

Trump's Lethal Decision on Jerusalem

President Trump has won praise from Christian Zionists and many staunch supporters of Israel for declaring Jerusalem Israel's capital, but critics say it only makes peace a more distant goal, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

Protests have broken out across the Middle East against President Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital – and Western critics complain that the move adds one more brick in the wall against the prospects for peace.

Professor Francis Boyle, who teaches international law at the University of Illinois College of Law and served as a long-time legal adviser to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), calls Trump's announcement a "symbolic but still critical step in Israeli designs to control not just Jerusalem, but all of historic Palestine." I spoke with Boyle on Dec. 6.

Dennis Bernstein: What was your initial response to the announcement by President Trump that the United States will be moving its embassy to Jerusalem?

Francis Boyle: It is always a sad day when you know that people are going to die. It is a defeat for the human spirit. In the last intifada [September 2000-February 2005], about 3,000 Palestinians died and 1,000 Israelis. I don't know what will happen this time. The Palestinians have called for "three days of rage." Trump could very well set off a third intifada here.

Dennis Bernstein: Trump says this doesn't get in the way of the US being an honest broker, that the vision is for peace. From the legal perspective, how do you see this?

Francis Boyle: First of all, the United States has never been an honest broker here. I was legal advisor to the Palestinian delegation to the Middle East Peace Negotiations from 1991, when they began, to the signing of Oslo. It was very clear that the United States was always serving as Israel's lawyer. You had Miller, Ross, and Kurtzer, all three American Jews, two of them orthodox.

The Palestinians had to go hat-in-hand to present their case to American Jews. Nothing has changed: We now have Kushner, Greenblatt and Friedman, all three of whom are orthodox Jews. The whole thing has been preposterous from the beginning. We have always been in favor of Israel, using lies, threats and intimidation to force the Palestinians to accept whatever the Israelis are

giving them. That is international diplomacy for you, conducted by the United States, not only in the Middle East but all over the world.

Dennis Bernstein: Would you say that what is going on here is not just Israel trying to control Jerusalem but all of Palestine?

Francis Boyle: That has always been Israel's policy. I had a conversation with the chair of the Palestinian Delegation to the Middle East peace negotiations. He told me that the Zionists have not changed their position since the Basel Convention of 1897. They want all of Palestine. What is happening now in Jerusalem is a step in that direction.

If you look at the recently leaked so-called peace plan that was presented to [Palestinian President Mahmoud] Abbas in Saudi Arabia, he was basically given an ultimatum to either accept some tiny bantustan or forget it. It is very clear that they want all of Palestine, all of the West Bank, all of Jerusalem. They want the Golan Heights and maybe even some more of Syria.

Dennis Bernstein: We have revelations now that Jared Kushner, our chief peace negotiator in the Middle East, failed to disclose in ethics filings his role as director of a family foundation that funded Israeli settlements. Do you think that is a problem?

Francis Boyle: Of course, because basically he is aiding and abetting war crimes and crimes against humanity in Palestine.

Dennis Bernstein: Is the United States participating in illegal actions in Israel, or doesn't it matter anymore?

Francis Boyle: For most of the Arab and Muslim world, it matters. Here in the United States, apart from the BDS movement, we have basically thrown in our lot with the Israeli government. Congress has been bought and paid for by the Israel lobby. During his campaign, Trump made explicit promises in order to secure Jewish funding and votes.

We arm, equip, supply and train Israel. What is going on in Gaza right now is a form of genocide. They are being strangled to death. The 1948 Genocide Convention, to which both Israel and the United States are parties, says that "deliberately inflicting on a people conditions of life calculated to bring about their physical destruction in whole or in part" is genocide. That is exactly what is going on in Gaza today.

Dennis Bernstein: How would you assess the situation now? Is a two-state solution at all viable?

Francis Boyle: That is for the Palestinians to decide. Their right of self determination is at stake here. As of today, their official position is two states with their capital in East Jerusalem. There have been hints that they might go back to the one-state solution, which was their position before the Palestinian Declaration of Independence of December 15, 1988, when they officially accepted a two-state solution. Since then they have gotten nothing. Every day Israel just steals more land and drives out more Palestinians.

Dennis Bernstein: Are there any options for the Palestinians in the international arena, for example, at the United Nations?

Francis Boyle: I have advised them to invoke the "Uniting for Peace" resolution adopted by the general assembly in 1950, so that they can be admitted to the UN General Assembly as a full-fledged UN member state, recognizing their capital as East Jerusalem. And, as you know, after Palestine became a UN observer state, you and I discussed the concept of a "legal intifada" that the Palestinians could pursue.

My advice to the Palestinians is a full-court press in all specialized United Nations agencies and affiliated organizations, using all available legal mechanisms. This would include suing Israel at the International Court of Justice, which I have offered to do for them. And of course they have filed a complaint against Israel for war crimes and crimes against humanity before the International Criminal Court. According to press reports, they are meeting right now to decide what to do and President Abbas will soon be addressing the Palestinian people.

Dennis Bernstein: I suppose it is important to emphasize the fact that this could turn very violent.

Francis Boyle: I am afraid so. This could turn into the third intifada. The First Intifada, which took place in 1987, was spontaneous. The Second Intifada [September 2000-February 2005] was provoked when Ariel Sharon went to the Al-Aqsa mosque with a couple hundred soldiers. Eventually, about 3,000 Palestinians lost their lives as a result.

Now we have Trump provoking the situation. His people, including Bannon and Flynn, know exactly what they are doing. They believe in Sam Huntington's concept of "the clash of civilizations." They truly believe that they are leading a crusade against the Muslim world. This is being done very deliberately.

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

Missing the Significance of Israel-gate

Amid the U.S. mainstream media's hyping of Russia-gate, there has been much less attention given to what some call "Israel-gate," evidence that Israel was wielding much more behind-the-scenes influence, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

President Trump's decision to begin moving the U.S. Embassy in Israel to the disputed city of Jerusalem – and disclosure that first-son-in-law Jared Kushner failed to disclose his role in a foundation funding Israeli settlements and lobbied against a United Nations' resolution critical of those settlements during the transition – are reminders that the foreign government with truly broad influence over U.S. politics is Israel.

Trump's Jerusalem announcement also threatened to touch off more disorder in the Middle East, which Ali Abunimah, co-founder of the Electronic Intifada, says reflected the Trump administration's determination to demand a full capitulation by the Palestinians. I spoke with Abunimah on Dec. 5.

Dennis Bernstein: We turn our attention back to occupied Palestine. We have now seen the kind of policy we are going to get from the Trump administration.

Jared Kushner has described bringing peace to the region as his dream. We are going to talk about that in the context of his investment in settlements there. I suppose the central issue in Palestine this week is whether the embassy is going to be moved from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and what will the timing be, as in, will it happen some time soon?

Ali Abunimah: Actually, it will not be moved any time soon. Trump will announce tomorrow [Dec. 6] that the US is recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital but he will also sign a waiver delaying the move for another six months and the whole process will likely take years.

Dennis Bernstein: How bad is the situation now? We know that settlements are being built apace, that the repression continues in the Gaza Strip, where life is barely livable.

Ali Abunimah: It is interesting that no one is actually talking about what is happening on the ground in Jerusalem, where hundreds of thousands of

Palestinians there are facing systematic ethnic cleansing by Israel. This includes home demolitions, revocation of residency rights, land confiscations.

In the words of B'Tselem, the Israeli human rights group, since the occupation of East Jerusalem began in 1967, Israel has treated Palestinians in the city as "unwanted immigrants" and worked systematically to drive them out of the area.

Whatever Trump announces tomorrow will not change the situation. The so-called international community is doing nothing about it and is letting Israel get away with it.

Dennis Bernstein: Jared Kushner is a broker for illegal settlements.

Ali Abunimah: He is a donor to illegal settlements, a philanthropist for illegal settlements. How many headlines have been devoted to Kushner failing to disclose important information in his government ethics filings? The latest is that he failed to disclose the fact that he was a director of his family's foundation, which has donated to building settlements in the occupied West Bank, particularly the settlement of Beit El, the same settlement that receives philanthropic donations from David Friedman, Trump's ambassador in Tel Aviv.

Kushner, who is supposedly charged with coming up with a peace plan, is actually busy funding settlements. Kushner's family are close friends of Benjamin Netanyahu. It is just farcical to pretend that anyone like Jared Kushner could ever be an honest broker.

Dennis Bernstein: Is all of this legal?

Ali Abunimah: That's questionable. Actually, in the past year there were lawsuits filed challenging this massive multi-billion dollar flow of tax-deductible, so-called charitable funds for illegal purposes, including the construction of settlements and massive donations to groups like Friends of the IDF.

Another issue is this whole business of what Jared Kushner was doing during the transition, when he was trying to undermine the policy of the sitting Obama administration and stop the UN Security Council resolution passed last December condemning Israeli settlements. This all came out in the context of the Mueller investigation and Michael Flynn's guilty plea, which revealed not so much a collusion with Russia as a very close collusion between the Trump transition and Israel.

Dennis Bernstein: You would think then that MSNBC, which makes a living on pumping up Russiagate, would want to jump into this case of collusion.

Ali Abunimah: The Michael Flynn revelation did not show collusion with Russia

and certainly did not show any interference in the US election. What Flynn pled guilty to was lying about two meetings. Flynn is a serial liar, he lied about his work for the Turkish government.

The facts that were filed in the documents with his plea show that a “very senior member” of the Trump transition team, who has since been identified as Jared Kushner, had ordered Flynn to contact every member of the UN Security Council to try to defeat this resolution criticizing Israel. It was also reported in The New York Times that Kushner had acted at the urging of Netanyahu.

None of this has anything to do with Russian interference in the elections.

What it does show is clear collusion at the highest level with a foreign government [Israel] to undermine and sabotage the policy of the sitting administration.

Dennis Bernstein: It doesn't appear that Arab outrage is going to have much influence over what happens with this plan to move the capital from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

Ali Abunimah: On the contrary, I think that it has actually been facilitated by the fact that Saudi Arabia, which markets itself as the guardian of Islam, has been engaging in this major rapprochement with Israel, pressuring the Palestinians to accept what amounts to surrender, in order to get them out of the way so that Saudi Arabia and Israel can embrace each other and go to war together against Iran.

The New York Times reported details of the so-called Trump peace plan that Jared Kushner has been putting together, which basically creates a Palestinian state in name only. The Palestinians would have very limited autonomy in very small non-contiguous areas of the West Bank. They would have no control, no sovereignty, no capital in East Jerusalem, no right of return for refugees, and so on. But they would be free to call this a Palestinian state if they want to.

All of this sounds familiar to people who have followed this issue because this is a rehashing of the kind of schemes that have been put forward since the 1990's. What is different this time is that Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian Authority leader, was called to Riyadh last month and told by Mohammad bin Salman that he was going to accept this or else. The thinking behind it is that the Palestinian issue is a thorn in the side of the Saudi/Israeli alliance that wants to escalate the catastrophic confrontation with Iran.

Dennis Bernstein: How does the crisis with the prime minister in Lebanon play into all of this?

Ali Abunimah: The Saudis have been behind so many of the regional disasters, including escalating the situation in Syria by funding a proxy war that has killed hundreds of thousands of people. For two years they have been bombing the poorest Arab country, Yemen, with millions suffering famine and tens of thousands killed and injured. Saudi Arabia has been unable to defeat the people resisting them in Yemen. They were trying to destabilize Lebanon and that failed because [Prime Minister] Hariri went home and rescinded his forced resignation under pressure from the Saudis.

Dennis Bernstein: I guess maybe the one silver lining in all of this is the boycott/divestment movement. There is not much else going on in terms of global resistance to the brutality in occupied Palestine.

Ali Abunimah: I suppose it is possible to look at all of this and just feel immobilized and hopeless. But I think it is important to feel hope as well. Even in Jerusalem, Palestinians have been standing up to Israel and winning victories, as they did this summer when they forced Israel to back down from its efforts to impose stricter control on entrance to the al-Aqsa mosque compound. That was a real victory for people power in Jerusalem against one of the strongest armies in the world.

Despite a twenty-fold increase in lobbying, Israel has not been able to stop the “impressive growth” of the Palestine solidarity movement, particularly the boycott/divestment/sanctions movement. So it’s not time to be hopeless, it’s time to get on with the work, because there is lots to do and people power is still winning victories.

Dennis Bernstein: I guess you could say that proof of those victories is the amount of repression and clamp-down of Palestinian students and their supporters all over the country.

Ali Abunimah: And it is across the board now, including the effort of the big Silicon Valley companies who are helping the establishment to censor and limit the reach of independent media like us. They know that people are listening and we are powerful, even though we may sometimes feel small in the face of the forces that are trying to reshape the world.

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.

Trump's Scheme to Carve Up Palestine

President Trump's big idea for Israeli-Palestinian peace was the "outside-in" plan in which Israel's new Saudi allies would squeeze the Palestinians until they accepted a bogus "state," as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

By Paul R. Pillar

Donald Trump never has given evidence that he has new, fresh, and promising ideas to achieve his declared objective of an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement. His statements on the subject can more plausibly be interpreted as another piece of braggadocio about his self-declared deal-making ability.

The obstacles to an Israeli-Palestinian peace have long been painfully apparent, even if much discussion of the subject does not candidly acknowledge them. The contours of any fair and stable resolution of the conflict also have long been well known and have found expression in, for example, the "parameters" that Bill Clinton outlined.

Rather than offering anything that would be either fair or stable, the Trump White House has seized on the idea of outsiders imposing a formula on the Palestinians, with selected Arab governments to play a major role. This has become known as the "outside-in" approach. The approach fits well with some of the administration's other inclinations that constitute what passes for a strategy toward the Middle East.

One of those inclinations is to go all in with the right-wing government of Israel. For Trump, this deference to the Netanyahu government has roots in his coming to terms during the presidential campaign with major donors who are allies of Netanyahu.

During the transition period, the deference was demonstrated by Michael Flynn's appeal to Russia to flout the will of the rest of the international community (and an abstention by the incumbent U.S. administration) by vetoing a United Nations Security Council resolution critical of Israel's continued construction of settlements in the occupied West Bank. Although Flynn's pre-inauguration machinations have been viewed mainly as part of the story of the influence in U.S. politics of Russia, the foreign country exerting influence in this case was not Russia (which voted for the resolution) but instead Israel.

Once in office, Trump appointed as ambassador to Israel his bankruptcy lawyer, who has been an advocate less for U.S. interests than for the Israeli right wing and has personally assisted construction of more settlements. Trump's son-in-law

Jared Kushner, to whom the President has given the Israeli-Palestinian peace portfolio, also has aided settlement construction, although we are only belatedly learning of the extent of his involvement because Kushner conveniently failed to disclose a major part of that involvement in his government ethics filing.

Only Lip Service

Given the all-too-obvious posture of Netanyahu's government toward the Palestinians and the issue of making peace with them, the posture of a deferential Trump administration on the same subject also is obvious. Despite periodic lip service by Netanyahu toward a peace process, his government opposes the yielding of occupied territory or the creation of a Palestinian state. Netanyahu says so when speaking to his domestic base, and other senior members of his ruling coalition are even more direct than he is in saying so.

Ergo, for the deferential deal-maker in the White House, a deal for genuine peace is not on the agenda. His newest statements about Jerusalem's status and a move of the U.S. embassy are just another facet of his deference to the government of Israel and its American backers.

The other inclination of the Trump administration that meshes well with the idea of outside-in is the going – well, if not all in, then mostly in – with the young de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS). Kushner is a key figure in this relationship as well. The two unelected thirty-somethings, with power handed to them through paternal favoritism, reportedly have become best buddies.

Here the U.S. deference has included Trump's support for the Saudi-led effort to isolate Qatar, despite his own Secretary of State's efforts to reconcile the disputatious Gulf Arabs. It also has included continued U.S. support for the Saudi military assault on Yemen, despite the resulting humanitarian catastrophe there.

The strengthening of the remaining link of this love triangle, with Israeli-Saudi cooperation becoming a more open and frequently discussed topic, also fits the outside-in notion. The Netanyahu government always has sought more salient ties with Arab governments as a demonstration that Israel need not resolve the Palestinian problem to avoid international isolation.

For MbS, developing a relationship with Israel is one form of getting help wherever he can get it amid the challenges of consolidating power internally after his coup and coping with a series of foreign policy setbacks involving

Yemen, Qatar, and Lebanon, while staying in good graces with a U.S. administration that is in bed with the ruling Israeli right-wing.

All three points of the triangle are making their maneuvers to the drumbeat of Iran, Iran, Iran as a constant preoccupation and rationalization. For Netanyahu, the drumbeat continues to serve as an all-purpose distraction and blame-shifter. MbS has made opposition to Iran his rallying cry in trying to justify operations such as the calamity in Yemen and the attempts to strong-arm smaller states such as Qatar and Lebanon.

Iran-Bashing

And of course, anti-Iranism has been the one loud and consistent theme in a Trump Middle East policy in which many observers have a hard time discerning a clear strategy.

None of this has anything to do with the issues underlying the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which has involved a contest between two peoples, Israelis and Palestinians, over the same land. Once again, Palestinians have become collateral damage of the pursuit of unrelated objectives by others.

Earlier in the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this included the objective of atoning for the genocidal sins of Europeans. Now the objectives include a young Saudi prince trying to shore up his position and an unpopular U.S. president trying to score points with his political base.

With such dynamics driving the latest chapter in what is still called the “peace process,” it is no surprise to read reports that MbS has presented Palestinian leaders with a proposal that no Palestinian leader could ever accept. The proposal supposedly would create a Palestinian state, but one with only noncontiguous pieces of the West Bank, only limited sovereignty over even that territory, no East Jerusalem, and no right of return for Palestinian refugees.

The Saudi suggestion included naming Abu Dis, an Arab-inhabited suburb of Jerusalem, as the capital of the Palestinian entity – an idea that has been advanced before. Such a proposal being advanced now undermines the contention that Trump’s new declaration regarding Jerusalem as Israel’s capital has no implication for how Jerusalem will be handled in final status negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians.

The history of Palestinian activism does not support the central concept of outside-in, which is that powerful Arab regimes will be able to impose their will on the Palestinians. The Arab League, with Gamal Abdel Nasser’s Egypt playing a leading role, did create the Palestine Liberation Organization in the 1960s. But only a few years later, the PLO came under the control of Yasser

Arafat's Fatah movement, which had originated before the PLO. Subsequent actions and postures repeatedly demonstrated that the PLO, despite its origin, was no tool of Arab regimes but more a reflection of popular Palestinian sentiment. Later history featured the rise of Hamas, which owed its existence to no regime and became such an expression of the frustration of Palestinians over Israeli occupation that Hamas even defeated Fatah in a free election.

There are strong reasons that the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict evokes strong sentiments, and will continue to do so until and unless a genuine resolution of the conflict – not an imposed substitute for such a resolution – is achieved. One thing Kushner got right was his recent public comment that “if we're going to try and create more stability in the region as a whole, you have to solve this issue.”

Anger Over Injustice

Sheer anger over occupation and all of the injustices in daily life that are part of the occupation is an underlying driver of instability. Another is the strength of nationalism and the desire of any people for self-determination. Such sentiment, among Israeli Jews as well as Palestinian Arabs, is why a two-state solution, despite how much more difficult the half century of Israeli colonization of occupied territory has made it, still is an essential part of any resolution of the conflict.

Arab empathy with Palestinian brethren continues to be strong, despite much talk in recent years about all the other problems in the Middle East that are on Arab minds, and notwithstanding how much the Bibi-MbS-Trump triangle would like to think that the only thing anyone cares about is Iran.

The Jerusalem issue – the focus of Trump's latest appeal to his base – is especially a hot button. As Shibley Telhami, who regularly uses polling to test Arab sentiment, observes, Jerusalem “remains a mobilizing issue even in a polarized environment: Even if Arabs don't go out into the streets in consequential numbers, a declaration will play into the hands of those plotting in the basement.”

And Arabs do still go out in the streets. Telhami notes that they did so a few months ago in response to Israel's installation of new security measures at the al-Aqsa Mosque, generating enough of an uproar to lead governments to intervene.

What the Trump administration is doing, in concert with the rightist Israeli government, can be interpreted as just another episode in stringing along a “peace process” while Israel unilaterally establishes still more facts on the ground that are difficult to reverse. It is that, but there probably also is

some self-delusion involved, especially when coupled with the inexperience of Kushner and MbS.

Sometimes when a rhetorical theme is repeated as often and for as many purposes as the drumbeat of Iran, Iran, Iran has been repeated, the drummers start to believe their own rhetoric.

In his public remarks the other day, Kushner asserted, "Israel is a much more natural ally today than they were 20 years ago because of Iran and ISIS extremism." No, it isn't. The growing intolerance in a state defined by religious and ethnic discrimination, with the cementing of a system of apartheid with a large subjugated population lacking political and civil rights, has made Israel even less of a natural ally of the United States over the past 20 years.

As for Iran, Netanyahu's political exploitation of that issue in a way that goes, with respect to the biggest Iran development in recent years – the agreement that restricts Iran's nuclear program – against even Israel's own security interests reflects how big the gap has become between Netanyahu's policies and U.S. interests.

Saudi Arabia always has had interests significantly different from those of the United States, notwithstanding mutually beneficial cooperative arrangements involving oil and security. The differences have become even greater with the rise of a young prince preoccupied with his internal power and his troubled campaign to claim regional dominance.

By hitching his Middle East policy to these two wagons in the vain hope that Palestinians can be browbeaten into permanent subjugation, Donald Trump is doing no favors either to U.S. interests or to the cause of Middle Eastern peace.

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Russia-gate's Reach into Journalism

The investigation to somehow blame Russia for Donald Trump's election has now merged with another establishment goal of isolating and intimidating whistleblowers and other dissidents, as Dennis J Bernstein describes.

By Dennis J Bernstein

The Russia-gate investigation has reached into the ranks of journalism with the House Intelligence Committee's subpoena of Randy Credico, who produced a series about WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange for Pacifica Radio and apparently is suspected of having passed on early word about leaked Democratic emails to Donald Trump's supporter Roger Stone.

The Credico subpoena, after he declined a request for a "voluntary" interview, underscores how the investigation is moving into areas of "guilt by association" and further isolating whistleblowers who defy the powers-that-be through unauthorized release of information to the public, a point made by National Security Agency whistleblower Thomas Drake in an interview.

Drake knows well what it means to blow the whistle on government misconduct and get prosecuted for it. A former senior NSA executive, Drake complained about a multi-billion-dollar fraud, waste, and widespread violation of the rights of civilians through secret mass surveillance programs. As a result, the Obama administration indicted Drake in 2010, "as the first whistleblower since Daniel Ellsberg charged with espionage," according to the Institute for Public Accuracy.

In 2011, the government's case against him, which carried a potential 35 years in prison, collapsed. Drake went free in a plea deal and was awarded the 2011 Ridenhour Truth Telling Prize.

I interviewed Drake about the significance of Credico's subpoena, which Credico believes resulted from his journalism about the persecution of Julian Assange for releasing information that powerful people would prefer kept hidden from the public. (I had a small role in Credico's 14-part radio series, *Julian Assange: Countdown to Freedom*. It was broadcast first as part of his Live on the Fly Series, over WBAI and later on KPFA and across the country on community radio.)

Credico got his start as a satirist and became a political candidate for mayor of New York City and later governor of New York, making mainstream politicians deal with issues they would rather not deal with.

I spoke to Thomas Drake by telephone on Nov. 30, 2017.

Dennis Bernstein: How do you look at Russiagate, based on what you know about what has already transpired in terms of the movement of information? How do you see Credico's role in this?

Thomas Drake: Information is the coin of the realm. It is the currency of power. Anyone who questions authority or is perceived as mocking authority—as

hanging out with “State enemies”—had better be careful. But this latest development is quite troubling, I must say. This is the normalization of everything that has been going on since 9/11. Randy is a sort of 21st century Diogenes who is confronting authority and pointing out corruption. This subpoena sends a chilling message. It’s a double whammy for Randy because, in the eyes of the US government, he is a media figure hanging out with the wrong media figure [Julian Assange].

Dennis Bernstein: Could you say a little bit about what your work was and what you tried to do with your expose?

Thomas Drake: My experience was quite telling, in terms of how far the government will go to try to destroy someone’s life. The attempt by the government to silence me was extraordinary. They threw everything they had at me, all because I spoke the truth. I spoke up about abuse of power, I spoke up about the mass surveillance regime. My crime was that I made the choice to go to the media. And the government was not just coming after me, they were sending a really chilling message to the media: If you print this, you are also under the gun.

Dennis Bernstein: We have heard the charges again and again, that this was a Russian hack. What was the source? Let’s trace it back as best we can.

Thomas Drake: In this hyper-inflated, politicized environment, it is extremely difficult to wade through the massive amount of disinformation on all sides. Hacking is something all modern nation-states engage in, including the United States, including Russia. The challenge here is trying to figure out who the players are, whose ox is being gored, and who is doing the goring.

From all accounts, Trump was duly elected. Now you have the Mueller investigation and the House investigation. Where is this all leading? The US intelligence agency hasn’t done itself any favors. The ICA provides no proof either, in terms of allegations that the Russians “hacked” the election. We do have the evidence disclosed by Reality Winner that maybe there was some interference. But the hyper-politicization is making it extraordinarily difficult.

The advantage that intelligence has is that they can hide behind what they are doing. They don’t actually have to tell the truth, they can shade it, they can influence it and shape it. This is where information can be politicized and used as a weapon. Randy has found himself caught up in these investigations by virtue of being a media figure and hanging out with “the wrong people.”

Dennis Bernstein: It looks like the Russiagateers in Congress are trying to

corner Randy. All his life he has spoken truth to power. But what do you think the role of the press should be?

Thomas Drake: The press amplifies just about everything they focus on, especially with today's 24-hour, in-your-face social media. Even the mainstream media is publishing directly to their webpages. You have to get behind the cacophony of all that noise and ask, "Why?" What are the intentions here?

I believe there are still enough independent journalists who are looking further and deeper. But clearly there are those who are hell-bent on making life as difficult as possible for the current president and those who are going to defend him to the hilt. I was not surprised at all that Trump won. A significant percentage of the American electorate were looking for something different.

Dennis Bernstein: Well, if you consider the content of those emails...Certainly, the Clinton folks got rid of Bernie Sanders.

Thomas Drake: That would have been an interesting race, to have Bernie vs. Trump. Sanders was appealing, especially to young audiences. He was raising legitimate issues.

Dennis Bernstein: In Clinton, they had a known quantity who supported the national security state.

Thomas Drake: The national security establishment was far more comfortable having Clinton as president. Someone central to my own case, General Michael Hayden, just a couple days ago went apoplectic because of a tweet from Trump taking on the mainstream media. Hayden got over 100,000 likes on his response. Well, Hayden was central to what we did in deep secrecy at the highest levels of government after 9/11, engaging in widespread surveillance and then justifying it as "raw executive authority."

Now you have this interesting dynamic where the national security establishment is effectively undermining a duly elected president of the United States. I recognize that Trump is vulnerable, but these types of investigations often become highly politicized. I worry that what is really happening is being sacrificed on the altar of entertainment and the stage of political theater.

What is happening to Randy is symptomatic of a larger trend. If you dare speak truth to power, you are going to pay the price. Is Randy that much of a threat, just because he is questioning authority? Are we afraid of the press? Are we afraid of having the uncomfortable conversations, of dealing with the inconvenient truths about ourselves?

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.

Roy Moore and the Triumph of Partisanship

Partisanship has reached such extremes in U.S. politics that Republicans are prepared to brush aside multiple allegations that Roy Moore preyed on teen-age girls to keep a Democrat from winning in Alabama, writes Michael Winship.

By Michael Winship

Amid all the craziness surrounding Roy Moore’s race for the U.S. Senate and the seeming willingness of Alabama’s likely voters to send a man of such dubious merit and morality to Capitol Hill (where, admittedly, the bar already is pretty damned low), I keep thinking of a line from the Randy Newman song “Rednecks.”

It’s the lead piece on his classic ’70s album *Good Old Boys*, and begins with a Southern man lamenting how the north-of-the-Mason-Dixon-line media types make fun of former Georgia Gov. Lester Maddox, the arch-segregationist notorious for using an ax handle to threaten those who tried to integrate his fried chicken restaurant.

“Well, he may be a fool but he’s our fool,” Newman sings, and yep, there’s the upcoming Alabama election in a nutshell. Outsiders are resented and tribalism reigns, no matter how irrational or destructive to self-interest.

“Thank God for Mississippi” is the old joke: No matter how bad things were in Alabama, there always was a state right next door where things were often worse. Alabama is the third “hungriest” state in the nation, with 18 percent of its population food insecure, behind Louisiana and, yes, Mississippi. It’s the sixth-poorest state, with some 18.5 percent living in poverty, and the third-highest state when it comes both to murders and the number of citizens behind bars per 100,000 members of population. According to the Centers for Disease Control, opioids are prescribed in Alabama more than in any other state, and a Center for Health Statistics report notes that Alabama’s rate of overdose deaths from opioids has doubled since 2011.

But no, instead of campaigning about how to get the federal government to help his state pull itself from the clutches of such poverty, hunger and addiction,

Roy Moore acts like a crackpot false prophet, preaching Islamophobia, homophobia and the dominance of “God’s law” over the Constitution; denying the allegations of the many women who say he assaulted or harassed or stalked them when they were teenagers (on Tuesday, a Moore spokesperson described the accusers as “criminals”) and all the time hammering away at his Democratic opponent Doug Jones on abortion.

Moore wants all abortion to be illegal and supports the reversal of *Roe v. Wade*. Jones has declared he is against “anything that is going to infringe on a woman’s right and her freedom to choose,” but also has said that he supports “current law” that restricts abortion after 20 weeks unless pregnancy threatens the health of the mother.

Moore’s wife has attacked Jones for supporting “full-term” abortion, which is wildly and deliberately misleading. What’s more, the website AL.com reports, “An examination of statistics compiled by the Alabama Department of Public Health shows that late-term procedures are almost nonexistent in the state. Three out of 6,642 abortions performed in Alabama in 2016 occurred after 20 weeks, according to the agency.”

Damn Yankee-ness

Admittedly, I write all this as one of those Northern media types, but also as one with a Southern mother and at least one great-grandfather from Alabama. Not that it grants me much immunity, if any, from my innate damn Yankee-ness, but I put it out there just to suggest that genetically at least I may not be a total hostage to Eastern seaboard prejudices and pointy-headed intellectualism.

Besides, these symptoms of self-righteous bigotry and callousness hardly are limited to Alabama. This knee-jerk tribal impulse that afflicts so much of the state’s politics is just a pure, concentrated and poisonous microcosm of the Republican Party’s Trumpism, right up to and including the race and gender prejudice, religious bias and sheer *chutzpah*, although that’s not a word one imagines in Moore’s Jesus-wants-me-for-a-sunbeam vocabulary.

And let’s not forget opportunism. National Republicans pay far more heed to poll numbers than Moore’s Ten Commandments. That’s why we’ve witnessed the appallingly cynical backflips on his behalf from Donald Trump, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and the Republican National Committee (RNC) as Moore’s percentages seem to have bounced back from an initial drop after the first allegations of his unchristian-like behavior with teenagers.

And so you have a morally compromised president who now shouts “Go get ‘em, Roy,” to a fellow misogynist and birther, as well as an RNC that has resumed

cash transfusions for the Moore campaign. You have a woman governor in Alabama, Kay Ivey, who says, "There's never an excuse for or rationale for sexual misconduct or sexual abuse" but who will vote for Moore anyway because "we need to have a Republican in the United States Senate to... make major decisions."

Then there's Tully Borland, philosophy professor at a Baptist university in Arkansas, convolutedly writing in *The Federalist* that relations between older men and teenage girls are "not without some merit if one wants to raise a large family," but adding, "Moore was a dirtbag and is currently lying about his actions rather than confessing the truth and asking for forgiveness." And then adding, "That being said, I don't think it's wrong to vote for Moore." As they used to say on *Monty Python*, "There! I've run rings around you logically."

No wonder my head hurts. Conservative columnist Jennifer Rubin recently wrote that the GOP contortions are "the final result of years of win-at-all-cost politics in which no evil (Child molestation? Murder?) compares to the 'evil' of electing a perfectly competent, patriotic member of the other party to office. ...

"Republicans will tell you they support Moore and Trump as vehicles to policy goals. That assumes (falsely) that their policy goals are noble when they are actually unrealistic, unpopular, inconsistent and unconservative... In truth, the goals these Republicans care about, if they ever did, have long ago been sublimated (they certainly changed them entirely) to the goal of holding power, of winning. When that is the highest calling they'll vote for alleged child predators, racists and just about anyone else with an 'R' next to his or her name."

According to Greg Sargent at *The Washington Post*, Democrats are planning to publicly hold Republicans responsible for supporting Moore. GOP Senate candidates will be asked if they agree with the decision and whether they're willing to serve with Moore if he wins. Well-clad feet will be held to fires.

But it could be too late. Sargent suggests Trump's behavior may already have degraded all of our politics beyond the point of no return. And he has given right-wing Republicans the chance they've sought for years: trying to gut every social policy achievement of the last eight decades while further enriching the oligarchs (including the Trump clan) as he distracts the rest of us with his unhinged, oafish behavior.

He may be a fool but he's our fool. Trump and his many accomplices, including and especially Roy Moore, only succeed if we keep letting them.

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Apparent Election Theft in Honduras

In 2009, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton excused a coup in Honduras to stop a possible second term by a progressive president, but the U.S. now sits by as a right-wing president steals a second term, says Rick Sterling.

By Rick Sterling

Honduras is in crisis, again. The national election took place on Nov. 26 with results posted that night showing the challenger Salvador Nasralla with a 5 percentage-point lead with 57 percent of the votes tallied. Then strange things began to happen.

After midnight on election night, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) stopped posting updates and effectively shut down for the next 36 hours. The TSE's president, David Matamoros Batson, said the TSE had received 13,000 tally sheets but was missing 6,000 from the total. With just over 18,000 total, this does not quite add up. Then two hours later, Matamoros increased the number of missing tally sheets to 7,500. When updates resumed, mid-day last Tuesday, the results consistently favored the incumbent right-wing President Juan Orlando Hernandez. The opposition lead steadily diminished then disappeared.

The leader of the Opposition Coalition against the Dictatorship, Salvador Nasralla, denounced the apparent malfeasance and protests commenced across the country. Police and military have sometimes responded violently. Numerous unarmed Hondurans have been killed over the past five days.

On Monday, more than a week after the election, the TSE announced results giving a narrow victory to the incumbent National Party President Juan Orlando Hernandez. As mass protests continue, the opposition has demanded a recount of all the tally sheets received after the TSE shutdown.

The current National Party government derives from the 2009 military coup, which overthrew the moderately progressive President Manuel Zelaya supposedly because he simply considered the possibility of seeking a second term. When Zelaya was kidnapped in the 2009 coup, he was flown directly from Tegucigalpa to the U.S. government's Palmerola Air Base just 48 miles from the capital.

After time on the ground there, with the coup leaders presumably consulting with Washington, the kidnapped president was taken to Costa Rica. Five months later an election was held to replace Zelaya. The election was widely boycotted within Honduras but given the seal of approval by Washington. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said the election made the coup a “moot point.”

Four years later, in 2013, there was another presidential election, which included a new party: the Liberation and Refoundation Party known as LIBRE. This party represented popular forces, which supported Zelaya and his progressive policies – and emerged from the popular resistance to the coup. The party quickly surpassed the traditional Liberal Party and presented a serious challenge to Hernandez’s National Party even as international observers documented voter intimidation and other irregularities. Hernandez assumed the presidency on Jan. 27, 2014.

(Ironically, despite the justification for ousting Zelaya – because he allegedly considered seeking a second term in defiance of the constitution – Hernandez’s path for reelection was cleared away by a contentious 2016 court ruling.

Ahead of the 2017 election, LIBRE forged a broader coalition with two smaller parties to support Salvador Nasralla as their candidate. This political alliance took the name the Coalition Against the Dictatorship and former President Zelaya was head coordinator.

Days before the recent Honduras election The Economist published a blockbuster article titled “Is Honduras Ruling Party Planning to Rig an Election?” reporting: “The Economist has obtained a recording that, if authentic, suggests the ruling party has plans to distort results in the upcoming election.” The two-hour recording is from a National Party training session. It details five tactics used to influence election results: buy the credentials of small party delegates who supervise the local polling place, surreptitiously allow National Party voters to vote more than once, spoil the votes for other candidates, damage the tally sheet which favors the opponent so it cannot be transmitted electronically to election headquarters – and expedite tally sheets favoring their party.

Thumb on the Scales

Besides the reported rigging schemes in the field, the election referees were far from neutral. The Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) is led by president David Matamoros Batson, who was previously Secretary General and a member of Congress for the National Party.

Following is evidence of TSE misconduct and bias:

1 – TSE delayed posting results that favored the opposition candidate.

In the 2013 election, TSE started posting the election results at 6:13 p.m. when just 24 percent of the total votes had been received. Those returns gave the National Party candidate Juan Orlando Hernandez a 5 percentage point lead.

This election, TSE acted differently. At 7:55 p.m., TSE President Matamoros tweeted “We have received 40% of the results.” But they did not post this. They delayed posting the data until near midnight. Then they reported that with 57.2 % of total votes counted the results were:

- Salvador Nasralla (Opposition Coalition Against the Dictatorship) with 855,847 votes = 45.17% of total.
- Juan Orlando Hernandez (National Party) with 761,892 votes = 40.22%
- Luis Zelaya (Liberal Party, no relation to ousted Manuel Zelaya) with 260,994 votes = 13.77% of total.
- Several other candidates had less than 1%.

Prior to the election, TSE expected to post the results from 70 percent of the electorate on election night, raising the question of whether the TSE was holding back more results.

2 – TSE changed the election procedure.

Honduras’ election procedure is to count and tally the paper ballots at each of the voting stations around the country. The tally sheet (‘acta’) is signed off by representatives from each party, then scanned and transmitted electronically to TSE headquarters where they are added to national totals and posted.

Following the posting of results showing the opposition candidate with a significant lead, at about midnight on election day, the TSE changed the procedure and stopped posting results for the next 36 hours. TSE President Matamoros arbitrarily changed the procedures.

The explanation was given by Matamoros at 1:39 p.m. on Nov. 27: “Today we are going to start opening the ballot boxes coming in from across the country to understand the ballots and results.” Five minutes later, at 1:44 p.m., he added “We cannot give results until all the missing tally sheets come in.”

The situation was questioned by Spanish election observer Ramon Jauregui who noted “There is no technical reason that explains the delay, because the tallies from all 18000 polling places were transmitted electronically to the @tsehonduras on the day of the election.”

3 – TSE falsely reported the number of missing tally sheets.

At 1:56 p.m., Matamoros announced that the TSE had received 13,000 of the total but are still missing 6,000 tally sheets (“actas”). “We have received 13,000 tallies from across the country we are missing 6,000”. With a total of 18,100 tallies, the actual number missing should have been about 5,100.

At 4:17 p.m., the number of missing tally sheets mysteriously increased by 25 percent to 7,500. TSE’s Matamoros announced “We are missing 7500 actas.”

4 – TSE officials gave contradictory results.

While Matamoros was issuing conflicting information about the number of missing “actas,” another election official was saying something very different. As reported in [this Reuters story](#):

“Election official Marcos Ramiro Lobo told Reuters on Monday afternoon that Nasralla was leading by a margin of five points, with about 70 percent of ballots counted. Lobo said Nasralla appeared certain to win, signaling that experts at the electoral body regarded his lead as irreversible.”

The third-place Liberal Party candidate also [recognized](#) Nasralla as the winner and urged the National Party leader to concede defeat.

About noon on Nov. 28, the TSE resumed posting election results after the 36-hour interruption. The new data showed Nasralla’s lead steadily declining and soon the National Party candidate and current President Juan Orlando Hernandez was [edging ahead](#). The Center for Economic and Policy Research has [analyzed](#) the data and determined the abrupt swing in elections results was “next to impossible.”

Where Things Stand

TSE has announced results showing Juan Orlando Hernandez winning the election. The Opposition Coalition candidate Nasralla has called for a [new election](#) under international observation and control. The Opposition Coordinator and former president, Manuel Zelaya, has issued a statement calling for the investigation and verification of the election procedures and results.

Honduras is important to U.S. foreign policy and the White House is closely following events. In mid-November Foreign Policy magazine ran an article titled [The United States has a lot Riding on the Honduras Election](#)” The article says “losing Hernandez would be a real setback.”

Clearly the Honduran people have even more riding on the Honduras election. The coup of 2009 led to increased crime and violence along with massive repression

of landless campesinos, environmental and indigenous communities. From the Caribbean Sea to the Pacific Ocean, the domestic policies of Honduras have been skewed to benefit foreign corporations, plantations, the local oligarchy and neighbor to the north.

The current situation calls into question the objectivity of the U.S. and Organization of American States (OAS). Will the U.S. and OAS issue token criticisms but ultimately rubber stamp this Honduras election despite the glaring problems? If so, it will highlight the double-standard as the U.S. and OAS have aggressively criticized Venezuelan elections and refused to acknowledge the results even after full recounts and verification.

The Honduras election process offers the potential of verification but only if the data from each and every polling place is compared with the data recorded at the TSE headquarters. The secret National Party training described by The Economist specifically called for disruption of the transmission of unfavorable “actas” (tally sheets) to the headquarters.

If opposition demands for a thorough examination of election procedures and voting tallies are not met, protests and repression may explode in Honduras. The majority of the Honduran people evidently want new leadership and voted for it. It appears that the voters’ desires were thwarted through a manipulated election process and transparent theft.

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Honduras Again in the Balance

The initial Honduran election returns looked promising for the progressive challenger but the vote count has since stalled and the authoritarian incumbent sent troops into the streets to stop protests, as Dennis J Bernstein reports.

By Dennis J Bernstein

The future of Honduras hangs in the balance as the vote count from presidential election drags on. The challenger, Salvador Nasralla, a former sportscaster running at the head of a progressive left-leaning alliance, initially held the

lead over incumbent President Juan Orlando Hernández but that was reversed amid allegations of ballot manipulation and the imposition of a military curfew to prevent protests.

A win by Nasralla would represent an across-the-board rejection of Hernández's iron-fisted rule.

Dana Frank, professor of history at the University of California, Santa Cruz, said, "The Honduran elections, especially President Juan Orlando Hernández's criminal candidacy in violation of the Honduran Constitution, continue to underscore the utter breakdown of the rule of law in Honduras since the 2009 coup – with the blessing of the U.S. government, which continues to celebrate a regime thoroughly marked by corruption and the vicious repression of basic civil liberties. Reports from the Honduran government claiming that the crime rate is down or that the police have been cleaned up should not be believed for a minute."

I spoke to Assistant Professor Suyapa Portillo of Pitzer College on Nov. 27. Portillo and her students were international observers in San Pedro Sula in Honduras and visited over 13 voting centers throughout the most marginalized sectors of the city.

Dennis Bernstein: Could you just remind us who the candidates are in this latest election in Honduras? There does seem to be a big difference between them.

Suyapa Portillo: The candidates are Salvador Nasralla, who is running for the Opposition Alliance, and Juan Orlando Hernández, the current president.

Actually, it is illegal for Hernández to run for reelection in Honduras. After the coup d'état, bipartisanship was partly broken and there were actually ten parties running in the north where I was an observer.

It was a very heated race but the electoral college reported around 1:40 am that about 45% of the electorate had voted for Nasralla and 40% for Hernández. But because the current president controls the entire system, including the electoral college, he hasn't conceded the election to Nasralla, which would be typical by this point. It still is not clear whether Hernández is going to respect the constitution.

Dennis Bernstein: Talk a little about the stark differences between the candidates. We have heard a lot about the violence in Honduras after the coup, which was supported by the United States government.

Suyapa Portillo: The National Alliance has been in power since the coup d'état in 2009. Since then, the crime rate has risen to an extreme degree. Over 200 environmental activists have been killed and about that many LGBT activists.

Journalists and human rights defenders are facing threats if they stand up against the government. A lot of the improvements in Honduras after the peace accords in the 1980's are being rolled back by the National Alliance. People in Honduras consider Hernández a dictator. Even though he claims that crime has been reduced, what has really happened is that it is less reported on.

Hernández's brother is one of the first high profile people to be linked to narco-trafficking.

Dennis Bernstein: We know that the US government, led by Hillary Clinton [as Secretary of State], sustained the coup that drove [former President] Zelaya out of the country [in 2009]. Clinton bragged about this in the first edition of her autobiography.

Suyapa Portillo: In Honduras narco-traffickers and gangs are taking over. The levels of violence are through the roof. We are seeing attacks against human rights defenders, organizers, feminists. Honduras deserves a different form of government. When Hillary Clinton bragged about the coup d'état and when the Obama administration refused to call this a coup d'état, they really set in motion all these murders.

Dennis Bernstein: Was this an important election? Did people really want to get out and vote? You take a risk when you vote in Honduras, particularly if you are a grassroots activist, a teacher, etc.

Suyapa Portillo: The entire country was militarized, particularly the city centers. We visited thirteen voting centers in San Pedro Sula, in some of the most marginalized sections of the city where people expected the most violence. There was a lot of energy and enthusiasm despite all the militarization. People voted early, went home and then came back for the vote count. This participation by the citizenry is new, emerging after the coup d'état. Every ballot box had its own count.

We did see quite a few discrepancies: people showing up to learn that they had already voted, people coming to vote to find that their pictures were not available. We saw a lot of tension between the ballot box people and the electoral college controlled by the government and the citizens. Some of the neighborhoods we visited are controlled by gangs, but the people still came out. In almost all of the thirteen voting centers we visited, Nasralla clearly had the lead.

Dennis Bernstein: How do you account for this enthusiasm? You talked a little about the violence in the country which ensued after the coup. But talk about some of the grassroots struggles that have gotten people out in numbers to vote.

Suyapa Portillo: 2014 saw the formation of the military police, a body that had not existed since the eighties. This puts military-grade weapons in the urban centers. When Hernández came into power, he granted 300 mining concessions to local elites and foreign companies and people felt he was giving away the country. These land concessions came into direct conflict with indigenous communities. You started to see incredible numbers of murders of human rights defenders and land rights defenders.

Dennis Bernstein: Some feel he is trying to turn the country into a free trade zone.

Suyapa Portillo: The Nationalist Party vision is just to get rich off of the people. There are no increases in minimum wage, there is no way out for people. In fact, in 2014 we saw an exodus of unaccompanied minors. There is really no future for young people in Honduras. Education is impossible to access without money. The military police have attacked university students organizing for reform.

And Hernández has put his entire family in office. All the ministers are his brothers, sisters, cousins—which is again something that hadn't happened since the 1980's in Honduras. Most importantly, there are no jobs. The economy is not growing.

Dennis Bernstein: The US government would know about the trafficking in Honduras because the United States has an extensive presence there. So there is nothing that would be a secret to the US.

Suyapa Portillo: The United States knows that there is impunity, that no human rights charges will ever see the light of day. Oftentimes, plaintiffs are either killed or leave before cases are resolved. Remember that Honduras was under military rule from 1963 to 1980. For most Hondurans this is recent history and they don't want to return to that.

The young people want a president who will represent them and the issues that they care about. Libre and the New Alliance have a proposal that makes sense to them. The activists we saw were remarkably young people.

Dennis Bernstein: This disastrous policy initiated by Obama and Clinton and intensified under Trump has led to a surge of people leaving the country. It is sort of a cynical policy because you have got various politicians in the US lecturing mothers in Honduras and El Salvador how dangerous it is to send their kids up north and yet we are creating the circumstances for extreme suffering and very little choice.

Suyapa Portillo: If people cannot make ends meet, they will migrate. We have to

also remember the history of corporations in Honduras. The United Fruit Company and Dole used to provide jobs for people along the north coast and then when the hurricanes hit factories were closed and unions were lost.

New, non-union, exploitative corporations are now coming in, which is also pushing people out. Along the north coast, just about every family has someone living in the United States. The government has to have a plan for dealing with immigration. What kind of policies will make people want to stay, rather than risk the very dangerous journey through Mexico?

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.

America’s Military-Industrial Addiction

Polls show that Americans are tired of endless wars in faraway lands, but many cheer President Trump’s showering money on the Pentagon and its contractors, a paradox that President Eisenhower foresaw, writes JP Sottile.

By JP Sottile

The Military-Industrial Complex has loomed over America ever since President Dwight D. Eisenhower warned of its growing influence during his prescient farewell address on Jan. 17, 1961. The Vietnam War followed shortly thereafter, and its bloody consequences cemented the image of the Military-Industrial Complex (MIC) as a faceless cadre of profit-seeking warmongers who’ve wrested control of the foreign policy. That was certainly borne out by the war’s utter senselessness ... and by tales of profiteering by well-connected contractors like Brown & Root.

Over five decades, four major wars and a dozen-odd interventions later, we often talk about the Military-Industrial Complex as if we’re referring to a nefarious, flag-draped Death Star floating just beyond the reach of helpless Americans who’d generally prefer that war was not, as the great Gen. Smedley Darlington Butler aptly put it, little more than a money-making “racket.”

The feeling of powerlessness that the MIC engenders in “average Americans” makes a lot of sense if you just follow the money coming out of Capitol Hill. The Project on Government Oversight (POGO) tabulated all “defense-related spending” for both 2017 and 2018, and it hit nearly \$1.1 trillion for each of the two

years. The “defense-related” part is important because the annual National Defense Authorization Act, a.k.a. the defense budget, doesn’t fully account for all the various forms of national security spending that gets peppered around a half-dozen agencies.

It’s a phenomenon that noted Pentagon watchdog William Hartung has tracked for years. He recently dissected it into “no less than 10 categories of national security spending.” Amazingly only one of those is the actual Pentagon budget. The others include spending on wars, on homeland security, on military aid, on intelligence, on nukes, on recruitment, on veterans, on interest payments and on “other defense” – which includes “a number of flows of defense-related funding that go to agencies other than the Pentagon.”

Perhaps most amazingly, Hartung noted in TomDisptach that the inflation-adjusted “base” defense budgets of the last couple years is “higher than at the height of President Ronald Reagan’s massive buildup of the 1980s and is now nearing the post-World War II funding peak.” And that’s just the “base” budget, meaning the roughly \$600 billion “defense-only” portion of the overall package. Like POGO, Hartung puts an annual price tag of nearly \$1.1 trillion on the whole enchilada of military-related spending.

The MIC’s ‘Swamp Creatures’

To secure their share of this grandiloquent banquet, the defense industry’s lobbyists stampede Capitol Hill like well-heeled wildebeest, each jockeying for a plum position at the trough. This year, a robust collection of 208 defense companies spent \$93,937,493 to deploy 728 “reported” lobbyists (apparently some go unreported) to feed this year’s trumped-up, \$700 billion defense-only budget, according to OpenSecrets.org. Last year they spent \$128,845,198 to secure their profitable pieces of the government pie.

And this reliable yearly harvest, along with the revolving doors connecting defense contractors with Capitol Hill, K Street and the Pentagon, is why so many critics blame the masters of war behind the MIC for turning war into a cash machine.

But the cash machine is not confined to the Beltway. There are ATM branches around the country. Much in the way it lavishes Congress with lobbying largesse, the defense industry works hand-in-glove with the Pentagon to spread the appropriations around the nation. This “spread the wealth” strategy may be equally as important as the “inside the Beltway” lobbying that garners so much of our attention and disdain.

Just go to U.S. Department of Defense’s contract announcement webpage on any

weekday to get a good sense of the “contracts valued at \$7 million or more” that are “announced each business day at 5 p.m.” A recent survey of these “awards” found the usual suspects like Raytheon, Lockheed Martin and General Dynamics. The MIC was well-represented. But many millions of dollars were also “won” by companies most Americans have never heard of ... like this sampling from one day at the end of October:

- Longbow LLC, Orlando Florida, got \$183,474,414 for radar electronic units with the stipulation that work will be performed in Orlando, Florida.
- Gradkell Systems Inc., Huntsville, Alabama, got \$75,000,000 for systems operations and maintenance at Fort Belvoir, Virginia
- Dawson Federal Inc., San Antonio, Texas; and A&H-Ambica JV LLC, Livonia, Michigan; and Frontier Services Inc., Kansas City, Missouri, will share a \$45,000,000 for repair and alternations for land ports of entry in North Dakota and Minnesota.
- TRAX International Corp., Las Vegas, Nevada, got a \$9,203,652 contract modification for non-personal test support services that will be performed in Yuma, Arizona, and Fort Greely, Alaska,
- Railroad Construction Co. Inc., Paterson, New Jersey, got a \$9,344,963 contract modification for base operations support services to be performed in Colts Neck, New Jersey.
- Belleville Shoe Co., Belleville, Illinois, got \$63,973,889 for hot-weather combat boots that will be made in Illinois.
- American Apparel Inc., Selma, Alabama, got \$48,411,186 for combat utility uniforms that will be made in Alabama.
- National Industries for the Blind, Alexandria, Virginia, got a \$12,884,595 contract modification to make and advanced combat helmet pad suspension system. The “locations of performance” are Virginia, Pennsylvania and North Carolina.

Sharing the Largesse

Clearly, the DoD is large enough, and smart enough, to award contracts to companies throughout the 50 states. Yes, it is a function of the sheer size or, more forebodingly, the utter “pervasiveness” of the military in American life. But it is also a strategy. And it’s a tactic readily apparent in a contract recently awarded to Raytheon.

On Oct. 31, 2017, they got a \$29,455,672 contract modification for missions systems equipment; computing environment hardware; and software research, test and development. The modification stipulates that the work will spread around the country to “Portsmouth, Rhode Island (46 percent); Tewksbury, Massachusetts (36 percent); Marlboro, Massachusetts (6 percent); Port Hueneme, California (5

percent); San Diego, California (4 percent); and Bath, Maine (3 percent)."

Frankly, it's a brilliant move that began in the Cold War. The more Congressional districts that got defense dollars, the more votes the defense budget was likely to receive on Capitol Hill. Over time, it evolved into its own underlying rationale for the budget.

As veteran journalist William Greider wrote in the Aug. 16, 1984 issue of Rolling Stone, "The entire political system, including liberals as well as conservatives, is held hostage by the politics of defense spending. Even the most well intentioned are captive to it. And this is a fundamental reason why the Pentagon budget is irrationally bloated and why America is mobilizing for war in a time of peace."

The peace-time mobilization Greider referred to was the Reagan build-up that, as William Hartung noted, is currently being surpassed by America's "War on Terror" binge. Then, as now ... the US was at peace at home, meddling around the world and running up a huge bill in the process. And then, as now ... the spending seems unstoppable.

And as an unnamed "arms-control lobbyist" told Greider, "It's a fact of life. I don't see how you can ask members of Congress to vote against their own districts. If I were a member of Congress, I might vote that way, too."

Essentially, members of Congress act as secondary lobbyists for the defense industry by making sure their constituents have a vested interest in seeing the defense budget is both robust and untouchable. But they are not alone. Because the states also reap what the Pentagon sows ... and, in the wake of the massive post-9/11 splurge, they've begun quantifying the impact of defense spending on their economies. It helps them make their specific case for keeping the spigot open.

Enter the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), which notes, or touts, that the Department of Defense (DoD) "operates more than 420 military installations in the 50 states, the District of Columbia, Guam and Puerto Rico." Additionally, the NCSL is understandably impressed by a DoD analysis that found the department's "\$408 billion on payroll and contracts in Fiscal Year 2015" translated into "approximately 2.3 percent of U.S. gross domestic product (GDP)."

And they've become a clearinghouse for state governments' economic impact studies of defense spending. Here's a sampling of recent data compiled on the NCSL website:

- *In 2015, for example, military installations in North Carolina supported*

- 578,000 jobs, \$34 billion in personal income and \$66 billion in gross state product. This amounts to roughly 10 percent of the state's overall economy.
- In 2014, Colorado lawmakers appropriated \$300,000 in state funds to examine the comprehensive value of military activities across the state's seven major installations. The state Department of Military and Veterans Affairs released its study in May 2015, reporting a total economic impact of \$27 billion.
 - Kentucky has also taken steps to measure military activity, releasing its fifth study in June 2016. The military spent approximately \$12 billion in Kentucky during 2014-15. With 38,700 active duty and civilian employees, military employment exceeds the next largest state employer by more than 21,000 jobs.
 - In Michigan, for example, defense spending in Fiscal Year 2014 supported 105,000 jobs, added more than \$9 billion in gross state product and created nearly \$10 billion in personal income. A 2016 study sponsored by the Michigan Defense Center presents a statewide strategy to preserve Army and Air National Guard facilities following a future Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) round as well as to attract new missions.

Electoral Impact

But that's not all. According to the DoD study cited above, the biggest recipients of DoD dollars are (in order): Virginia, California, Texas, Maryland and Florida. And among the top 18 host states for military bases, electorally important states like California, Florida and Texas lead the nation.

And that's the real rub ... this has an electoral impact. Because the constituency for defense spending isn't just the 1 percent percent of Americans who actively serve in the military or 7 percent of Americans who've served sometime in their lives, but it is also the millions of Americans who directly or indirectly make a living off of the "defense-related" largesse that passes through the Pentagon like grass through a goose.

It's a dirty little secret that Donald Trump exploited throughout the 2016 presidential campaign. Somehow, he was able to criticize wasting money on foreign wars and the neoconservative interventionism of the Bushes, the neoliberal interventionism of Hillary Clinton, and, at the same time, moan endlessly about the "depleted" military despite "years of record-high spending." He went on to promise a massive increase in the defense budget, a massive increase in naval construction and a huge nuclear arsenal.

And, much to the approval of many Americans, he's delivered. A Morning Consult/Politico poll showed increased defense spending was the most popular among a variety of spending priorities presented to voters ... even as voters

express trepidation about the coming of another war. A pair of NBC News/Survey Monkey polls found that 76 percent of Americans are “worried” the United States “will become engaged in a major war in the next four years” and only 25 percent want America to become “more active” in world affairs.

More to the point, only 20 percent of Americans wanted to increase the troop level in Afghanistan after Trump’s stay-the-course speech in August, but Gallup’s three decade-long tracking poll found that the belief the U.S. spends “too little” on defense is at its highest point (37 percent) since it spiked after 9/11 (41 percent). The previous highpoint was 51 percent in 1981 when Ronald Reagan was elected in no small part on the promise of a major build-up.

So, if Americans generally don’t support wars or engagement in the world, why do they seem to reflexively support massive military budgets?

Frankly, look no further than Trump’s mantra of “jobs, jobs, jobs.” He says it when he lords over the sale of weapon systems to foreign powers or he visits a naval shipyard or goes to one of his post-election rallies to proclaim to “We’re building up our military like never before.” Frankly, he’s giving the people what they want. Although they may be war-weary, they’ve not tired of the dispersal system that Greider wrote about during Reagan’s big spree.

Ultimately, it means that the dreaded Military-Industrial Complex isn’t just a shadowy cabal manipulating policies against the will of the American people. Nor is the “racket” exclusive to an elite group of Deep State swamp things. Instead, the military and the vast economic network it feeds presents a far more “complex” issue that involves millions of self-interested Americans in much the way Eisenhower predicted, but few are willing to truly forsake.

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How Trump Botched Iran Policy

By bowing to the desires of Saudi Arabia and Israel, President Trump has dashed a potential détente with Iran and driven average Iranians into stronger support for their government, explains ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

An important consequence of the unrelenting, unqualified hostility toward Iran that Donald Trump has made a centerpiece of his foreign policy is described in an [article](#) by Thomas Erdbrink of the *New York Times* about the impact of that policy on the Iranian public.

Erdbrink summarizes the overall effect this way: “In short, it appears that Mr. Trump and the Saudis have helped the government achieve what years of repression could never accomplish: widespread public support for the hard-line view that the United States and Riyadh cannot be trusted and that Iran is now a strong and capable state capable of staring down its enemies.”

Such an effect is unsurprising. Nor are the underlying dynamics unique to Iran. Two fundamental processes are at work in Iran to produce the effect Erdbrink is observing. Both are foreshadowed by many earlier experiences of countries that felt especially threatened by a foreign power.

One is the tendency of nations to unite and to overcome internal differences in the face of such a threat. This is the familiar phenomenon of rallying around the flag. Iranians are rallying around their flag today.

A variant of this first phenomenon – again with numerous examples through history – is the picking of fights with outsiders as a way for a ruler to muster more united domestic support than he otherwise would enjoy. Mohammed bin Salman, the young authoritarian prince who now makes Saudi Arabia’s policies, is picking fights with Iran – the other day he likened Iranian supreme leader Ali Khamenei to Hitler – partly in the hope of making his remarkably audacious internal power grab succeed.

There may be something of the same motivation for Donald Trump, although as with his domestic policies, he is more interested in the loyalty of a narrow political base than in winning broader support.

The other fundamental process is the tendency of hard-line views, and those who propound them, to prevail against more moderate alternatives in the face of an external threat. To preach about the malevolence and untrustworthiness of a foreign power is, in Iran as in the United States and in other countries, a defining characteristic of being a hard-liner.

Proving America’s Madness

Erdbrink quotes a hard-line Iranian political analyst named Hamidreza Taraghi as saying, “Thanks to Trump’s dishonest, cheating and crazy remarks, he has proved what we have said for a long time: America cannot be trusted. Many didn’t believe us, but now they do.”

This is not just a claim the hard-liners themselves make. A liberal-minded theater director in Tehran observes, “We need to understand that the U.S. has been playing with us all along. Trump is proving that our hard-liners were right all these years, to say that America cannot be trusted.”

A major effect of the Trump administration’s vehement hatred of Iran and seeking of confrontation with it is thus to make Iranians more determined than ever to stay their current course, with more internal unity and political support than ever before. The administration’s hostility naturally engenders negative feelings about the United States in return; it would hardly be a human reaction if they did not.

So the administration’s drumbeat message, that Iran is supposedly an implacable and irredeemable foe, is not only counterproductive but also to some degree self-fulfilling.

The popular sentiment in Iranian streets and salons is much more than a product of regime propaganda. Despite Trump’s calling a “dictatorship” an Iranian political system that actually is more democratic than most in the Middle East, he is confronting not just a “fanatical regime” but instead a nation that is exhibiting nationalism very similar to what other nations have exhibited, especially so in times of externally imposed stress.

Iranians also constitute a relatively well-educated nation and can easily see through such Trumpian falsehoods as the allegation that Iran is in cahoots with the Sunni terrorists of al-Qaeda or ISIS rather than carrying much of the burden of fighting against them. Erdbrink notes how one Revolutionary Guard soldier who was captured and beheaded by ISIS has become a national hero.

The reporter goes on to quote a self-described reformist in his early thirties: “There are many here like me, who don’t care for the Islamic Republic and its rules. But today is about something bigger than that; one of us has been killed. At the same time this American president is breaking our hearts with his rhetoric and threats. We have to choose sides. I choose for my country.”

Missed Opportunity

Much of what the Trump administration and some others in the United States routinely label as “nefarious, malign, destabilizing behavior” of Iran in the Middle East is supported by, and is even a source of pride for, most ordinary Iranians. They understandably see much of this Iranian activity – certainly including the military action against ISIS – as necessary for national defense, and/or a laudable contribution to a larger cause of international security.

The same goes for Iran’s development of ballistic missiles. An Iranian sociology

professor who is a leading reformist notes that many Iranians, “even those who are completely secular,” cheer missile tests because the tests “are making them feel strong and safe” in the face of growing threats from the United States and Saudi Arabia.

What U.S. policy is doing to Iranian public sentiment represents a huge missed opportunity, with a proud and intelligent people who otherwise could have been willing and able partners in much that the United States has hoped to accomplish. This follows earlier missed opportunities, especially when the George W. Bush administration slammed the door in the face of an Iran that had been working effectively with the United States against al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban.

Now the Trump administration, egged on by the rulers of Israel and Saudi Arabia to whom Trump has surrendered the initiative on policy for this part of the world, and trashing rather than building upon the agreement that has successfully restricted the Iranian nuclear program, is sliding down an endless spiral of conflict, confrontation, and perhaps war.

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.)

The Hidden Hazards of GOP’s Tax-Cut Plan

Though sold as a pain-free tax cut for most Americans, the Republican plans favor the rich and carry hidden dangers for Social Security, Medicare and other key social programs, as Dennis J Bernstein describes.

By Dennis J Bernstein

The Democrats and the entire progressive community are up in arms about the Republican tax-cut plans, which budget experts say will shower the wealthy with tax breaks while raising taxes on some middle- and working-class families. The plans also could flood the federal debt with another \$1.5 trillion in red ink over the next decade.

The legislation is now in the hands of the U.S. Senate where some modifications are expected in order to bring onboard a few Republican holdouts, but the Senate version does not play well either with critics alarmed about the potential debt-induced raid on Social Security and other key social programs.

Rep. Ro Khanna, D-California, put it this way: "Not only would the GOP tax plan blow a hole in the deficit, but as a result, it would trigger major cuts to programs that many Americans depend on, including a \$25 billion cut to Medicare. This plan is a disaster for the middle class....[It] clearly demonstrates that they think it's better to serve the interests of the very wealthy than everyday people. Shareholders and corporate executives do not need any more favors handed to them."

What follows is an in-depth primer, from a progressive perspective, on the tax cut legislation. I spoke about it with Josh Hoxie on Nov. 21 in Boston. Hoxie has studied the proposal extensively and written about it as well. He is the Co-Editor of Inequality.org, based at the Institute for Policy Studies in Boston.

Dennis Bernstein: Let's start with some background on the Estate Tax. What is the estate tax and how was it established?

Josh Hoxie: About 100 years ago, Teddy Roosevelt and a few others saw that wealth was concentrating in fewer and fewer hands. We had a funneling of wealth up to the upper class and the rest of the country was struggling. They decided that we ought to have a levy on the inter-generational transfer of immense wealth. When so much money concentrates in so few hands, it is bad for everyone.

Today this tax is levied on wealth dynasties of \$7 million for married couples or \$5.5 million for individuals. It is probably the most progressive aspect of our tax code. It is incredibly important, not just for raising revenue, but for controlling the runaway inequality we are witnessing in America today.

Dennis Bernstein: Does the estate tax actually deal with the issue of inequality?

Josh Hoxie: If you have a fortune and can do whatever you want with that fortune when you die, you should think about how your money was made. I can guarantee that every great fortune in the United States was in some way enabled by the public sector: the roads you drove on, the schools that educated your workforce, the intellectual property rights that protected your intellectual property, and so on down the line.

One way we think of the estate tax is as "economic opportunity recycling."

Paying forward the benefits that you had to create your fortune to the next

generation so that they can get ahead too. Without an estate tax, the only people who benefit from your fortune are the genetic lottery winners who happen to be born to multi-millionaire and billionaire parents. With an estate tax, that opportunity gets spread around a little bit.

Dennis Bernstein: Trump says that eliminating the estate tax is going to bring money to the middle class. You say it is ultimately going to cost all of us \$260 billion in inequality. How do you come to that figure?

Josh Hoxie: The Senate Joint Committee on Taxation came to that figure. If we get rid of that tax, that is how much won't be raised. So it comes out of the public coffers and into the hands of the wealthiest people in this country. The most regressive thing you can do is take money away from the Program for Women and Infant Children (WIC)—which half of the children in this country rely on for basic nutrition—and give that money to the wealthiest people who need it the least.

Dennis Bernstein: You wrote a piece that appeared recently in *The Las Vegas Sun*. Can you say more about how this would significantly widen the racial wealth divide?

Josh Hoxie: When we look at who has the wealth in this country, we find that it is incredibly concentrated by race. Essentially, White families have hundreds of thousands of dollars in assets, while the median Black family has a few thousand. So we are talking about a hundred-to-one ratio. And it is similar for Whites-to-Latinos.

When you look at who pays the estate tax, it is proportionately White folks who have tons of money but the money is held in disproportionately White hands.

That is the result of a legacy of racist public policy that goes back to red-lining in our cities, the legacy of slavery, and income disparities that extend to today.

Dennis Bernstein: How would you critique the focus of this new tax plan?

Josh Hoxie: It is hard to criticize strongly enough the Trump tax cuts. They could mean irreparable damage for generations to come. This is a money grab.

This is done on party lines, jammed through Congress, backed by multi-millionaires and billionaires for their exclusive benefit.

It is bad economics but more than that it is morally reprehensible. In an age where one in five children is food insecure, we are going to cut basic public programs in order to give this tax break to people who need it the least in this country!

We have the first billionaire president and the wealthiest cabinet in history.

And we have never had so much money in our campaign finance system. So this is not being done for congressional constituents, it is being done for wealthy billionaire donors.

Dennis Bernstein: What programs are going to be cut, who is going to suffer?

Josh Hoxie: The Trump tax cuts will create such a major hole in the federal budget that they will preempt mandatory spending cuts in Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid. They are bringing back something called "chained CPI" which translates to less money for seniors. Social Security is the most successful anti-poverty program in American history. Before Social Security came around, half of people over 65 lived in poverty. Now it is less than 10 percent, largely thanks to Social Security.

I think it is just now coming out, all the insidious ways that this wealth grab is going to affect all the non-wealthy people in this country. A lot of people will see their taxes go up. Graduate students are going to see their costs go up fivefold. This is just mean on its face.

Dennis Bernstein: Are corporations and the wealthy spending a lot of money to make sure this goes through? And how will the Trump family make out?

Josh Hoxie: Donald Trump likes to claim that he is worth \$10 billion. If we take him at his word, eliminating the estate tax would mean \$4 billion for his kids. The Walton family stands to benefit enormously, as do the beneficiaries of the Koch brothers. There is a carve-out in the Trump tax cuts for private jet owners and alongside it is a fee increase for ordinary commercial flight passengers! That is indicative of who is in the room when these things are decided.

Dennis Bernstein: What did we learn about these people from the *Panama Papers*?

Josh Hoxie: Two major leaks have come out regarding offshore tax shelters: *The Panama Papers* came out last year and *The Paradise Papers* came out this year. Essentially, we know that there is an untold amount of money hiding in offshore tax shelters. We still don't know how much money is concentrated at the very top. We do know that it is not small businesses who are putting away money in these tax havens. It is corporate CEO's, corporations themselves, shady entities.

The whole premise of trickle-down economics is that if you give money to the top they will spend it and it will benefit everyone else. That has never happened, but even if you took them at their word, if the money is hiding in an offshore tax shelter, how is that ever going to benefit anyone else?

It is hard to overstate what happens when so much money concentrates in so few hands. Basically, we are seeing our politics, our civil society, our philanthropy dominated by the very rich, who care about no one but themselves and their country club friends.

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.
