applauded, even cheered, his remarks and booed Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton when he mentioned them. One 15-year-old scout from Indiana told *The Washington Post*, “There were disagreements all over camp. Some people saying ‘F Trump,’ some people saying ‘MAGA.’ I heard there was a troop from New York that had a troop from Texas right next to them and the leaders had to keep them separate.”

That many of our worthy New York lads resisted the urge to pelt our whackdoodle commander-in-chief with s’mores and trail mix may only be explained by a healthy fear of the Secret Service. The Boy Scouts’ chief executive apologized to those offended by the speech, saying, “We sincerely regret that politics were inserted into the Scouting program.” But then, in an interview with *The Wall Street Journal*, Trump claimed, “I got a call from the head of the Boy Scouts saying it was the greatest speech that was ever made to them, and they were very thankful.”

It will come as no shock that the Boy Scouts deny such a call ever took place. In any case, as even Fox News regular Kat Timpf said to *The Post*, “It’s a strange thing to use your time in front of tens of thousands of teenagers to brag about your election win and your partying days in New York.”

You remember the old joke: What’s the difference between government and the Boy Scouts? The Boy Scouts have adult leadership.

Encouraging Police Abuse

At the end of the week, on Friday, July 28, there was the president’s now-notorious speech to law enforcement officers in Long Island’s Suffolk County, where police have been fighting murder and other violence perpetrated by the brutal street gang MS-13. Trump used the occasion to deliver one of his fearmongering “American carnage”-style speeches as he described gang members as “animals” who “have transformed peaceful parks and beautiful, quiet neighborhoods into bloodstained killing fields.”

MS-13 began in California, but many if not most of its members are from Central America. It is “transnational.” Trump’s subtext was ugly and clear: Too many immigrants commit heinous crimes. (This week’s White House rollout of the RAISE

Act to slash the amount of immigration to the US was the latest legislative manifestation of Trump and the right wing's xenophobia).

Much of this anti-immigrant rhetoric was lost, however, as the focus of public and media attention shifted to remarks in the speech that all but endorsed police brutality:

"When you see these thugs being thrown into the back of a paddy wagon, you just see them thrown in, rough, I said, please don't be too nice. Like when you guys put somebody in the car and you're protecting their head, you know, the way you put their hand over. Like, don't hit their head and they've just killed somebody. Don't hit their head. I said, you can take the hand away, okay?"

As many responded in disbelief and revulsion, Trump's spin team tried to brush this off as one big funny joke but even if it was meant in jest – and what snowballs have you been fighting with in hell? – his words were revolting, and resulted in pushback from police departments (including Suffolk County's) and other professional law enforcement organizations. "The last thing we need," the Police Executive Research Forum's Chuck Wexler said in a radio interview, "is a green light from the president of the United States for officers to use unnecessary force."

A Reelection Rally

The third speech, on Tuesday, July 25, in Youngstown, Ohio, was the one least noticed, perhaps because there was so much other Trump news – part of the day was spent by the president dissing Attorney General Sessions and it also was just hours after the Senate voted to begin debate on their proposals to repeal Obamacare. What's more, it wasn't an official White House event but part of yet another campaign rally – the sixth since he became president – meant to placate and keep inflated his Macy's balloon-sized ego.

You won't find the text on the official White House website, but it was in many ways the most cringe-inducing of the three addresses, once again hammering at the empty catchphrases that have characterized Trump's candidacy and presidency:

"I'm back in the center of the American heartland, far away from the Washington swamp to spend time with thousands of true American patriots," he began. "... I'm here this evening to cut through the fake news filter and to speak straight to the American people. Fake news. Fake, fake, fake news. Boy oh boy, people. Is there anyplace that's more fun, more exciting and safer than a Trump rally?"

He painted what was in many ways an even more lurid picture of immigrant violence than he would later in the week on Long Island:

“The predators and criminal aliens who poison our communities with drugs and prey on innocent young people, these beautiful, innocent young people will find no safe haven anywhere in our country. And you’ve seen the stories about some of these animals. They don’t want to use guns, because it’s too fast and it’s not painful enough.”

He then went into more explicit detail – “[Make America Afraid Again](#)” was the headline at *Slate.com* – then attacked the notion of sanctuary cities and said:

“We are dismantling and destroying the bloodthirsty criminal gangs, and well, I will just tell you in, we’re not doing it in a politically correct fashion. We’re doing it rough. Our guys are rougher than their guys.”

[Read the Youngstown speech in its entirety.](#) While awash in his standard campaign bluster, it is even more disturbing when uttered by the man who as president is supposed to set an example of leadership. Which brings us to this astonishing statement:

“Sometimes they say he doesn’t act presidential. And I say, hey look, great schools, smart guy, it’s so easy to act presidential but that’s not gonna to get it done. In fact, I said it’s much easier, by the way, to act presidential than what we’re doing here tonight, believe me. And I said with the exception of the late great Abraham Lincoln, I can be more presidential than any president that’s ever held this office. That I can tell you. It’s real easy. [Cheers] But sadly, we have to move a little faster than that.”

Wow. What’s appalling, Mr. President, is that the moves you envision diminish us as a nation, remove all traces of grace and charity, play to the basest instincts and demean the high office you hold. I am trying to move as fast as I can, too, sir. In the opposite direction from wherever you are.

Michael Winship is the Emmy Award-winning senior writer of *Moyers & Company* and *BillMoyers.com*. Follow him on Twitter: [@MichaelWinship](#). [This article first appeared at <http://billmoyers.com/story/trump-speeches-dead-nation/>]

Making Police Truly ‘Protect and Serve’

As President Trump suggests police should be rougher with suspects, other voices from the police community say the behavior should go in the opposite direction, treating the public with more respect, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

Former Seattle Police Chief Norm Stamper, who laments that many Americans have experienced police as “an overly aggressive, militarized enemy of the people,” believes “the police in America [should] belong to the people – not the other way around.”

In a recent interview Stamper asserted that “Policing is the public’s business, and the public has the full right and responsibility to work collaboratively with local law enforcement.”

Stamper is calling for fundamental changes “in the federal government’s role in local policing as well as citizen participation in all aspects of police operations: policy-making, program development, crime fighting and service delivery, entry-level and ongoing education and training, oversight of police conduct, and—especially relevant to today’s challenges—joint community-police crisis management.” Says Stamper, “nothing will ever change until the system itself is radically restructured.”

Norm Stamper was a cop for 34 years, the first 28 in San Diego, the last six as Seattle’s police chief from 1994-2000. He resigned in the immediate wake of the so-called “Battle in Seattle” of 1999, where police famously confronted the first major international protests against the World Trade Organization with extreme and excessive force.

Chief Stamper took full responsibility for the breakdown and police overreaction and resigned directly following the confrontations. He has since devoted himself to reforming police actions and procedures through extensive community involvement in policing affairs. His most recent book is *To Protect and Serve: How to Fix America’s Police*. I spoke to Stamper in Oakland, California on July 26.

Dennis Bernstein: I’d like you to begin by telling us how you went from police chief in Seattle to globally-known police reformer?

Norm Stamper: It came with a recognition for me that not only is what we are doing not working but it is causing great damage to the community/police relationship. My position is that policing in this country needs to be radically reformed.

DB: Are you heartened by the formation of groups like Black Lives Matter to take back their communities? Do you support that kind of organization to restrain the police during this transition you are envisioning?

NS: Not only do I support it, I believe that a massive grassroots citizen strategy for educating and mobilizing is essential. Based on my 34 years of experience, I just don’t see the institution reforming itself. It may make

modest incremental improvements but then slide backwards in terms of progress. We need citizens leading this movement.

DB: Why did you resign your position as Chief of the Seattle police?

NS: Most people would say I resigned in the immediate wake of the "Battle in Seattle." I was extremely unhappy with the police response to what had begun as a nonviolent protest against globalization. We thought we were ready, we were not. We felt prepared to meet the challenges associated with a new and different form of organizing, a sort of early equivalent of social media, using cell phones, etc. But we were wrong on pretty much all accounts.

On the second day I made the worst decision of my career in authorizing the use of chemical agents against non-violent, non-threatening protesters. At that point I realized that my time was up and that the best way to begin a process of soul-searching and critiquing was to remove myself and end my tenure.

DB: Tell us a little more about what was going through your mind when you came to acknowledge your error.

NS: On top of the list was the realization that I was using militarized tactics against young people who had the courage and wisdom to oppose globalization in so many of its manifestations, to call into question such issues as intellectual property rights, child labor laws, and also criminal justice issues. How do we achieve a truly just society that is accessible to all people, not just here, but all around the world? It was very troubling to me to know that I was leading a militarized response to those conditions.

DB: Since that time we have witnessed the militarization of police departments and some very brutal killings committed by police. What is your impression of what we have seen since your resignation?

NS: First, it is obvious that police forces haven't learned the lessons we learned here in Seattle with respect to handling mass protests. But let's look at the catalysts for those protests: the Michael Brown shooting in Ferguson, the cold-blooded murder of Laquan McDonald in Chicago, the murder of Walter Scott in Charleston, the tragic death of twelve-year-old Tamir Rice in Cleveland. What would possess a police officer to shoot a fleeing man in the back, in some cases someone completely unarmed? Then to lie about it, have fellow officers join in the cover-up, to have police executives and sometimes civic executives pretend that nothing happened.

We are never going to make progress until we learn what it takes to de-escalate conflict situations, to avoid them if possible, and to engage in crisis intervention tactics that have proven to work in the mental health field, for

example. And why is it so hard to figure out a way to discipline police officers so that when they encounter these situations the outcomes are not fatal? This speaks to the need for fundamental reform. Not tinkering with the system but rather fundamentally reconfiguring American police work.

DB: It has come to the point where officers can simply say that they fear for their lives and then proceed to execute.

NS: If a police officer has undergone the proper training and enough of it, and is supervised and led by people who understand the sanctity of human life, we can put an end to this kind of behavior. I am tired of police chiefs standing in front of a bank of microphones and talking about the tragedy, for the victim and the victim's family, for the community and for the police officers. The question is, how do we prevent such tragedies in the future? The answer is definitely not to continue what we are doing these days.

DB: There was a terrible case here in Northern California where a sheriff's trainer named Erick Gelhaus shot a thirteen-year-old boy [Andy Lopez] who he supposedly thought had a real gun. Gelhaus fired something like seven shots in ten seconds. We learned later that Gelhaus was writing a column for Soldier of Fortune and was giving advice along the lines of "If you do shoot a thirteen-year-old holding a BB gun, you have to be able to show that you were really afraid." This is a guy who had just got back from Iraq where he was taking out "insurgents." He had twenty years of training for the sheriff's department. Not only was Gelhaus not indicted, he was promoted!

NS: That story is repeated in jurisdiction after jurisdiction in this country. And we will continue to make those mistakes until we adopt a number of reform measures that I am advocating.

DB: Describe a few of those measures. What is your prescription for change?

NS: Three major recommendations would go a long way toward preventing the kinds of things we are talking about. Number one, end this drug war which has made police officers foot soldiers in a war against their own people, against people who are disproportionately young, poor, and of color.

The war against drugs has caused far more harm than good. It has cost one and a half trillion dollars thus far and, today, drugs are more readily available, at lower prices and higher levels of potency, than ever before. And, as we learned in the 1920s and 1930s, prohibition doesn't work, it is a lousy organizing mechanism for US drug policy and should be replaced with a regulatory system.

Second, license every police officer in the country, making sure that every officer thoroughly understands and is able to apply the Constitution of the

United States. Think of “stop and frisk,” think of laws of arrest, think of the use of lethal force, think of the gathering and preservation of evidence.

Build standards around every procedural justice set of tasks and then insist that every officer in the country, from Ferguson to the NYPD, understands and meets those standards. And if an officer gets fired, they don’t get picked up anywhere else in the country because they don’t have a license, they cannot practice law enforcement.

Thirdly, we must put the community in the driver’s seat. Citizens should be involved as partners in policy-making, program development and crisis management. They should have a say in hiring decisions. Credible citizen oversight mechanisms must be implemented, including subpoena power and the capacity to investigate and reach decisions regarding alleged police misconduct and lethal force issues.

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