

The Agony of 'Regime Change' Refugees

Exclusive: There are positive signs of Syrians returning to Aleppo after the ouster of Al Qaeda's militants. But the legacy of Western "regime change" wars continues to plague Europe and inflict human suffering, writes Andrew Spannaus.

By Andrew Spannaus

European nations have been thrown into a political crisis by the hundreds of thousands of migrants coming north from the Middle East and Africa. The number has grown in recent years, due to a mix of wars and poverty, resulting in a visible increase of the influx of foreigners across Europe, and a popular backlash that has political institutions scrambling to find a way to stem the flow and lessen the sense of emergency.

The problem is that the causes of the mass migration have deep roots that cannot be solved in the short-term; and even a medium- to long-term solution will require serious changes in foreign and economic policy for the entire Western world.

In September 2015, as the number of refugees from Syria increased due to the ongoing military conflict there, German Chancellor Angela Merkel made a surprising announcement. Going against the grain of public opinion, in which anti-immigrant sentiment seemed to be rising rapidly, Merkel announced that her country would open its doors and accept hundreds of thousands of asylum-seekers. Germany already has a large number of recent immigrants among its population, and the view was that a wealthy country with a population of over 80 million could certainly do its part to deal with the humanitarian crisis enveloping the Middle East.

The open attitude didn't last long. In March 2016, Germany played a key role in reaching a deal with President Erdogan of Turkey, who in exchange for billions of euros, essentially closed the land route towards Europe through the Balkans. As a result, only the sea routes remained, with departures principally from Turkey, Egypt and Libya, making Greece and Italy the primary entry points to Europe. The routes have been further reduced over the past year, with the vast majority of departures currently originating in Libya.

Italy at Forefront

This has meant that in 2017 over 85 percent of total migrants headed towards Europe have arrived in Italy, a country that has led efforts to rescue people risking death in the Mediterranean in recent years. There have been ongoing

negotiations with other European nations to relocate the migrants that are taken to Italian ports and lessen the burden on the country of entry, but the number of migrants relocated has been only a small portion of those that arrive.

As a result Italy, which is not particularly efficient in managing the new arrivals despite making significant strides in recent years, feels left alone to deal with a crisis that is straining its resources. One of the side effects is a palpable shift in public attitudes in this Catholic country, from openness to help those in need, to a feeling that the situation is out of control and that the identity of Europe is under threat from the constant influx of migrants from different cultures.

The Italian government is attempting to find a technical solution to reduce the flow across the sea, which includes negotiations with the various factions in Libya, a new code of conduct for NGOs working in the area, and tightening the rules for bringing migrants to Italian ports.

All of these measures address only the last link in the chain of migration from the Middle East and Africa though, and even if they were to succeed, would only block the flow from Libya – where migrants suffer horrendous conditions, including torture – while human traffickers would seek new routes to get around the obstacles put up by European governments.

The Larger Issue

The deeper problem to address is the causes of the migrant crisis. This requires taking a step backwards, to understand how the current situation was created. The first issue is that of Libya itself, a country without any effective centralized control, ruled over by rival factions that are unable or unwilling to stop the numerous human trafficking networks from taking money from desperate migrants and putting them on rafts pointed towards Italy, where they will either be rescued by naval forces or NGOs, or die along the way.

The prime responsibility for the Libyan chaos lies in Paris, London and Washington. The goal of overthrowing Muammar Gaddafi had been present for decades in Western capitals, but it was not until 2011 – under the cover of the “Arab Spring” – that the French government in particular began to organize the effort to overthrow him, and gain economic and strategic advantages for itself in Northern Africa as a result.

The French had already prepared the attack as they encouraged U.S. President Barack Obama to join the “humanitarian” war that was intended to save the opposition from being massacred by Gaddafi. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton headed up the pro-intervention faction in the Obama Administration to the point

that the Libyan campaign became known to many as "Hillary's War."

Upon learning of Gaddafi's brutal murder, Clinton paraphrased Julius Caesar declaring: "We came, we saw, he died." The result though, rather than being a triumph of democracy, has been a descent into chaos, that among other things has allowed the country to become a key gathering point for terrorist groups such as ISIS.

'Regime Change' Chaos

The Libyan chaos, the most immediate hindrance to stopping the flow of migrants to Europe at this moment, leads to the larger issue of Western policy regarding terrorism and the Middle East in general. The series of "regime change" wars in recent years have reflected the goal of using terrorist networks for the West's strategic advantage, while ignoring the long-term effects of this tactic. The support for the Mujahidin in Afghanistan in the 1980s, in an attempt to weaken the Soviet Union, led directly to the rise of Osama bin-Laden and Al Qaeda in the 1990s.

The financial backing given to Sunni extremism, provided in particular by allies such as Saudi Arabia, spawned the terrorist groups that today target the West. From the war in Iraq to support for the most extreme anti-Assad groups in Syria, the United States and other Western powers have had a major hand in creating the very problem they are scrambling to deal with today.

The Obama Administration began a timid shift away from "regime change," with the decision not to bomb Syria in 2013, and rather to seek cooperation with Russia. The attempt to rebalance U.S. interests in the Middle East was also reflected in the nuclear deal reached with Iran. The effort ultimately proved to be too little, too late though, as large sections of the institutions resisted the shift and Obama himself essentially ran out of time; by the end of his term he had succumbed to the pressure to maintain a hostile position towards Russia, and failed to define a new strategic orientation towards the Middle East.

President Donald Trump has repeatedly criticized the policies of regime change and is moving forward on cooperation with Russia in Syria, despite the bombing of a Syrian air base in April in response to dubious claims of a chemical weapons attack by the Syrian government. Yet he has also toed the traditional pro-Saudi, anti-Iran line in the Middle East in general, making it seem doubtful that he is willing, or even able, to actually change U.S. policy in the region. As of now, the conflicts are far from being over, and from this perspective, it becomes clear that no short-term solutions are on the horizon.

An even broader issue is that of development, as economic conditions are once

again overtaking political unrest as the main driver of migration. There has been talk recently of a European Plan for Africa, to spur economic development and remove the root causes that drive people to leave their homes and families despite the potential dangers. The reality though, is that the discussion still revolves around the type of limited initiatives that are all too similar to the programs of the International Monetary Fund, focused on improving the climate for private investment and other “structural reforms.”

Some of the goals may be laudable, but the approach is a far cry from that of the Marshall Plan for Europe after World War II – which is often thrown around as a precedent when new plans are announced – that involved large amounts of public investment in rebuilding industrial capacity.

On this front as well, Western nations seem unable to recognize their own mistakes and contribution to the poverty in Africa that is driving a decades-long humanitarian crisis, that has now become an urgent political crisis for much of Europe as well.

Andrew Spannaus is a freelance journalist and strategic analyst based in Milan, Italy. He is the founder of Transatlantico.info, that provides news, analysis and consulting to Italian institutions and businesses. He has published the books “Perché vince Trump” (Why Trump is Winning – June 2016) and “La rivolta degli elettori” (The Revolt of the Voters – July 2017).

How Obama, Trump Had Their Wings Clipped

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

By Andrew Spannaus

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

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

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

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

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

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

Obama's Iran Initiative

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

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

In order for the United States to fulfill its commitments, it was sufficient for the President to begin waiving sanctions, but the anti-Iran forces within the United States were determined to block the deal, and thus pushed for a Congressional vote to prevent the President from moving forward. The attempt failed, as the Senate voted 58-42 to close debate on the resolution, just shy of the 60-vote threshold needed for final passage.

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

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

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

Challenging the Establishment

In addition to working behind the scenes to assure Senators' votes, Obama also made his case for the Iran deal publicly. His most effective intervention came in August 2015 when speaking at American University in Washington, D.C. He put the choice in stark terms, rather than attempting to woo lawmakers with a soft approach: a vote against the Iran deal was a vote for war in the future. And he

drew a clear parallel with the decision to invade Iraq in 2002, that in hindsight many Congressmen have been forced to admit was wrong, and avoidable.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Andrew Spannaus is a freelance journalist and strategic analyst based in Milan, Italy. He is the founder of [Transatlantico.info](http://www.transatlantico.info), that provides news, analysis and consulting to Italian institutions and businesses. He has published the books "Perché vince Trump" (Why Trump is Winning – June 2016) and "La rivolta degli elettori" (The Revolt of the Voters – July 2017). [This article first appeared at

<http://www.aspeninstitute.it/aspenia-online/article/congress-vs-president-what-trump-can-learn-obama>]

The Russia-Did-It Certitude Challenged

Many mainstream news outlets confessed to their gullibility over the Iraq-WMD claims, but have fallen into another groupthink over Russia-gate, as Randy Credico and Dennis J Bernstein heard from ex-U.K. Ambassador Craig Murray.

By Randy Credico and Dennis J Bernstein

Despite the certitude of the U.S. Congress and the corporate press, not everyone believes that the Russians "hacked" the Clinton campaign and handed Donald Trump his stunning victory. Among those saying that the Russians did not do it is the former whistleblowing British ambassador to Uzbekistan, Craig Murray, who

collaborates with WikiLeaks, which published the Democratic emails last year.

“I know who leaked them,” Murray said recently. “I’ve met the person who leaked them, and they are certainly not Russian and it’s an insider. It’s a leak, not a hack; the two are different things.”

Ambassador Murray, a friend and close associate of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, was also an early opponent of the the U.S.-British-led war against Iraq, and an early whistleblower on the wide-ranging program of torture and rendition promoted by U.S. President George W. Bush and condoned by British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who was recently absolved by a British court – on a technicality – of being criminally liable for the US torture program.

These days, Ambassador Murray is an author, broadcaster and human rights activist. He served as British Ambassador to Uzbekistan from August 2002 to October 2004 and Rector of the University of Dundee from 2007 to 2010.

Dennis Bernstein: My first question, Mr. Ambassador, is whether you are concerned with this Russia-gate frenzy and how it might end up leading us into a direct confrontation with Russia, and thus open the door to World War III?

Craig Murray: Well, there is always that danger when a confrontation exists between nuclear armed powers. The whole anti-Russia propaganda campaign that is going on at the moment is quite extraordinary because there is no factual basis behind it. But it is certainly a continuation of the anti-Russia propaganda that has dominated political discourse in the United States for several years now.

Of course, this is very much in the interests of the armaments industry. We have to remember that there are those who benefit enormously from extra spending on armaments and the armed forces. These people are the ones pushing the agenda.

DB: We’ve been doing sort of a poll of our guests, asking them whether they consider what happened in the United States as a leak or a hack.

CM: Well, through my association with WikiLeaks, I know for sure that it was a leak and not a hack. As Bill Binney, former technical director of the NSA, has pointed out, were it actually a hack the NSA would be able to pinpoint it. In fact, there is no such evidence. This is not something WikiLeaks got from a foreign state or from hackers. No, there is no doubt at all that this was an internal leak. Besides which, we are talking about two separate things in the DNC emails and the Podesta emails, so it would be wrong to presume that there is only one leaker.

Randy Credico: Is this just an artifice to cover up the real motivation with regards to Russia, which is to break the country into small states and to

prevent them from getting involved in the world oil supply?

CM: I am not sure they actually want to break up Russia. They rather like having a reasonably strong Russia because it gives them an excuse to invest large amounts of money in armaments, which are very profitable. The militarist forces on both sides like to play up the strength of the other and portray the other as evil. That is primarily what we have going on here.

Recently, Putin seems to be the master of the diplomatic game. And we should not forget that all of these people are part of the global one percent. The way they invest their money and where they live and how they socialize makes them all very much part of the same club in an interconnected world. So we should not be too distracted by the smoke and mirrors that the global elite put up. While these are very dangerous games to be playing, the people playing them have some very cozy relationships behind the scenes.

RC: Tell us about your relationship with Julian Assange and the conditions he is now living under.

CM: Well, I have known Julian Assange for several years now. Like Julian, I was myself a whistleblower. I left the British foreign service in order to expose torture and extraordinary rendition related to the war in Iraq. We have a club of whistleblowers, if you like, of which Daniel Ellsberg is a kind of patron. And obviously WikiLeaks, which is the best publisher for whistleblowers, is very important to us.

I have been appalled by the treatment of Julian and the evidently nonsensical allegations made against him in Sweden. And I am saddened by the continued persecution of WikiLeaks by the United States. Of course, a lot of people are very sore that the dreadful American war crimes were exposed by the leaks believed to be perpetrated by Chelsea Manning. A lot of people don't like the light that WikiLeaks shines on the dark places of government. But in the land which purportedly upholds freedom of speech as a great virtue, it is a dreadful shame to see the persecution of a publisher in this way.

Then, of course, we see the completely ridiculous nature of this whole Russia-gate affair. Really it was just a kind of propaganda excuse for Hillary Clinton's appalling election campaign. All this makes unlikely allies who have ganged up on Julian Assange from the establishment side of both major parties in the United States.

RC: In the wake of the recent UK elections what, if anything, has changed for Julian Assange?

CM: Nothing good at the moment. We still have the conservative party in power

and now they are in alliance with the Democratic Unionist Party, who are the most retrograde, religiously motivated party here and who tilt the government even more to the right than it was before. In the medium to longer term, based on the performance by Jeremy Corbin's Labor Party, which comes as a breath of fresh air in British politics, we may well see a reversal of the current situation.

DB: One of the issues that WikiLeaks confronts head on is the endless wars that the United States has been waging, in Iraq in particular. Tony Blair was being investigated for lying us into the Iraq War but [on July 31] he was absolved of all charges.

CM: Interestingly, what the UK high court said in the recent judgment was that there is no crime of aggression under British domestic law. They claimed that this international crime has never entered into British domestic law by an act of parliament and can therefore not be enforced in the UK.

So it was a very technical acquittal. They are not saying that Blair is innocent, they are saying that legislation has never been enacted making that international war crime a domestic crime in Britain. This is quite extraordinary in many ways. The United Kingdom was one of the three countries that constituted the Nuremberg Tribunal, where the crime of aggression was the main charge.

So for the high court to rule that the United Kingdom accepts the existence of the crime of aggression and can prosecute it internationally but does not accept that it applies domestically is illogical and a case of special pleading. The high court judges are just ganging together to protect Tony Blair and making asses of themselves with this very strange ruling.

DB: Tony Blair has played a role in deciding who will control the massive oil resources in the Middle East and in other places you are familiar with. Do you want to talk about what he has been up to?

CM: Since leaving office, he has been primarily concerned with making money for himself, on a very large scale. He is now worth hundreds of millions. It is fairly obvious that the actions he took while in office with regards to Iraq, with regards to Libya, were all undertaken to promote the interests of British and other Western oil companies and mercenary companies.

He famously worked to block the prosecution of British Aerospace for paying billions of dollars in bribes to Saudi princes to gain arms contracts, on the grounds that that would be against national security because it would damage our alliance with Saudi Arabia. That was one instance where Blair, while prime minister, intervened directly to aid the armaments industry and prevent an anti-

corruption prosecution.

Since he left office, he has been cashing in on all of this. He is completely shameless. He is a consultant to the president of Kazakhstan, for example, a very nasty dictatorship. One thing that has become public through a leak is that he was advising the government of Kazakhstan on how to handle public relations after Kazakh soldiers massacred coal miners for going on strike. Here's Blair, who used to represent a coal mining district, advising on how to do a good PR cover-up of the massacre of coal miners.

The man is completely unprincipled. He is just out to get whatever money he can. I wouldn't say he has much power nowadays. He rather prostitutes himself to the wealthy, particularly those from countries with dubious human rights records who view it as helpful to cash in on his global image.

RC: We know about the War Logs and what they exposed in Afghanistan. Can you talk about what happened in Uzbekistan?

CM: It is very different to know about it intellectually and to come face-to-face with it. Within a month of first arriving in Uzbekistan, we got detailed photos of a guy who had been literally boiled alive at one of the big prison camps. He had been alive when placed in the boiling liquid. That sort of thing makes you realize what it really means when people talk of torture.

There is no doubt that the CIA were actually colluding in such torture and to a large extent financing it. Hundreds of millions of American taxpayer dollars were put into the Uzbek security services and the CIA was getting their so-called intelligence from those torture sessions.

We also discovered that the CIA was flying people into Uzbekistan under the extraordinary rendition program. In pretty much every case, they were never seen again. At that time, I assumed that all the people being flown in to be tortured were Uzbeks who had been captured abroad and flown back to their own country. I didn't realize that the Americans were flying in other nationals to be tortured by the Uzbek security services.

RC: What were they trying to elicit from these people who were being tortured?

CM: In virtually every case, they were making them confess to membership in Al Qaeda and to the existence of widespread terror plots to attack Western countries. I am ninety-nine percent certain that every one of these stories was untrue. Often I could show the information was wrong.

But the object was to exaggerate the threat posed by Al Qaeda because that was the justification for our foreign policy, for all our invasions, and for all the

restrictions on civil liberties at home. The security services required a strong terrorist threat in order to justify their actions. By sending people to be tortured, they were manufacturing the false existence of a terrorist threat.

RC: What happened when you went public with this?

CM: I arrived in August and I think by December I was sending back top-secret internal telegrams protesting this, which were bound to get me sacked. In some ways, I consider myself something of a fraud as a whistleblower. I protested internally, I did everything I could within the system to stop it. I was making the case that these actions were illegal and that we were colluding in these actions by receiving this intelligence.

I thought that if we got this before government lawyers, they would advise the government to put an end to it. What happened to me then was similar to what happened to Julian Assange. After a twenty-year unblemished career, I suddenly found that I was up on charges of trying to extort sex from visa applicants, of being an habitual alcoholic, and so on.

DB: Ambassador Murray, what would be your understanding of how high in the US government people knew about this rendition program?

CM: In the UK I am certain that it did go all the way up the chain as far as Tony Blair. I made sure my protests went that high. When I was told to shut up, I was told that this had all been authorized from the very top. In the States, I know it went as high as Donald Rumsfeld because he had signed off on torture techniques personally. The lawyers who drafted documents on what was permissible in terms of torture certainly passed those by George W. Bush.



DB: Was what happened in the Ukraine a case of Russian aggression or a US soft coup?

CM: I am actually quite critical of both parties. There is no doubt that the United States was interfering very strongly in Ukrainian politics. On the other

hand, I also think that the Russians supported levels of violence that were unnecessary. I get very criticized by the left. The left has become very pro-Putin, as a reaction I suppose to the lies of the right. But it is overcompensation to paint Putin as a saint. So the US was undoubtedly engaged in attempts at a coup, something it has been doing for decades.

RC: Ambassador, you were involved in peace negotiations in Sierra Leone back in 1998. At the time you ran across someone named Spicer who was an arms merchant and ran mercenary companies and who later went to Iraq. Could you just encapsulate that period in a few minutes?

CM: Spicer, together with a guy called Tony Buckingham, was initially in charge of a company which was called Executive Outcomes, made up of former British special forces personnel who sold themselves to oil companies in Angola and other oil-rich African states in order to physically take control of oil resources during times of civil war. They perpetrated an awful lot of atrocities, including machine gunning villagers from helicopters.

After Executive Outcomes, they moved on to a company called Sandline which was involved in a very crooked deal to take control of the diamond resources of Sierra Leone. To me, involved in the peace negotiations there, it was sickening to witness the desire of Western companies and Western governments to get out of it access to Sierra Leone's diamond and titanium resources.

Then of course the people at Executive Outcomes and Sandline went on to really strike the jackpot in Iraq, where they ran a private mercenary company called Aegis, which worked for both the British and United States governments and employed tens of thousands of mercenaries. The people responsible for it made billions of dollars from the privatization of killing. All of this is quite startling and far too little known.

DB: Getting back to where we started, what do you see as the importance of Julian Assange in the context of what is called mainstream journalism?

CM: Julian Assange has been a central figure in breaking the monopoly on what we are allowed to know. People now increasingly distrust the mainstream media and get their information from places where you have direct access to source documentation rather than read the opinion of some journalist on it. I think that is very important. I think other whistleblowers have made a mistake by going through the mainstream media, who have then acted as gatekeepers on what we find out through those leaks. The Panama Papers were a great example of that kind of lost opportunity.

Julian is really the figurehead for freedom of information and a figurehead for

governments to trounce. He is an enormously intelligent and articulate individual who has a tremendous contribution to make to international debate, aside from the material that he publishes. Obviously, he would be able to fulfill that role to a much greater degree if he were free.

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.

Neocons Leverage Trump-Hate for More Wars

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

By Robert Parry

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

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

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

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

People who would normally favor international cooperation toward peaceful resolution of conflicts have joined the neocons in ratcheting up global tensions

and making progress toward peace far more difficult.

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

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

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

The Putin Obstacle

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

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

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

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

For his part, Putin compounded his offense to the neocons by facilitating Obama’s negotiations with Iran that imposed strict constraints on Iran’s actions

toward development of a nuclear bomb and took U.S. war against Iran off the table. The neocons, Israel and Saudi Arabia wanted the U.S. military to lead a bombing campaign against Iran with the hope of crippling their regional adversary and possibly even achieving “regime change” in Tehran.

Punishing Russia

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

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

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

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

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

Meanwhile, the major U.S. media essentially flacked for “moderate” Syrian rebels who just happened to be fighting alongside Al Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate and sharing their powerful U.S.-supplied weapons with the jihadists, all the better to kill Syrian soldiers trying to protect the secular government in Damascus.

Successful Propaganda

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Hand-Picked' Analysts

According to Clapper's later congressional testimony, the analysts for this job were "hand-picked" from the CIA, FBI and National Security Agency and assigned

to produce an “assessment” before Obama left office. Their Jan. 6 report was remarkable in its lack of evidence and the analysts themselves admitted that it fell far short of establishing anything as fact. It amounted to a continuation of the “trust us” approach that had dominated the anti-Russia themes for years.

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

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

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

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

Lost Logic

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book,

America's Stolen Narrative, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).

How the World May End

Republicans and Democrats – along with a complicit mainstream media – are plunging ahead toward war with Russia, a mad groupthink that could end life on the planet, observes John Pilger.

By John Pilger

The U.S. submarine captain says, “We’ve all got to die one day, some sooner and some later. The trouble always has been that you’re never ready, because you don’t know when it’s coming. Well, now we do know and there’s nothing to be done about it.”

He says he will be dead by September. It will take about a week to die, though no one can be sure. Animals live the longest.

The war was over in a month. The United States, Russia and China were the protagonists. It is not clear if it was started by accident or mistake. There was no victor. The Northern Hemisphere is contaminated and lifeless now.

A curtain of radioactivity is moving south towards Australia and New Zealand, southern Africa and South America. By September, the last cities, towns and villages will succumb. As in the north, most buildings will remain untouched, some illuminated by the last flickers of electric light.

This is the way the world ends

Not with a bang but a whimper

These lines from T.S. Eliot’s poem *The Hollow Men* appear at the beginning of Nevil Shute’s novel *On the Beach*, which left me close to tears. The endorsements on the cover said the same.

Published in 1957 at the height of the Cold War when too many writers were silent or cowed, it is a masterpiece. At first the language suggests a genteel relic; yet nothing I have read on nuclear war is as unyielding in its warning. No book is more urgent.

Some readers will remember the black and white Hollywood film starring Gregory

Peck as the U.S. Navy commander who takes his submarine to Australia to await the silent, formless specter descending on the last of the living world.

I read *On the Beach* for the first time the other day, finishing it as the U.S. Congress passed a law to wage economic war on Russia, the world's second most lethal nuclear power. There was no justification for this insane vote, except the promise of plunder.

Aiming Toward a Hot War

The "sanctions" are aimed at Europe, too, mainly Germany, which depends on Russian natural gas and on European companies that do legitimate business with Russia. In what passed for debate on Capitol Hill, the more garrulous senators left no doubt that the embargo was designed to force Europe to import expensive American gas.

Their main aim seems to be war – real war. No provocation as extreme can suggest anything else. They seem to crave it, even though Americans have little idea what war is. The Civil War of 1861-65 was the last on their mainland. War is what the United States does to others.

The only nation to have used nuclear weapons against human beings, they have since destroyed scores of governments, many of them democracies, and laid to waste whole societies – the million deaths in Iraq were a fraction of the carnage in Indochina, which President Reagan called "a noble cause" and President Obama revised as the tragedy of an "exceptional people." He was not referring to the Vietnamese.

Filming last year at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, I overheard a National Parks Service guide lecturing a school party of young teenagers. "Listen up," he said. "We lost 58,000 young soldiers in Vietnam, and they died defending *your freedom.*"

At a stroke, the truth was inverted. No freedom was defended. Freedom was destroyed. A peasant country was invaded and millions of its people were killed, maimed, dispossessed, poisoned; 60,000 of the invaders took their own lives. Listen up, indeed.

A lobotomy is performed on each generation. Facts are removed. History is excised and replaced by what *Time* magazine calls "an eternal present." Harold Pinter described this as "manipulation of power worldwide, while masquerading as a force for universal good, a brilliant, even witty, highly successful act of hypnosis [which meant] that it never happened. Nothing ever happened. Even while it was happening it wasn't happening. It didn't matter. It was of no interest."

Those who call themselves liberals or tendentiously “the left” are eager participants in this manipulation, and its brainwashing, which today revert to one name: Trump.

Trump is mad, a fascist, a dupe of Russia. He is also a gift for “liberal brains pickled in the formaldehyde of identity politics,” wrote Luciana Bohne memorably. The obsession with Trump the man – not Trump as a symptom and caricature of an enduring system – beckons great danger for all of us.

A Narcissistic Media

While they pursue their fossilized anti-Russia agendas, narcissistic media such as the *Washington Post*, the BBC and the *Guardian* suppress the essence of the most important political story of our time as they warmonger on a scale I cannot remember in my lifetime.

On 3 Aug., in contrast to the acreage the *Guardian* has given to drivel that the Russians conspired with Trump (reminiscent of the far-right smearing of John Kennedy as a “Soviet agent”), the paper buried, on page 16, news that the President of the United States was forced to sign a Congressional bill declaring economic war on Russia.

Unlike every other Trump signing, this was conducted in virtual secrecy and attached with a caveat from Trump himself that it was “clearly unconstitutional.”

A coup against the man in the White House is under way. This is not because he is an odious human being, but because he has consistently made clear he does not want war with Russia.

This glimpse of sanity, or simple pragmatism, is anathema to the “national security” managers who guard a system based on war, surveillance, armaments, threats and extreme capitalism. Martin Luther King called them “the greatest purveyors of violence in the world today.”

They have encircled Russia and China with missiles and a nuclear arsenal. They have used neo-Nazis to install an unstable, aggressive regime on Russia’s “borderland” – the way through which Hitler invaded, causing the deaths of 27 million people. Their goal is to dismember the modern Russian Federation.

In response, “partnership” is a word used incessantly by Vladimir Putin – anything, it seems, that might halt an evangelical drive to war in the United States. Incredulity in Russia may have now turned to fear and perhaps a certain resolution. The Russians almost certainly have war-gamed nuclear counter strikes. Air-raid drills are not uncommon. Their history tells them to get

ready.

The threat is simultaneous. Russia is first, China is next. The U.S. has just completed a huge military exercise with Australia known as Talisman Sabre. They rehearsed a blockade of the Malacca Straits and the South China Sea, through which pass China's economic lifelines.

The admiral commanding the U.S. Pacific fleet said that, "if required," he would nuke China. That he would say such a thing publicly in the current perfidious atmosphere begins to make fact of Nevil Shute's fiction.

Silencing Dissenting Journalists

None of this is considered news. No connection is made as the bloodfest of Passchendaele a century ago is remembered. Honest reporting is no longer welcome in much of the media. Windbags, known as pundits, dominate: editors are infotainment or party-line managers. Where there was once sub-editing, there is the liberation of axe-grinding clichés. Those journalists who do not comply are defenestrated.

The urgency has plenty of precedents. In my film, *The Coming War on China*, John Bordne, a member of a U.S. Air Force missile combat crew based in Okinawa, Japan, describes how in 1962 – during the Cuban missile crisis – he and his colleagues were "told to launch all the missiles" from their silos.

Nuclear armed, the missiles were aimed at both China and Russia. A junior officer questioned this, and the order was eventually rescinded – but only after they were issued with service revolvers and ordered to shoot at others in a missile crew if they did not "stand down."

At the height of the Cold War, the anti-communist hysteria in the United States was such that U.S. officials who were on official business in China were accused of treason and sacked. In 1957 – the year Shute wrote *On the Beach* – no official in the State Department could speak the language of the world's most populous nation. Mandarin speakers were purged under strictures now echoed in the Congressional bill that has just passed, aimed at Russia.

The bill was bipartisan. There is no fundamental difference between Democrats and Republicans. The terms "left" and "right" are meaningless. Most of America's modern wars were started not by conservatives, but by liberal Democrats.

When Obama left office, he presided over a record seven wars, including America's longest war and an unprecedented campaign of extrajudicial killings – murder – by drones.

In his last year, according to a Council on Foreign Relations study, Obama, the “reluctant liberal warrior,” dropped 26,171 bombs – three bombs every hour, 24 hours a day. Having pledged to help “rid the world” of nuclear weapons, the Nobel Peace Laureate built more nuclear warheads than any president since the Cold War.

Trump is a wimp by comparison. It was Obama – with his Secretary of State Hillary Clinton at his side – who destroyed Libya as a modern state and launched the human stampede to Europe. At home, immigration groups knew him as the “deporter-in-chief.”

One of Obama’s last acts as president was to sign a bill that handed a record \$618 billion to the Pentagon, reflecting the soaring ascendancy of fascist militarism in the governance of the United States. Trump has endorsed this.

Buried in the detail was the establishment of a “Center for Information Analysis and Response.” This is a ministry of truth. It is tasked with providing an “official narrative of facts” that will prepare us for the real possibility of nuclear war – if we allow it.

John Pilger is an Australian-British journalist based in London. Pilger’s Web site is: www.johnpilger.com. His new film, “The Coming War on China,” is available in the U.S. from www.bullfrogfilms.com

The Dawn of an Orwellian Future

Exclusive: The U.S. mainstream media continues to spread its own “fake news,” like the falsehood about an intelligence community “consensus” on Russia-gate “hacking,” as algorithms begin to marginalize dissent, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

It seems that The New York Times can’t let a good lie lie. Even after being pushed into running [an embarrassing correction](#) retracting its false claim that there was a consensus of all 17 U.S. intelligence agencies that Russia hacked Democratic emails and made them public to help Donald Trump defeat Hillary Clinton, the Times is back suggesting exactly that.

The Times’ current ploy is to say the Russian hacking claims are the “consensus” judgment of the U.S. intelligence community without citing a specific number of agencies. For instance, on Friday, the Times published [an article](#) by Matt

Flegenheimer about the U.S. Senate vote to prevent President Trump from lifting sanctions on Russia and deployed the misleading phrasing:

“The Trump administration has opposed the sanctions against Russia, arguing that it needs flexibility to pursue a more collaborative diplomacy with a country that, by American intelligence consensus, interfered in last year’s presidential election.”

So, instead of explaining the truth – that the Jan. 6 “Intelligence Community Assessment” was the work of a small group of “hand-picked” analysts from three of the agencies under the watchful eye of then-CIA Director John Brennan and beneath the oversight of then-Director of National Intelligence James Clapper – the Times opts to give its readers the misleading impression that there was a “consensus” within the U.S. intelligence community.

In other words, unless a Times reader knows the truth by having read it at a non-mainstream media outlet such as Consortiumnews.com, that reader would continue to believe that all 17 intelligence agencies were in agreement on this foundational point in the Russia-gate affair.

Marginalizing Dissent

And the continuation of this willful deception comes as the Times and other mainstream media outlets make progress in their plans to deploy Internet algorithms to hunt down and marginalize what they deem “fake news,” including articles that challenge the mainstream media’s power to control the dominant news narrative.



A report by the World Socialist Web Site found that “in the three months since Internet monopoly Google announced plans to keep users from accessing ‘fake news,’ the global traffic rankings of a broad range of left-wing, progressive, anti-war and democratic rights organizations have fallen significantly.”

Google’s strategy is to downgrade search results for targeted Web sites based on a supposed desire to limit reader access to “low-quality” information, but the targets reportedly include some of the highest-quality alternative news sites on the Internet, such as – according to the report – Consortiumnews.com.

Google sponsors the First Draft Coalition, which was created to counter alleged “fake news” and consists of mainstream news outlets, including the Times and The

Washington Post, as well as establishment-approved Web sites, such as Bellingcat, which has a close association with the anti-Russia and pro-NATO Atlantic Council.

This creation of a modern-day Ministry of Truth occurred under the cover of a mainstream-driven hysteria about “fake news” and “Russian propaganda” in the wake of Donald Trump’s election.

Last Thanksgiving Day, the Post ran a front-page article citing accusations from an anonymous Web site, PropOrNot, that identified 200 Web sites – including such Internet stalwarts as Truthdig, Counterpunch and Consortiumnews – as purveyors of “Russian propaganda.”

Apparently, PropOrNot’s standard was to smear any news outlet that questioned the State Department’s Official Narrative on the Ukraine crisis or some other global hot spot, but the Post didn’t offer any actual specifics of what these Web sites had done to earn their place on a McCarthyistic blacklist.

An Orwellian Future

In early May 2017, the Times chimed in with a laudatory article about how sophisticated algorithms could purge the Internet of alleged “fake news” or what the mainstream media deems to be “misinformation.”

As I wrote at the time, “you don’t need a huge amount of imagination to see how this combination of mainstream groupthink and artificial intelligence could create an Orwellian future in which only one side of a story gets told and the other side simply disappears from view.”

After my article appeared, I received a call from an NPR reporter who was planning a segment on this new technology and argued with me about my concerns. However, after I offered a detailed explanation about how I saw this as a classic case of the cure being far worse than the disease, I was not invited onto the NPR program.

Also, as for the relatively small number of willfully produced “fake news” stories, none appear to have traced back to Russia despite extensive efforts by the mainstream U.S. media to make the connection. When the U.S. mainstream media has tracked down a source of “fake news,” it has turned out to be some young entrepreneur trying to make some money by getting lots of clicks.

For instance, on Nov. 26, 2016, as the anti-Russia hysteria was heating up in the weeks following Trump’s election, the Times ran a relatively responsible article revealing how a leading “fake news” Web site was not connected to Russia at all but rather was a profit-making effort by an unemployed Georgian student

who was using a Web site in Tbilisi to make money by promoting pro-Trump stories.

The owner of the Web site, 22-year-old Beqa Latsabidse, said he had initially tried to push stories favorable to Hillary Clinton but that proved unprofitable so he switched to publishing anti-Clinton and pro-Trump articles whether true or not.

While creators of intentionally “fake news” and baseless “conspiracy theories” deserve wholehearted condemnation, the idea of giving the Times and a collection of Google-approved news outlets the power to prevent public access to information that challenges equally mindless groupthinks is a chilling and dangerous prospect.

Russia-gate Doubts

Even if the Russian government did hack the Democratic emails and slip them to WikiLeaks – a charge that both the Kremlin and WikiLeaks deny – there is no claim that those emails were fake. Indeed, all evidence is that they were actual emails and newsworthy to boot.

Meanwhile, U.S. government accusations against the Russian network, RT, have related more to it covering topics that may make the Establishment look bad – such as the Occupy Wall Street protests, fracking for natural gas, and the opinions of third-party presidential candidates – than publishing false stories.

In some cases, State Department officials have even made their own false allegations in attacking RT.

The current Russia-gate frenzy is a particularly scary example of how dubious government conclusions and mainstream media falsehoods can propel the world toward nuclear destruction. The mainstream media’s certainty about Russia’s guilt in the disclosure of Democratic emails is a case in point even when many well-informed experts have expressed serious doubts – though almost always at alternative media sites.

See, for instance, former WMD inspector Scott Ritter’s warning about lessons unlearned from the Iraq debacle or the opinions of U.S. intelligence veterans who have questioned the accuracy of the Jan. 6 report on Russian hacking.

Perhaps these concerns are misplaced and the Jan. 6 report is correct, but the pursuit of truth should not simply be a case of grabbing onto the opinions of some “hand-picked” analysts working for political appointees, such as Brennan and Clapper. Truth should be subjected to rigorous testing against alternative viewpoints and contradictory arguments.

That has been a core principle since the days of the Enlightenment, that truth best emerges from withstanding challenges in the marketplace of ideas. Overturning that age-old truth – by today unleashing algorithms to enforce the Official Narrative – is a much greater threat to an informed electorate and to the health of democracy than the relatively few times when some kid makes up a bogus story to increase his Web traffic.

And, if this new process of marginalizing dissenting views is successful, who will hold The New York Times accountable when it intentionally misleads its readers with deceptive language about the U.S. intelligence community's "consensus" regarding Russia and the Democratic emails?

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

PBS' Anti-Russia Propaganda Series

PBS has joined the anti-Russia propaganda stampede with a five-part documentary series that recycles the false and deceptive claims that have become Official Washington's dangerous new groupthink, reports Rick Sterling.

By Rick Sterling

The U.S.-government-supported Public Broadcasting System (PBS) recently ran a five-part series dubbed "[Inside Putin's Russia](#)". With a different theme each night, it purports to give a realistic look at Russia today. The image conveyed is of a Russia that is undemocratic with widespread state repression, violence and propaganda. Following are significant distortions and falsehoods in the five-part documentary.

Episode 1: "How Putin Redefined what it means to be Russian"

In this episode, the documentary:

–Claims that Russian identity is based on "projection of power." In reality, "projection of power" characterizes the U.S. much more than Russia. For the past two centuries the United States has expanded across the continent and globe. The last century is documented in the [book](#) *Overthrow: American's Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq*. The U.S. currently has nearly 800 foreign military

bases in over 70 countries. In contrast, Russia has military bases in only two countries beyond the former Soviet Union: Syria and Vietnam.

-Ignores crucial information about events in Ukraine. Russian involvement in eastern Ukraine and Crimea are presented as examples of “projection of power.” But basic facts are omitted from the documentary. There is no mention of the violent February 2014 coup in Kiev nor the involvement of neoconservatives such as Sen. John McCain and U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland in supporting and encouraging the overthrow of Ukraine’s elected government. In a December 2013 speech, Nuland outlined her intense involvement in Ukraine including U.S. insistence that Ukraine choose a “European future” since the U.S. had “invested \$5 billion to assist.” Days before the coup in February 2014, Nuland was captured on audio planning the composition of the coup leadership.

-Ignores Crimea’s historic connections with Russia and the Ukrainian violence. The documentary says, “In 2014 in Crimea, Russia helped install separatist leaders who rushed through a referendum that led to Crimea’s annexation.” This gives the misleading impression the decision was Russian, not Crimean.

Even the New York Times report on March 16, 2014, acknowledged that, “The outcome, in a region that shares a language and centuries of history with Russia, was a foregone conclusion even before exit polls showed more than 93 percent of voters favoring secession.”

The documentary fails to mention the fear of violence after Crimean travelers to Kiev were beaten and killed by Ukrainian hyper-nationalists. One of the first decisions of the Kiev coup government was to declare that Russian would no longer be an official language. A good overview including video interviews with Crimeans is in this video, contrasting sharply with the implications of the PBS documentary.

-Trivializes Russian opposition to NATO expansion. The documentary suggests Russians feel “humiliated” by NATO expanding to their borders. This distorts a serious military concern into a subjective, emotional issue. In 2002, the U.S. unilaterally withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and started construction of missile defense systems which could be used in tandem with a nuclear first strike. In recent years, NATO troops and missiles have been installed at Russia’s borders. Imagine the response if Russian troops and missiles were placed at the U.S. border in Canada and Mexico.

-Falsely claims that coup violence in Odessa was “exaggerated.”

The documentary says that Russians who went to help defend civilians in eastern Ukraine were convinced by Russian “propaganda” where “dozens of pro-Russian

separatists died in Odessa, Ukraine” but “Russian media exaggerated the attack.” In reality, the Odessa attack killed at least 42 people and injured 100. This [video](#) shows the sequence of events with the initial attack on peaceful protesters followed by fire-bomb attacks in the building. Fire trucks were prevented from reaching the building to put out the fire and rescue citizens inside.

Episode 2: “Inside Russia’s Propaganda Machine.”

In this episode, the documentary:

–Suggests Russians are aggressive and threatening. The documentary highlights a Russian TV broadcaster who is translated to say, “Russia is the only country in the world that is realistically capable of turning the United States into radioactive ash.” And later, “If you can persuade a person, you don’t need to kill him ... if you aren’t able to persuade, then you will have to kill.” We do not know the context or accuracy of these translated statements. However on the basis of my own travels in Russia and the experience of many other Americans, these statements are strange and uncharacteristic.

At the popular and government level, Russians are typically at pains to call the U.S. a “partner” and to wish for peace and better relations. With 27 million killed in World War 2, most Russians are very conscious of the consequences of war and deeply want peace. Russians vividly recall the Russia-U.S. alliance during WW2 and seek a return to friendly collaboration. The film producers must have heard this message and desire for peace expressed by many Russians many times. But the documentary only presents this uncharacteristic aggressive message.

–Inaccurately suggests that producers of a private TV network received angry public messages because they were exposing corruption. In reality, the angry public response was because the TV station ran a poll asking viewers if the Soviet Union should have surrendered to Nazi Germany to save lives during the siege of Leningrad.

–Falsely suggests that RT (Russia Today TV) typically features Holocaust deniers and neo-Nazis. This is a grotesque distortion Anyone who watches RT will know that American personalities such as Chris Hedges, Larry King and Ed Schultz are regulars on RT. Interviewees on international affairs generally come from the left side of the political spectrum – the opposite of what is suggested.

–Uncritically repeats the conspiracy theory that Russia hacked the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and Hillary Clinton emails. The findings have been disputed by the publisher of the emails, [Julian Assange](#) of Wikileaks , as well

as Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity. A recent forensic examination confirms that this was a leak not a hack (inside job done by local data transfer NOT a hack over the internet) and points to "Guccifer 2.0", the presumptive "hacker," being a hoax intentionally created to implicate Russia.

-Falsely suggests that anti-Clinton social media messaging during 2016 was significantly caused by Russian government trolls. Hillary Clinton was strongly opposed by significant portions of both the left and right. There were probably hundreds of thousands of Americans who shared anti-Clinton social media messages.

-Claims that research showing a Google search engine bias in favor of Hillary Clinton was "quickly debunked." The documentary ignores the original article describing the potential effect of search-engine bias, which was published in the prestigious *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. The author is Dr. Robert Epstein, former editor-in-chief of *Psychology Today* magazine. Contradicting the claim that this research was "debunked," this academic article estimates the effect of the Google bias and how the bias went away AFTER the election. The response from Google and very shallow Snopes "fact check" are effectively rebutted by the lead author here. In neo-McCarthyist style, the documentary smears the findings and claims they were "laundered" after being published by the Russian "Sputnik" media.

-Suggests the "idea that President Kennedy was killed by the CIA" was "planted" by the Soviet intelligence agency KGB. Many impressive American books have been written supporting this contention, from New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison's book to David Talbot's 2015 book *Devil's Chessboard: Allen Dulles, the CIA and Deep State*. Claiming that this accusation is based on KGB "disinformation" is another grotesque distortion. It is not revealing disinformation; this is an example of disinformation.

Episode 3: "Why are so many from this Russian republic fighting for Isis?"

In this episode, the documentary:

-Rationalizes and almost justifies Russian Muslims traveling to join ISIS. The documentary suggests that religious repression and discrimination is a cause of ISIS recruitment and that "Dagestanis who fought for ISIS continue a decades-old legacy here of radicalism and militancy."

-Ignores the role of the U.S., Saudi Arabia and Pakistan in promoting Islamist fundamentalism in Dagestan. As described by Robert Dreyfus in the book *Devil's Game: How the United States Helped Unleash Fundamentalist Islam*: "the Casey-ISI (CIA and Pakistan Secret Service) actions aided the growth of a significant

network of right-wing, Islamist extremists who, to this day, plague the governments of the former Soviet republics ... In particular, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Islamic Liberation Party, the powerful Islamist groups in Chechnya and Dagestan.”

–Ignores the role of the US and allies in facilitating ISIS. As journalist Patrick Cockburn has written, “In the 20 years between 1996 and 2016, the CIA and British security and foreign policy agencies have consistently given priority to maintaining their partnership with powerful Sunni states over the elimination of terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda and Isis.”

Journalist Nafeez Ahmed exposed the role of Turkey here, “A former senior counter-terrorism official in Turkey has blown the whistle on President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s deliberate sponsorship of the Islamic State (ISIS) as a geopolitical tool to expand Turkey’s regional influence and sideline his political opponents at home.”

Elements of the U.S. military/intelligence suggested the establishment of ISIS to “isolate the Syrian regime.” This was revealed in the classified 2012 report of the Defense Intelligence Agency that “THERE IS THE POSSIBILITY OF ESTABLISHING A DECLARED OR UNDECLARED SALAFIST PRINCIPALITY IN EASTERN SYRIA (HASAKA AND DER ZOR), AND THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT THE SUPPORTING POWERS TO THE OPPOSITION WANT, IN ORDER TO ISOLATE THE SYRIAN REGIME”

In short, ISIS recruitment from Muslim communities in Russia and worldwide has been spurred by the policies and actions of the U.S. and allies such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey. This is what Dreyfus calls *The Devil’s Game*, but is ignored in the documentary.

Episode 4: “The Deadly Risk of Standing up to Putin”

In this episode, the documentary:

–Suggests that critics of Putin and the Russian government face “consequences” including death. These accusations are widespread in the West but largely based on the claims of different U.S.-supported “activists.” One of the most famous cases, and the one on which U.S. congressional sanctions against Russia are based, is that of Sergei Magnitsky. Magnitsky’s death was the subject of a documentary, which has been effectively banned in the U.S. In the course of researching what happened, the filmmaker learned that the truth was very different than has been told in the West and promoted by hedge-fund executive William Browder. Gilbert Doctorow outlines what happens in his review of the film here:

“‘*Magnitsky Act: Behind the Scenes*’ is an amazing film which takes us through

the thought processes, the evidence sorting of the well-known independent film maker Andrei Nekrasov as he approached an assignment that was at the outset meant to be one more public confirmation of the narrative Browder has sold to the US Congress and to the American and European political elites. That story was all about a 36 year old whistle-blower 'attorney' (actually a bookkeeper) named Sergei Magnitsky who denounced on Browder's behalf the theft of Russian taxes to his boss's companies amounting to \$230 million and who was rewarded for his efforts by arrest, torture and murder in detainment by the officials who perpetrated the theft. This shocking tale drove legislation that was a major landmark in the descent of US-Russian relations under President Barack Obama to a level rivaling the worst days of the Cold War.

"At the end of the film we understand that this story was concocted by William Browder to cover up his own criminal theft of the money in question, that Magnitsky was not a whistleblower, but on the contrary was likely an assistant and abettor to the fraud and theft that Browder organized, that he was not murdered by corrupt Russian police but died in prison from banal neglect of his medical condition."

The PBS documentary quotes an opposition leader, Vladimir Kara-Murza, saying "We have no free and fair elections. We have censorship in the media. We have political prisoners, more than 100 political prisoners now in Russia, today." Kara-Murza now lives in Washington "for his safety" but returns to Russia periodically. He claims to have been poisoned several times.

Opponents of the Russian government are quick to accuse but the evidence is largely hearsay and speculation. Public polls of citizens in Russia repeatedly indicate that Putin and the government have widespread popularity, in contrast with the accusations in this documentary that they rule by intimidation and violence.

Episode 5: "What Russians think about Trump and the U.S."

Based on the content, the final episode should be titled "What the U.S. establishment and media thinks of Putin and Russia." In this episode, the documentary:

-Features accusations by CIA Director Mike Pompeo that Russian President Putin, " is a man for whom veracity doesn't translate into English." An objective documentary would take CIA claims about "veracity" with a healthy dose of skepticism. Just a few years ago, former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper was confirmed to have lied under oath to Congress. Former CIA chief of counterintelligence James Angleton said in his dying days, "Fundamentally, the

founding fathers of U.S. intelligence were liars. The better you lied and the more you betrayed, the more likely you got promoted." So it is curious to see the PBS documentary uncritically presenting the new CIA director as a judge of veracity.

-Implies that President Trump is out of line to question "the U.S. intelligence community's unanimous assessment that Russia hacked the 2016 election." It has been recently exposed that the "unanimous assessment" was, in reality, by "hand-picked" analysts at three agencies, under DNI Clapper's oversight, not all 17 agencies and that the National Security Agency did NOT have "high confidence" in a key finding. The "assessment," which the Jan. 6 report acknowledged was NOT an establishment of fact, was based on the forensics of a private company, CrowdStrike, with a checkered record in this field, and the dubious Christopher Steele dossier, a collection of "opposition research" reports against Donald Trump, paid for unidentified allies of Hillary Clinton and compiled by Steele, an ex-British intelligence agent.

In March 2017, CrowdStrike was found to have made false claims in another investigation of an alleged Russian "hack." Yet, neither the CIA nor FBI examined the Democratic National Committee's computers. If the issue was as important as it supposedly has now become, the FBI should have issued a subpoena to do its own examination. Why the DNC rejected the FBI request, and why the FBI did not insist, raises serious questions given the enormous publicity and accusations that have followed.

-Uncritically features two US politicians making loose accusations and effectively criminalizing "contacts" with Russians. Sen. James Lankford, R-Oklahoma, says President Trump is "pushing out some messages that are consistent with the Kremlin policies ... there's no question that the Russians were trying to hack into our elections." Yet, former U.S. intelligence officers with experience in these areas recently presented evidence raising significant questions about this conventional wisdom.

On the Democratic side, Sen. Mark Warner of Virginia indicates the Senate investigation reached its conclusion before it began. He said, "The goal of this investigation is not only to reconfirm Russian intervention and explain that to the American public, but to also see if there were any contacts between Trump and the Russians."

In the current environment, to have "contacts" with Russians has been criminalized. Instead of questioning the validity or wisdom of this position, the documentary presents it with seeming approval.

-Uncritically promotes false statements and reckless threats. Sen. Lankford says

“We believe strongly that what Russia continues to do to be able to threaten Ukraine, threaten its neighbors, threaten NATO, to continue to pry into not only our elections, but other elections, is destabilizing, and it demands a response. They have yet to have a consequence to what they did in the election time. And they should.”

Lankford’s assertions are presented as facts but are debatable or false. For example, security services in Germany, France and the U.K. all found that – despite the international accusations – there was NO evidence of Russian interference in their recent elections.

–Justifies and promotes “punishment” of Russia. The belligerent approach of Lankford and Warner is continued by PBS host Judy Woodruff and narrator Nick Schiffrin. The U.S. is portrayed as a vulnerable victim with a future that is “foreboding”. Russia is portrayed as threatening and needing some punishment soon: “The Russian government doesn’t feel like the United States government really penalized them for what happened last year... a lot of officials here in Washington agree with that... Russia should have paid for what they did last year.”

This threatening talk is then followed by the following assessment from the narrator: “There are analysts in Moscow who think the only thing we can hope is that we avoid war.”

In 2002-2003, American mainstream media failed to question or challenge the assertions of the CIA and politicians pushing for the invasion of Iraq. At that time, the false pretense was that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction and posed a threat to the U.S.

Much of the media and many of the same politicians are now claiming Russia is an adversary that has “attacked us.” This claim is being widely made without serious question or challenge. “Liberal” media seems to be in alliance with hawkish neoconservatives on this issue. Virtually any accusation against Russia and its leader can be made with impunity and without serious evidence.

The PBS documentary “Inside Putin’s Russia” aims to expose Russian repression, aggression and disinformation. As shown in the many examples above, the five-part documentary is highly biased and inaccurate. While it shows some features of Russia, it also demonstrates American propaganda in the current tumultuous times.

Rick Sterling is an investigative journalist based in northern California. He can be contacted at rsterling1@gmail.com

The U.S. Hypocrisy of ‘Human Rights’

Long before President Trump, the U.S. government had made a mockery of “human rights,” condemning abuses by adversary states but silent when crimes were committed by U.S. agents or U.S. allies, explains Todd E. Pierce.

By Todd E. Pierce

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson is reportedly considering closing the Office of Global Criminal Justice, a tiny agency with a meager budget of \$3 million a year, located within the State Department.

According to its website, the office “advises the Secretary of State . . . on issues related to war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide.” It “also coordinates U.S. Government positions relating to the international and hybrid courts currently prosecuting persons responsible for genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity – not only for such crimes committed in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and Cambodia – but also in Kenya, Libya, Côte d’Ivoire, Guatemala, and elsewhere in the world.”

Furthermore, it deploys “a range of diplomatic, legal, economic, military, and intelligence tools to help expose the truth, judge those responsible, protect and assist victims, enable reconciliation, deter atrocities, and build the rule of law.”

The *New York Times* reported that human rights advocates saw the proposal as an example of “the Trump administration’s indifference to human rights outside North Korea, Iran and Cuba.” Human rights activists also said that shutting the Office “would hamper efforts to publicize atrocities and bring war criminals to justice.” *Newsweek* reported, however, that the Obama administration also reportedly considered downgrading the office and merging it with another agency.

According to the *Newsweek* article, the office offered rewards for information on “war criminals, and has inveighed against brutal dictators, including Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.” But the article also noted it “has not criticized Saudi Arabia or other American allies with dismal human rights records.”

The same *Newsweek* piece explained that the office was formed following the 1996 passage of the War Crimes Act. That Act defined a war crime as a “grave breach” of the Geneva Conventions. The War Crimes Act, codified as 18 U.S. Code § 2441, makes it an offense, “whether inside or outside the United States,” to commit a war crime, if one is a member of the Armed Forces of the United States or a

national of the United States. *Newsweek* writer Nina Burleigh correctly noted that when “the CIA began using torture early in the Iraq War and, later, jailing people indefinitely and without trial in Guantanamo, the U.S. was in open breach of the conventions.” As noted above, the Office of Global Criminal Justice has inveighed against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. But it seemed to have had no problem with the Syrian government when CIA officials outsourced torture to the Syrian government earlier in the so-called Global War on Terror.

A Symbol of Hypocrisy

So, if there was ever a U.S. government agency standing as a symbol for U.S. hypocrisy, the Office of Global Criminal Justice is it. It is not hard to see in decoding their mission statement that “elsewhere in the world” does not mean leaders of any U.S.-allied nations.

But even more hypocritical is having a U.S. government agency charged with tasks to “help expose the truth, judge those responsible, protect and assist victims, enable reconciliation, deter atrocities, and build the rule of law,” when the U.S. Department of Justice is doing the exact opposite in enforcing the War Crime Act itself.

That hypocrisy is seen in a series of cases beginning in 2006 with the decision in *Rasul v. Rumsfeld*, by the D.C. District Court. As law professor Steve Vladeck explained, when asked of that case in [a 2006 article](#), “Is torture or other forms of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment (CIDT) within the scope of government employment? At least somewhat surprisingly, . . . the answer to that question is ‘yes.’”

Since 2006, the principle in the decision of *Rasul v. Rumsfeld* that Vladeck referred to has become a time-honored principle of U.S. jurisprudence, and a symbol of U.S. hypocrisy when compared to other U.S. pronouncements on torture and war crimes, as seen in a long series of cases down to the present day.

The manner that those decisions are written eliminates all illusions that the United States government is opposed to war crimes when done by “a member of the Armed Forces of the United States or a national of the United States” – they have been granted impunity under the law to offend. Famously, that was expressed by President Obama when he stated that those CIA officials guilty of torture would not be held criminally accountable for acts that are defined as “war crimes,” that is, torture. Little wonder that Donald Trump could so readily say he believed torture worked, since that is what many CIA officials continue to say.

Failing to prosecute war crimes is in itself a war crime under international

law, and, to use the words of the “Office of Global Criminal Justice,” the opposite of its mission to “expose the truth,” and “judge those responsible.” But taking matters a step further, the U.S. government has designed a legal procedure to deny protection and assistance to victims. This is exactly what leaders of countries that are in line for U.S.-sponsored regime change are routinely accused of doing by the Office of Global Criminal Justice.

Shielding Torturers

The issue in a series of lawsuits involving the war crime of torture is whether former Guantanamo prisoners who were victims of U.S. government officials could sue the officials for civil damages. The courts have held, however, that government officials were entitled to immunity for the acts they had committed and were being sued for torture, as it was “within the scope of their employment.” These decisions are based on procedures based on the Westfall Act, which is too convoluted to explain here, but it serves to nullify the War Crimes Act.

Typical of the language in the court’s decisions is: “several detainees were subjected to abuse – including ‘forced grooming, solitary confinement, sleep deprivation, forced medication, transport in ‘shackles and chains, blackened goggles, and ear coverings,’ and the disruption of ... religious practices” – even after a CSRT had determined that there were not enemy combatants... The court held that the defendants’ actions were ‘of the kind’ [they were] employed to perform,” even though the mistreatment occurred when several of the plaintiffs “had no intelligence value.”

The court noted that “[t]hrough the intelligence rationale has dissipated, the need to maintain an orderly detention environment remained after CSRT clearance.” The court continued: “Authorized or not, the conduct was certainly foreseeable because maintaining peace, security, and safety at a place like Guantanamo Bay is a stern and difficult business.”

That was what German military and Gestapo officers said of the prisons they worked in when they went on trial for war crimes at Nuremberg. Most common as their legal defense against war crime charges was that the defendants were only following “superior orders,” in German, “Befehl ist Befehl” (“orders are orders”) – a tactic now known as the Nuremberg defense. In other words, the earlier generation of war criminals effectively claimed their actions were “within their scope of employment.” That defense didn’t work at Nuremberg for Germans, but it works now for U.S. officials in U.S. courts.

The closing the Office of Global Criminal Justice just makes official what has been U.S. policy since 9/11. If it is true that hypocrisy is the tribute that

vice pays to virtue, then the U.S. government has showered tribute upon vice with the hypocrisy of the Office of Global Criminal Justice. If it closes, it means we won't even pay tribute anymore to virtue, preferring to fully embrace vice in a display of our "authenticity." And that may be the one example where the "Office of Global Criminal Justice" fulfills its mission to "expose the truth."

(Ret.) Maj. Todd E. Pierce is a former Army judge advocate general defense attorney at Guantanamo Bay detention center, Cuba. This article originally appeared at The American Conservative at <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/tillerson-mulls-closing-of-war-crimes-office/>]

Pitching the 'Forever War' in Afghanistan

Exclusive: Rather than rethink U.S. policy in the Mideast, particularly the entangling alliances with Israel and Saudi Arabia, Official Washington pushes schemes to perpetuate the "forever war" in Afghanistan, writes James W Carden.

By James W Carden

In May, the founder of the mercenary-for-hire group Blackwater (now since remained Academi), Erik Prince took to the pages of the *Wall Street Journal* to propose that the Pentagon employ "private military units" and appoint a "viceroy" to oversee the war in Afghanistan.

According to Prince, who has been actively lobbying for what he calls an "East India Company approach" as the solution to America's longest war (16 years, \$117 billion and counting), "In Afghanistan, the viceroy approach would reduce rampant fraud by focusing spending on initiatives that further the central strategy, rather than handing cash to every outstretched hand from a U.S. system bereft of institutional memory." (Prince naturally failed to say if his were among those "outstretched hands")

On July 10, *The New York Times* reported that Prince and the owner of the military contractor Dyn Corporation, Stephen Feinberg, have, at the request of Stephen K. Bannon and Jared Kushner, been pushing a plan to, in effect, privatize the war effort in Afghanistan. (In recent weeks both The Nation and The American Conservative have published deep-dive investigative pieces into the

behind the scenes machinations of would-be Viceroy Prince and Feinberg).

According to the *Times* report "The strategy has been called 'the Laos option,' after America's shadowy involvement in Laos during the war in neighboring Vietnam."

If so, then "the Laos option" is an unfortunate moniker for their strategy given the fact that during America's war over Laos (1964-73) the U.S. dropped 2.5 million tons of munitions on that country as part of the failed effort in Vietnam, which finally ended when the U.S. embassy in Saigon was evacuated in 1975.

It is worth mentioning, since we so often overlook the "collateral damage" caused by our overseas adventures, that in the 40-plus years since the cessation of operations in Laos that 20,000 Laotians have been killed by unexploded ordinance dropped that had been dropped during that illegal nine-year campaign.

And while Prince and Feinberg have (so far anyway) gotten the cold shoulder from National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster and Pentagon Chief James Mattis, momentum is picking up for once again ramping up American involvement in Afghanistan among some of the (allegedly) more sophisticated members of the foreign policy establishment.

More Armchair Warmongering

On July 11, former Deputy Defense Secretary Michele Flournoy and think tank functionary Richard Fontaine published a piece for the purportedly realist *National Interest* magazine that attempted to assure readers that "The Afghan War Is Not Lost." Why not? Because even though there are roughly 8,400 U.S. troops in Afghanistan, "*More troops* can help achieve American objectives in Afghanistan, but only if they are part of a larger and more effective strategy." [Emphasis mine].

The stress on more troops (if not to say, thousands upon thousands of unaccountable mercenaries in the pay of Feinberg and Prince) is deeply concerning because if anyone can be said to be a reliable barometer of prevailing opinion inside the Beltway it is Flournoy.

Readers may recall that Flournoy co-chaired the Obama administration's Afghanistan policy review, which led to the President's ill-fated December 2009 decision to send 33,000 American troops (plus a contingent of 7,000 from NATO) to prop up the Karzai regime in Afghanistan. The following year, 2010, would end up as the bloodiest one yet for coalition forces in Afghanistan. Indeed, nearly three-fourth of all American casualties in that war took place in the years following Obama's decision to "surge" in Afghanistan.

But give Flournoy (who was at the top of Hillary Clinton's short list to be Defense Secretary) credit: she persists. Today Flournoy and her frequent co-author Fontaine (both are executives of the hawkish think tank Center for a New American Security) say that American should commit to Afghanistan "indefinitely":

"The centerpiece of the administration's Afghanistan strategy must therefore be a clear and sustained American commitment to Afghanistan. By forswearing deadlines and making clear that the United States will support the Afghan government and security forces indefinitely and until they are able to hold their own, Washington can telegraph to the Taliban that it will not succeed in retaking the country."

Worryingly, some members of Congress seem to be on board. In early July, a bipartisan delegation including Senators John McCain, Lindsey Graham and Elizabeth Warren toured Pakistan and Afghanistan and called for greater military involvement in the region. Speaking on behalf of the delegation, McCain noted, "none of us would say that we're on course to a success here in Afghanistan."

The Forever War

Driving the push to send more troops is the fact that, as Flournoy and Fontaine point out, the "Taliban today controls more territory than at any time since 9/11. Faced with corruption and exclusionary politics, popular opposition to the government in Kabul is rising, while the Taliban makes inroads in rural areas and, increasingly, near the cities." This is no doubt the case.

And proponents of the forever war in Afghanistan are correct when they say, as they inevitably do, that the Taliban provided sanctuary to Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda in the lead up to 9/11. But these same proponents usually neglect to note that bin Laden and Al Qaeda were motivated by the U.S.-Israeli special relationship and, according to the 9/11 Report, "grievances against the United States" that were "widely shared in the Muslim world." Bin Laden "inveighed against the presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia ... and against other U.S. policies in the Middle East."

But, in the intervening years between 2001 and now, Al Qaeda's leadership has been decimated, and according to a Brown University study, "the United States has spent or taken on obligations to spend more than \$3.6 trillion in current dollars on the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Syria and on the Department of Homeland Security" in the years following 9/11.

Meanwhile other alternative strategies (such as the "offshore balancing strategy" advocated by John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt) have never been tried.

As I wrote at Consortiumnews in June, “there *are* alternatives (there always are). It’s just that these tend not to have the institutional backing of Washington’s policy/think tank community which, because it is deeply compromised by its defense industry funders, rarely given them voice or consideration.”

If the U.S. is to successfully combat terrorism emanating out of the Middle East a wholesale re-evaluation of U.S. policy is in order, particularly with regard to Israel and Saudi Arabia. To gloss over this is to miss the point.

And proponents of expanding and privatizing the war in Afghanistan miss it entirely.

James W Carden is a contributing writer for The Nation and editor of The American Committee for East-West Accord’s eastwestaccord.com. He previously served as an advisor on Russia to the Special Representative for Global Inter-governmental Affairs at the US State Department.

Learning to Love Perpetual War

The transformation of the Democratic Party into the perpetual war party – accelerated by the Russia-gate hysteria – is personified by Rep. Barbara Lee who voted against the “war on terror” resolution in 2001, as Norman Solomon explains.

By Norman Solomon

For Americans who oppose perpetual war, no member of Congress has been more admired than Barbara Lee. Ever since she cast the only vote against a blank-check war resolution, three days after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, the Oakland Democrat has earned a reputation for bravely speaking antiwar truth to militarist power.

But, now, the core wisdom of her eloquent speech on the House floor nearly 16 years ago is under threat – from Lee herself.

When Lee beseeched her colleagues to “think through the implications of our actions today, so that this does not spiral out of control,” she was looking far beyond the politics and passions of that moment on Sept. 14, 2001. Now, in a July 7 tweet, she has stepped away from steadfast support for the necessity of diplomatic initiatives.

Finding alternatives to war must include diplomacy. In the case of the “war on terror” that Lee resisted from the start, what spiraled out of control was endless and boundless war. These days, the escalating tensions with Russia could spiral out of control all the way to nuclear holocaust.

That’s a major reason the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists moved the symbolic hands of its Doomsday Clock even closer to apocalyptic midnight early this year. The nuclear peril is terribly real, and it’s growing.

For that overarching reason, former Sen. Sam Nunn joined with three seasoned ex-diplomats to co-sign an open letter in late June, urging Presidents Trump and Vladimir Putin to discuss four specific proposals for reducing the dangers of nuclear war. Nunn – drawing on his experience as chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee – knows that top-level talks between the Russian and U.S. governments are crucial to reduce the risk of the world blowing up.

But Lee addressed the Trump-Putin meeting at the G20 summit in a very different way. Right after it was over, she sent out a tweet that denounced the very idea of the two presidents sitting down and talking: “Outraged by President Trump’s 2 hr meeting w/Putin, the man who orchestrated attacks on our democracy. Where do his loyalties lie?”

Yet real diplomacy often requires that leaders we don’t like – at the top of a foreign government and maybe our own – sit down together, talk and negotiate. In the case of the world’s two nuclear-weapons superpowers, that could turn out to mean the difference between coexistence or co-annihilation.

During her historic 2001 speech on the House floor, when she insisted that “some of us must urge the use of restraint,” Lee was refusing to be swept up in the easy and dangerous conformity of the times. She saw that militarized confrontation would be a tragically unwise alternative to diplomacy.

Lee now seems to have cast aside such understanding, at least as far as relations with Russia are concerned. Her constituents, as well as other supporters in California and beyond, should encourage her to return to it.

Certainly, Lee deserves credit for ongoing efforts to repeal the 2001 war authorization. Yet this month she veered way off the peace track by proclaiming that she was “outraged” because Trump and Putin had a meeting.

In the aftermath of 9/11, Rep. Lee offered profound insight and leadership instead of confusion and fear. That’s why the saying “Barbara Lee speaks for me” took hold and lasted. But now we must let her know when she no longer speaks for us.

Norman Solomon is the author of "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death" (2005). [This article first appeared in San Francisco Chronicle at <http://www.sfchronicle.com/opinion/openforum/article/When-Barbara-Lee-doesn-t-speak-for-me-11305910.php>]
