

Trump Lets Saudis Off on 9/11 Evidence

Like his predecessors, President Trump made nice with the rich royals of Saudi Arabia, despite damning evidence that they have supported Islamic terrorists, including the 9/11 attackers, notes 9/11 widow Kristen Breitweiser.

By Kristen Breitweiser

President Trump has cut a \$110 billion arms deal with the Saudis. As someone who is trying to hold the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia accountable for the mass murder of 3,000 on 9/11 (of which my husband Ron was an innocent victim), I'd think President Trump would be up in arms with the Saudis, not selling arms to them – especially given the information set forth below.

Many people know the explicit evidence found from 2009 that Saudi Arabia was, “a critical financial support base for al Qaeda, the Taliban, LeT and other terrorist groups.”

Just like many know the more recent and far more damning 2016 revelation that Saudi Arabia continues to provide “clandestine financial and logistical support to ISIL and other radical Sunni groups” in the Middle East.

[Also, see Consortiumnews.com's “The Long-Hidden 9/11 Saudi Trail” and “America First or Saudi Arabia First?”]

And, anyone who cares about women's rights and human rights should also know about the latest human rights report produced by Rex Tillerson's own State Department that details, “Saudi Arabia's restrictions on universal rights, such as freedom of expression, including on the internet, and the freedoms of assembly, association, movement and religion, as well as the country's pervasive gender discrimination.”

Indeed, according to Wikipedia, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is consistently ranked among the “worst of the worst” in Freedom House's annual survey of political and civil rights, among the 11 least free nations in the world giving the country a score of 10 out of 100 on its freedom index. Interestingly, Iran is ranked better on human rights issues than Saudi Arabia; Iran's Freedom House ranking is 17.

Zubaydah's Admissions

But perhaps what many – including President Trump and his advisers – might not know about Saudi Arabia is the information surrounding the capture and interrogation of Al Qaeda's Abu Zubaydah, who currently remains in custody at

the Guantanamo Bay prison. I'd like to share some of that information – chronicled in Gerald Posner's Why America Slept: The Failure to Prevent 9/11 – with the hope that learning this information might further crystalize why the 9/11 families are so driven to hold the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia accountable for its alleged role in the 9/11 attacks.

As Posner reported, Abu Zubaydah “was long considered to be a key member of al Qaeda's inner circle. He was born in Saudi Arabia in 1971 but grew up in the Palestinian refugee camps in the Gaza Strip. After early involvement with Hamas, he was recruited by al Zawahiri's Islamic Jihad and when al Zawahiri fused his group with bin Laden's al Qaeda in 1996, Zubaydah was appointed chief of operations. Zubaydah was in charge of the eastern Afghanistan camps responsible for training thousands of Muslim radicals. Bin Laden trusted Zubaydah, and put him in charge of the Millennium plot to bomb the Radisson Hotel in Jordan and Los Angeles International Airport on New Year's Day, 2000. Zubaydah also served as the field commander for the USS Cole Attack.”

Thankfully, Zubaydah was captured by U.S. Special Forces in 2002. During the capture, Zubaydah was severely injured and required medical care. He was given medical attention and placed on intravenous fluids including pain killers – and sodium pentothal.

At the time, U.S. intelligence decided to play a trick on Zubaydah. This trick entailed leading Zubaydah to believe that the U.S. was ready to hand him over to Saudi intelligence officials for further (even more severe) interrogation since Zubaydah wasn't “fully cooperating” with U.S. interrogators. The Saudis' reputation for interrogation was rather severe – it included extreme torture and sometimes death. U.S. intelligence surmised that in facing the threat of being handed over to the Saudis, Zubaydah would want to stay with the U.S. interrogators who were giving him medical attention and, therefore, Zubaydah might be more willing to “talk.”

What happens next is what few people know. When “handed over to the Saudis” (who were really just U.S. intelligence agents pretending to be Saudi intelligence), Zubaydah was actually relieved and started demanding to talk to his contact within Saudi intelligence – in addition to several members of the Saudi Royal Family.

According to Posner's account, “when confronted with men passing themselves off as Saudi security officers, Zubaydah's reaction was not fear, but instead relief. The prisoner, who had been reluctant even to confirm his identity to his American captors, suddenly started talking animatedly. He was happy to see them, he said, because he feared the Americans would torture and kill him. Zubaydah asked his interrogators to call a senior member of the ruling Saudi Royal

family. He then provided the home number and cell phone number from memory. "He will tell you what to do."

The Rosetta Stone

Upon further questioning by his "Saudi interrogators," Zubaydah raised his voice and unleashed a "torrent of information that one investigator refers to as the Rosetta Stone of 9/11" or what he claimed was his work for senior Saudi and Pakistani officials.

According to Posner, Zubaydah said, "he was present in 1996 in Pakistan when bin Laden struck a deal with Mushaf Ali Mir, a highly placed military officer with close ties to some of the most pro-Islamist elements in the Pakistani ISI. It was a relationship that was still active in 2002 and provided bin Laden and al Qaeda protection, arms, and supplies. And that military deal with al Qaeda was blessed by the Saudis, claimed Zubaydah. Bin Laden had personally told Zubaydah of the early 1991 meeting he had with Saudi intelligence chief Prince Turki, and again, Zubaydah claimed he was personally present several times when Turki and bin Laden met in Afghanistan and Pakistan during the 1990s.

"According to Zubaydah, he was the al Qaeda representative in Kandahar in the summer of 1998 when Prince Turki and Taliban officials struck a deal in which Turki gave assurances that more Saudi aid would flow to the Taliban and that the Saudis would never ask for bin Laden's extradition, so long as al Qaeda kept its long-standing promise of directing fundamentalism away from the Kingdom."

Posner reported that Zubaydah "insisted that the Saudis not only sent money regularly to al Qaeda, but that he personally dealt through a series of intermediaries with several members of the Royal family. He then gave more private telephone numbers from memory for a businessman and former military pilot, Prince Sultan bin Faisal bin Turki al Saud, another nephew of King Fahd's and a friend of Prince Fahd's, and also for a contemporary to his own age, another distant relative of King Fahd's, twenty-five-year-old Prince Fahd bin Turki bin Saud al Kabir."

The Saudi Cover-up

Shocked to learn this information about their Saudi and Pakistani "allies," CIA officials investigated the claims put forth by Zubaydah. And then they decided to pass some of the information to their Saudi and Pakistani counterparts hoping to gain a better understanding of the situation.

Posner continues, "The Agency was as interested in monitoring the behind-the-scenes responses of its two allies as in what they officially replied on the record. U.S. officials were already frustrated with the lack of Saudi assistance

on the hijackers, fifteen of whom were citizens of the Kingdom. Saudi authorities had released no information about them. And that all of them evaded detection by Saudi internal security forces, who maintain massive domestic files, had puzzled American officials.”

Of course, the Saudis denied all the information, secret deals, and connections put forth by Zubaydah. Soon thereafter, interestingly (and rather unfortunately), all of the individuals named by Zubaydah during his interrogation turned up dead – except, of course, Prince Turki who was removed from his post as head of Saudi intelligence and named as Saudi Ambassador to Britain.

Posner reported, “on July 22, 2002, less than four months after Zubaydah’s revelations, the Saudis announced the unexpected death of Prince Ahmed. He was forty-three. The cause of death was a heart attack, said the official Saudi news agency. The following day, the second man named by Zubaydah, forty-one year old Prince Sultan bin Faisal bin Turki al Saud was killed in a car accident as he was driving from the resort of Jeddah to Riyadh for the funeral of his cousin, Prince Ahmed. According to Saudi police, speed was the likely cause of the accident which did not involve another car.

“One week later, the third person named by Zubaydah, twenty-five year old Prince Fahd bin Turki bin Saud al Kabir was also found dead. He died while on a trip in the province of Remaah, fifty-five miles east of Riyadh. The Saudi Royal Court announced his death, saying the prince who was traveling during the height of the Saudi summer heat had ‘died of thirst.’”

Months later, Mushaf Ali Mir, the Pakistani “loose end” named by Zubaydah, was killed with several others in a plane crash. Case closed. Problem solved.

A Distracted America

Unfortunately, at the time that the Zubaydah information initially became public in fall 2003, the United States was a nation with a President preoccupied with a war in Iraq. Neither the Bush Administration nor the American public paid proper attention to the Zubaydah information and/or the alleged Saudi role in the 9/11 attacks.

Since that time, the obvious questions raised by the Zubaydah information have yet to be properly and/or publicly investigated and/or answered. All the while, Abu Zubaydah remains in U.S. custody and at least somewhat willing to talk as a prisoner at GTMO. [Similar unanswered questions were raised by another Al Qaeda member in U.S. custody, Zacarias Moussaoui, who testified about his own collaboration with Saudi officials.]

And that's why President Trump should be up in arms – and perhaps even twisting arms – in Saudi Arabia, not selling them arms. Because the record and facts surrounding the 9/11 attacks (whether provided in the so-called “28 pages,” the 9/11 Commission report and its voluminous footnotes, or other sources like Posner's book) all point a very strong finger at the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its role in the 9/11 attacks. The Saudis should be held accountable for that alleged role in a court of law.

Sixteen years post-9/11, the 9/11 families are still earnestly trying to receive a modicum of justice in a court of law by providing all the evidence we have gathered against the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. We simply want our day in court.

We certainly hope President Trump and Congress will continue to support us in our path to justice in holding the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia accountable for its alleged financial and logistical role in the murder of our loved ones.

Kristen Breitweiser is a 9/11 widow and activist who – working with other 9/11 widows known collectively as the “Jersey Girls” – pressured the U.S. government to conduct a formal investigation into the terror attacks on Sept. 11, 2001. Follow Kristen Breitweiser on Twitter: www.twitter.com/kdbreitweiser. [A version of this article originally appeared as a blog post at HuffingtonPost.]

Saudis Win Hearts by Lining Pockets

Exclusive: By achieving an odd-couple alliance with Israel, Saudi Arabia has cleared away U.S. political resistance to the massive arms build-up that President Trump just embraced, reports Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall (This is the fourth in a series on foreign lobbying.)

Families of the victims and survivors of the 9/11 terrorist attacks have asked the Department of Justice to open “an immediate national security investigation” into a “massive Saudi-funded foreign agent offensive” to “delude Congress” into “shield[ing] the Kingdom from any inquiry into the involvement of its agents in supporting the September 11th attacks.”

The complaint marks what is perhaps the most frontal public assault on Saudi influence peddling in Washington since 1981, when pro-Israel critics blasted Riyadh's successful campaign to win congressional approval for its controversial purchase of AWACS surveillance planes.

The families' complaint targets Saudi Arabia's lavishly funded attempts to water down the Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act (JASTA). Passed into law last fall, against opposition from the Obama administration, the act gives Americans the right to sue foreign governments that provide "material support" to terrorist groups.

The complaint asserts that after the law passed, "the Kingdom went on a foreign agent spending spree, hiring . . . more than 100 foreign agents to work on its behalf to wage an assault on JASTA. No expense has been spared in the Kingdom's unparalleled campaign to build a state of the art and nationwide lobbying and propaganda apparatus for the sole purpose of bending U.S. legislative process to its will."

It also claims that Saudi Arabia and its lobbyists have potentially committed "widespread criminal violations of the Foreign Agents Registration Act" by, among other things, concealing their role in mobilizing veterans under false pretenses to back repeal of the law.

According to *The Hill*, the Saudi government now employs 14 lobbying firms, at an estimated cost of well over \$1.3 million a month, more than it spent in all of 2000. Their hired guns include Podesta Group, co-founded by Tony Podesta, one of the Democratic Party's top fundraisers, and his brother John Podesta, who was Hillary Clinton's national campaign chairman in 2016; BGR Group, whose name partners include the former head of the Republican Party; and former Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, R-Mississippi.

Besides supporting specific legislative goals like rolling back JASTA, Saudi Arabia cultivates allies in Washington to "keep the focus on what a great ally it is in the Middle East, not on issues like what women are and aren't allowed to do there," said a spokeswoman the Center for Responsive Politics in Washington, D.C.

Saudi Arabia's agents go to great lengths to play down the country's human rights abuses, including its many beheadings and cruel floggings of dissidents. According to Lee Fang,

"When Nimr al-Nimr, a peaceful government critic, was executed in January (2016), the Podesta Group helped the regime shape media coverage, providing a quote to the *New York Times* to smear Nimr as a 'terrorist.' Other American consultants working for the Saudi Embassy used social media and other efforts to attack Nimr and justify the execution. . . .

"The influence also extends to promotion of Saudi Arabia's controversial role in the Middle East, including the Saudi-led invasion of Yemen and the country's

failure to address private financiers of radical Islamic groups such as ISIS.”

Taking Care of Friends

Saudi Arabia manages to exert influence, particularly over the Executive Branch, for a number of economic and geopolitical reasons apart from lobbying. No president can afford to overlook its immense importance as a market for U.S. arms makers or its ability to influence the world price of oil.

Successive administrations have curried favor with the monarchy to reward its conservative influence in a region that has long been rocked by fiery ideologues like Nasser, Arafat and Khomeini. Saudi Arabia is also valued as an ally in other regions, for example its off-the-books financial support for the Afghan mujahedeen and Nicaraguan Contras in the 1980s.

More recently, Saudi Arabia has won strong support from the Obama and Trump administrations for organizing a coalition of Sunni Arab states to oppose the expansion of Iran’s influence in the Middle East. In the name of containing Iran, Washington has kept quiet about Saudi responsibility for killing thousands of civilians in Yemen, and putting millions there at risk of starvation.

In its quest for influence, however, Saudi Arabia takes no chances and spares no expense. Since the 1940s, when their country became an oil superpower, the Saudis have handed out vast sums of cash on a bipartisan basis to powerful and soon-to-be powerful Americans.

When Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton was nominated for president in 1992, Saudi business tycoons donated \$3.5 million to endow the King Fahd Center for Middle East and Islamic Studies at the University of Arkansas. That November, the King of Saudi Arabia called to congratulate President-elect Clinton – and gave another \$20 million to the university.

Years later, as Hillary Clinton was mulling her future campaign for president, the Saudi kingdom donated more than \$10 million to the Clinton Foundation. Kuwait and other Gulf interests chipped in many millions on top, no doubt solely because of their shared commitment to fighting AIDS.

Republicans have fared even better. Rich Saudis close to the royal family reportedly invested \$80 million in Carlyle Group, the world’s largest private equity firm, after it hired former President H. W. Bush and former Secretary of State James Baker as senior advisers.

Earlier, a billionaire Saudi banker raised eyebrows by rescuing Harken Energy after it appointed George W. Bush to its board of directors. Deals like these made the relationship between the Bush family and the royal family almost

legendary, particularly after George W. Bush turned a blind eye to Saudi Arabia's support for radical Islamists, even after 9/11.

The Bushes and the Clintons were far from unique. In the words of former CIA officer Robert Baer, "finding a high-ranking former U.S. government official who isn't at least tangentially bound to Saudi Arabia is like searching for a teetotaler at a Phi Gam toga party. . . . Aware that government bureaucrats can't retire comfortably on a federal pension, the Saudis put out the message: You play the game – keep your mouth shut about the kingdom – and we'll take care of you, find you a job, fund a chair at a university for you, maybe even present you with a Lexus and a town house in Georgetown."

One of Saudi Arabia's most influential ambassadors to the United States, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, reportedly told an associate, "If the reputation . . . builds that the Saudis take care of friends when they leave office, you'd be surprised how much better friends you have who are just coming into office."

The Arab Lobby vs. the Israel Lobby

Recalling that quote, Alan Dershowitz, the pugnacious Harvard law professor and champion of Israel, once commented, "Yes Virginia, there is a big bad lobby that distorts U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East way out of proportion to its actual support by the American public. . . . But the offending lobby is not AIPAC, which supports Israel, but rather the Arab lobby, which opposes the Jewish state."

Yet for all its funding, the Saudi (or broader Arab) Lobby doesn't compare in clout to the Israel Lobby. Its most significant victory – narrowly winning congressional support for Riyadh's purchase of AWACS surveillance planes in 1981 – was achieved more by lobbying from President Reagan and aerospace contractors than from the desert kingdom's hired help.

Saudi Arabia's failure to head off passage of JASTA last year highlights its limited ability to defeat grassroots coalitions that threaten its interests. For all its funding, the pro-Arab lobby has no significant public support in the United States. Arab-Americans are politically much less well organized – or focused on Mideast issues – than their counterparts (including Christian Zionists) in the pro-Israel lobby.

In addition, Americans are much less sympathetic to the Saudi national story of desert Bedouins striking it rich with oil, than to the Israeli story of Holocaust survivors establishing the Middle East's "only democracy" and making the desert bloom.

However, the old game of comparing the clout of these rival lobbies is no longer

relevant. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states today enjoy relatively strong support from Democratic and Republican legislators alike because they have become de facto allies of Israel, pursuing a common campaign of isolating Iran and destabilizing the Assad regime in Syria.

In October 2013, during the height of the impassioned debate over Iran's nuclear program, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu told the U.N. General Assembly, "The dangers of a nuclear-armed Iran and the emergence of other threats in our region have led many of our Arab neighbors to recognize, finally recognize, that Israel is not their enemy. And this affords us the opportunity to overcome the historic animosities and build new relationships, new friendships, new hopes."

Reports soon emerged of *sub rosa* meetings between Israeli security officials and the powerful Saudi princes Bandar bin Sultan and Turki al-Faisal, both former heads of Saudi intelligence and ambassadors to the United States. Such meetings reportedly produced secret strategic agreements between Israel, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, as well as joint propaganda campaigns in the United States.

Israel's staunch supporters in the United States quickly followed Netanyahu's lead and applauded Saudi Arabia as a great friend.

Soon after the Prime Minister's U.N. speech, for instance, journalist Robert Parry observed that "American neocons are rallying to the new Israeli-Saudi alliance by demanding that President Barack Obama engage more aggressively against the two countries' foes in the Middle East, thus 'bolstering Israeli and Saudi confidence,' as the *Washington Post's* deputy editorial-page editor Jackson Diehl declared."

Neoconservatives ranging from Max Boot to the *Wall Street Journal's* editorial board hammered away at that theme, publishing a steady stream of articles calling on the United States to join Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states to "stop the new Persian Empire."

One manifestation of the new alliance is the fact that U.S. arms deliveries to Saudi Arabia soared 280 percent from the five-year period 2005-10 to 2011-16. Such massive arming of Riyadh simply would not have been possible without the support of pro-Israel members of Congress.

Defenders of the Israel and Saudi lobbies will claim that they are not subverting the U.S. political system but rather supporting U.S. national interests by promoting the containment of Iran, which they misleadingly brand the world's "chief sponsor of terrorism."

In truth, however, the policies they endorse have little genuine public support and have proven dangerous and fabulously expensive to Americans.

The failure to press for a lasting solution to the plight of Palestinians continues to fuel anti-Americanism in the Middle East and other parts of the world. The destabilization of Syria has produced millions of desperate refugees and provided haven for thousands of hardened Islamist fighters. The war in Yemen, supported by Washington in the name of resisting Iran, has become one of the world's great humanitarian crises.

The Israeli-Saudi ongoing proxy wars with Iran create obstacles to achieving peaceful settlements in the theaters of America two biggest recent wars, Iraq and Afghanistan. Washington's silence on the human rights violations of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states makes a mockery of its universal moral claims. And the failure to squarely address Saudi Arabia's contributions to the growth of Islamist militancy heightens the insecurity of all nations threatened by misguided jihadists.

Reversing these disastrous policies will require years of continued debate and political organizing. But it will also require public exposure and genuine discussion of the malign influence of foreign money and propaganda on the U.S. political system, not just the current focus on alleged Russian activities.

[This is the fourth in a series on foreign lobbying. The previous installments were "[The Open Secret of Foreign Lobbying](#)"; "[How China Lobby Shaped America](#)"; and "[Israel Pays the Political Piper.](#)" Next: The Turkish Lobby.]

Jonathan Marshall is a regular contributor to ConsortiumNews.com.

The Long Ordeal of Julian Assange

For the past decade, WikiLeaks has published groundbreaking evidence of government and corporate abuse while getting targeted for abuse itself, including a seven-year vendetta against founder Julian Assange, says John Pilger.

By John Pilger

Julian Assange has been vindicated because the Swedish case against him was corrupt. The prosecutor, Marianne Ny, obstructed justice and should be prosecuted. Her obsession with Assange not only embarrassed her colleagues and the judiciary but exposed the Swedish state's collusion with the United States in its crimes of war and "rendition."

Had Assange not sought refuge in the Ecuadorean embassy in London, he would have been on his way to the kind of American torture pit Chelsea Manning had to endure.

This prospect was obscured by the grim farce played out in Sweden. "It's a laughing stock," said James Catlin, one of Assange's Australian lawyers. "It is as if they make it up as they go along."

It may have seemed that way, but there was always serious purpose. In 2008, a secret Pentagon document prepared by the "Cyber Counterintelligence Assessments Branch" foretold a detailed plan to discredit WikiLeaks and smear Assange personally.

The "mission" was to destroy the "trust" that was WikiLeaks' "center of gravity." This would be achieved with threats of "exposure [and] criminal prosecution." Silencing and criminalizing such an unpredictable source of truth-telling was the aim.

Perhaps this was understandable. WikiLeaks has exposed the way America dominates much of human affairs, including its epic crimes, especially in Afghanistan and Iraq: the wholesale, often homicidal killing of civilians and the contempt for sovereignty and international law.

These disclosures are protected by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. As a presidential candidate in 2008, Barack Obama, a professor of constitutional law, lauded whistle blowers as "part of a healthy democracy [and they] must be protected from reprisal." In 2012, the Obama campaign boasted on its website that Obama had prosecuted more whistle blowers in his first term than all other US presidents combined. Before Chelsea Manning had even received a trial, Obama had publicly pronounced her guilty.

Few serious observers doubt that should the U.S. get its hands on Assange, a similar fate awaits him. According to documents released by National Security Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden, he is on a "Manhunt target list." Threats of his kidnapping and assassination became almost political and media currency in the U.S. following then Vice-President Joe Biden's preposterous slur that the WikiLeaks founder was a "cyber-terrorist."

Hillary Clinton, the destroyer of Libya and, as WikiLeaks revealed last year, the secret supporter and personal beneficiary of forces underwriting ISIS, proposed her own expedient solution: "Can't we just drone this guy," according to the conservative Web site True Pundit, which cited State Department sources for the quote. [Clinton said she didn't recall making the remark but adding: "It would have been a joke, if it had been said, but I don't recall that."]

According to Australian diplomatic cables, Washington's bid to get Assange is "unprecedented in scale and nature." In Alexandria, Virginia, a secret grand jury has sought for almost seven years to contrive a crime for which Assange can be prosecuted. This is not easy.

The First Amendment Obstacle

The First Amendment protects publishers, journalists and whistleblowers, whether it is the editor of the New York Times or the editor of WikiLeaks. The very notion of free speech is described as America's "founding virtue" or, as Thomas Jefferson called it, "our currency."

Faced with this hurdle, the U.S. Justice Department has contrived charges of "espionage," "conspiracy to commit espionage," "conversion" (theft of government property), "computer fraud and abuse" (computer hacking) and general "conspiracy." The favored Espionage Act, which was meant to deter pacifists and conscientious objectors during World War One, has provisions for life imprisonment and the death penalty.

Assange's ability to defend himself in such a Kafkaesque world has been severely limited by the U.S. declaring his case a state secret. In 2015, a federal court in Washington blocked the release of all information about the "national security" investigation against WikiLeaks, because it was "active and ongoing" and would harm the "pending prosecution" of Assange. The judge, Barbara J. Rothstein, said it was necessary to show "appropriate deference to the executive in matters of national security." This is a kangaroo court.

For Assange, his trial has been trial by media. On August 20, 2010, when the Swedish police opened a "rape investigation," they coordinated it, unlawfully, with the Stockholm tabloids. The front pages said Assange had been accused of the "rape of two women." The word "rape" can have a very different legal meaning in Sweden than in Britain [or elsewhere]; a pernicious false reality became the news that went round the world.

Less than 24 hours later, the Stockholm Chief Prosecutor, Eva Finne, took over the investigation. She wasted no time in cancelling the arrest warrant, saying, "I don't believe there is any reason to suspect that he has committed rape." Four days later, she dismissed the rape investigation altogether, saying, "There is no suspicion of any crime whatsoever."

Enter Claes Borgstrom, a highly contentious figure in the Social Democratic Party then standing as a candidate in Sweden's imminent general election. Within days of the chief prosecutor's dismissal of the case, Borgstrom, a lawyer, announced to the media that he was representing the two women and had sought a

different prosecutor in Gothenberg. This was Marianne Ny, whom Borgstrom knew well, personally and politically.

On August 30, Assange attended a police station in Stockholm voluntarily and answered the questions put to him. He understood that was the end of the matter. Two days later, Ny announced she was re-opening the case.

At a press conference, Borgstrom was asked by a Swedish reporter why the case was proceeding when it had already been dismissed. The reporter cited one of the women as saying she had not been raped. He replied, "Ah, but she is not a lawyer."

On the day that Marianne Ny reactivated the case, the head of Sweden's military intelligence service – which has the acronym MUST – publicly denounced WikiLeaks in an article entitled "WikiLeaks [is] a threat to our soldiers [under US command in Afghanistan]."

Both the Swedish prime minister and foreign minister attacked Assange, who had been charged with no crime. Assange was warned that the Swedish intelligence service, SAPO, had been told by its U.S. counterparts that U.S.-Sweden intelligence-sharing arrangements would be "cut off" if Sweden sheltered him.

For five weeks, Assange waited in Sweden for the renewed "rape investigation" to take its course. The Guardian was then on the brink of publishing the Iraq "War Logs," based on WikiLeaks' disclosures, which Assange was to oversee in London.

Finally, he was allowed to leave. As soon as he had left, Marianne Ny issued a European Arrest Warrant and an Interpol "red alert" normally used for terrorists and dangerous criminals.

Stuck in London

Assange attended a police station in London, was duly arrested and spent ten days in Wandsworth Prison, in solitary confinement. Released on £340,000 bail, he was electronically tagged, required to report to police daily and placed under virtual house arrest while his case began its long journey to the U.K. Supreme Court.

He still had not been charged with any offense. His lawyers repeated his offer to be questioned in London, by video or personally, pointing out that Marianne Ny had given him permission to leave Sweden. They suggested a special facility at Scotland Yard commonly used by the Swedish and other European authorities for that purpose. She refused.

For almost seven years, while Sweden has questioned 44 people in the U.K. in

connection with police investigations, Ny refused to question Assange and so advance her case.

Writing in the Swedish press, a former Swedish prosecutor, Rolf Hillegren, accused Ny of losing all impartiality. He described her personal investment in the case as “abnormal” and demanded she be replaced.

Assange asked the Swedish authorities for a guarantee that he would not be “rendered” to the U.S. if he was extradited to Sweden. This was refused. In December 2010, The Independent revealed that the two governments had discussed his onward extradition to the U.S.

Contrary to its reputation as a bastion of liberal enlightenment, Sweden has drawn so close to Washington that it has allowed secret CIA “renditions” – including the illegal deportation of refugees. The rendition and subsequent torture of two Egyptian political refugees in 2001 was condemned by the U.N. Committee against Torture, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch; the complicity and duplicity of the Swedish state are documented in successful civil litigation and in WikiLeaks cables.

“Documents released by WikiLeaks since Assange moved to England,” wrote Al Burke, editor of the online Nordic News Network, an authority on the multiple twists and dangers that faced Assange, “clearly indicate that Sweden has consistently submitted to pressure from the United States in matters relating to civil rights. There is every reason for concern that if Assange were to be taken into custody by Swedish authorities, he could be turned over to the United States without due consideration of his legal rights.”

A Faltering Case

The war on Assange now intensified. Marianne Ny refused to allow his Swedish lawyers, and the Swedish courts, access to hundreds of SMS messages that the police had extracted from the phone of one of the two women involved in the “rape” allegations.

Ny said she was not legally required to reveal this critical evidence until a formal charge was laid and she had questioned him. Then, why wouldn't she question him? Catch-22.

When she announced last week that she was dropping the Assange case, she made no mention of the evidence that would destroy it. One of the SMS messages makes clear that one of the women did not want any charges brought against Assange, “but the police were keen on getting a hold on him.” She was “shocked” when they arrested him because she only “wanted him to take [an HIV] test.” She “did not want to accuse JA of anything” and “it was the police who made up the charges.”

In a witness statement, she is quoted as saying that she had been “railroaded by police and others around her.”

Neither woman claimed she had been raped. Indeed, both denied they were raped and one of them has since tweeted, “I have not been raped.” The women were manipulated by police – whatever their lawyers might say now. Certainly, they, too, are the victims of this sinister saga.

The Politics of ‘Rape’

Katrin Axelsson and Lisa Longstaff of Women Against Rape wrote: “The allegations against [Assange] are a smokescreen behind which a number of governments are trying to clamp down on WikiLeaks for having audaciously revealed to the public their secret planning of wars and occupations with their attendant rape, murder and destruction. ... The authorities care so little about violence against women that they manipulate rape allegations at will. [Assange] has made it clear he is available for questioning by the Swedish authorities, in Britain or via Skype. Why are they refusing this essential step in their investigation? What are they afraid of?”

Assange’s choice was stark: extradition to a country that had refused to say whether or not it would send him on to the U.S., or to seek what seemed his last opportunity for refuge and safety.

Supported by most of Latin America, the government of tiny Ecuador granted him refugee status on the basis of documented evidence that he faced the prospect of cruel and unusual punishment in the U.S.; that this threat violated his basic human rights; and that his own government in Australia had abandoned him and colluded with Washington.

Australia’s Labor government of then Prime Minister Julia Gillard had even threatened to take away his Australian passport – until it was pointed out to her that this would be unlawful.

The renowned human rights lawyer, Gareth Peirce, who represents Assange in London, wrote to then Australian Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd: “Given the extent of the public discussion, frequently on the basis of entirely false assumptions... it is very hard to attempt to preserve for him any presumption of innocence. Mr. Assange has now hanging over him not one but two Damocles swords, of potential extradition to two different jurisdictions in turn for two different alleged crimes, neither of which are crimes in his own country, and that his personal safety has become at risk in circumstances that are highly politically charged.”

It was not until she contacted the Australian High Commission in London that Peirce received a response, which answered none of the pressing points she

raised. In a meeting I attended with her, Australian Consul-General Ken Pascoe made the astonishing claim that he knew “only what I read in the newspapers” about the details of the case.

In 2011, in Sydney, I spent several hours with a conservative Member of Australia’s Federal Parliament, Malcolm Turnbull. We discussed the threats to Assange and their wider implications for freedom of speech and justice, and why Australia was obliged to stand by him. Turnbull then had a reputation as a free speech advocate. He is now the Prime Minister of Australia.

I gave him Gareth Peirce’s letter about the threat to Assange’s rights and life. He said the situation was clearly appalling and promised to take it up with the Gillard government. Only his silence followed.

A Vituperative Campaign

For almost seven years, this epic miscarriage of justice has been drowned in a vituperative campaign against the WikiLeaks founder. There are few precedents. Deeply personal, petty, vicious and inhuman attacks have been aimed at a man not charged with any crime yet subjected to treatment not even meted out to a defendant facing extradition on a charge of murdering his wife. That the U.S. threat to Assange was a threat to all journalists, and to the principle of free speech, was lost in the sordid and the ambitious. I would call it anti-journalism.

Books were published, movie deals struck and media careers launched or kick-started on the back of WikiLeaks and an assumption that attacking Assange was fair game and he was too poor to sue. People have made money, often big money, while WikiLeaks has struggled to survive.

The previous editor of the Guardian, Alan Rusbridger, called the WikiLeaks disclosures, which his newspaper published, “one of the greatest journalistic scoops of the last 30 years.” Yet no attempt was made to protect the Guardian’s provider and source. Instead, the “scoop” became part of a marketing plan to raise the newspaper’s cover price.

With not a penny going to Assange or to WikiLeaks, a hyped Guardian book led to a lucrative Hollywood movie. The book’s authors, Luke Harding and David Leigh, gratuitously described Assange as a “damaged personality” and “callous.” They also revealed the secret password he had given the paper in confidence, which was designed to protect a digital file containing the U.S. embassy cables. With Assange now trapped in the Ecuadorean embassy, Harding, standing among the police outside, gloated on his blog that “Scotland Yard may get the last laugh.”

Journalism students might well study this period to understand the most

ubiquitous source of “fake news” – as from within a media self-ordained with a false respectability and as an extension of the authority and power it courts and protects.

The presumption of innocence was not a consideration in Kirsty Wark’s memorable live-on-air interrogation in 2010. “Why don’t you just apologize to the women?” she demanded of Assange, followed by: “Do we have your word of honor that you won’t abscond?”

On the BBC’s Today program, John Humphrys bellowed: “Are you a sexual predator?” Assange replied that the suggestion was ridiculous, to which Humphrys demanded to know how many women he had slept with.

“Would even Fox News have descended to that level?” wondered the American historian William Blum. “I wish Assange had been raised in the streets of Brooklyn, as I was. He then would have known precisely how to reply to such a question: ‘You mean including your mother?’”

Last week, on BBC World News, on the day Sweden announced it was dropping the case, I was interviewed by Greta Guru-Murthy, who seemed to have little knowledge of the Assange case. She persisted in referring to the “charges” against him. She accused him of putting Trump in the White House; and she drew my attention to the “fact” that “leaders around the world” had condemned him. Among these “leaders” she included Trump’s CIA director. I asked her, “Are you a journalist?”

The injustice meted out to Assange is one of the reasons Parliament reformed the Extradition Act in 2014. “His case has been won lock, stock and barrel,” Gareth Peirce told me, “these changes in the law mean that the UK now recognizes as correct everything that was argued in his case. Yet he does not benefit.” In other words, he would have won his case in the British courts and would not have been forced to take refuge.

Ecuador’s decision to protect Assange in 2012 was immensely brave. Even though the granting of asylum is a humanitarian act, and the power to do so is enjoyed by all states under international law, both Sweden and the United Kingdom refused to recognize the legitimacy of Ecuador’s decision.

Police Siege

Ecuador’s embassy in London was placed under police siege and its government abused. When William Hague’s Foreign Office threatened to violate the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, warning that it would remove the diplomatic inviolability of the embassy and send the police in to get Assange, outrage across the world forced the government to back down.

During one night, police appeared at the windows of the embassy in an obvious attempt to intimidate Assange and his protectors.

Since then, Assange has been confined to a small room without sunlight. He has been ill from time to time and refused safe passage to the diagnostic facilities of hospital. Yet, his resilience and dark humor remain quite remarkable in the circumstances. When asked how he put up with the confinement, he replied, "Sure beats a supermax."

It is not over, but the campaign against him is unraveling. The United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention – the tribunal that adjudicates and decides whether governments comply with their human rights obligations – last year ruled that Assange had been detained unlawfully by Britain and Sweden. This is international law at its apex.

Both Britain and Sweden participated in the 16-month long U.N. investigation and submitted evidence and defended their position before the tribunal. In previous cases ruled upon by the Working Group – Aung Sang Suu Kyi in Burma, imprisoned opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim in Malaysia, detained Washington Post journalist Jason Rezaian in Iran – both Britain and Sweden gave full support to the tribunal. The difference now is that Assange's persecution endures in the heart of London.

The Metropolitan Police say they still intend to arrest Assange for bail infringement should he leave the embassy. What then? A few months in prison while the U.S. delivers its extradition request to the British courts?

If the British Government allows this to happen it will, in the eyes of the world, be shamed comprehensively and historically as an accessory to the crime of a war waged by rampant power against justice and freedom, and all of us.

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 Existential Risk of Trusting 'Intel'

Official Washington has a near mystical faith in "intelligence," especially when it's warning of some foreign enemy, but ideological bias and groupthink often creep in as shown in an insightful Cold War memoir, reports John V. Walsh.

By John V. Walsh

In Tom Lehrer's ballad satirizing former Nazi rocket scientist Wernher von Braun's cavalier attitude toward the deadly consequences of his work, there's the line, "'Once the rockets are up, who cares where they come down? That's not my department,' says Wernher von Braun."

From MAD to Madness: Inside Pentagon Nuclear War Planning is the enlightening memoir by Paul Johnstone, a man who worked in the "department" that decided where "they" would come down. Johnstone labored there during WWII and then from 1949 to 1969, the initial period of the Cold War and the period covered by this book. On Aug. 29, 1949, the Soviet Union caught the world flat-footed when it set off its first nuclear bomb (just over four years after the United States dropped nuclear bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki).

Thus began the years when frightened children scrambled under their desks by day and were tormented with mushroom cloud nightmares by night. The U.S. and the USSR stood on The Brink over the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Berlin Crisis when The Wall went up. Those years were the initial period of nuclear standoff called MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction).

What Johnstone saw as he went about his duties horrified him – and it should also horrify us. For it is the thesis of the Afterword, by the author's daughter, the prominent political commentator Diana Johnstone, that after the demise of the Soviet Union, the U.S. moved quickly from "MAD to Madness."

Madness refers to plans for a knockout nuclear first strike on Russia, aided and abetted by the latest missile defense boondoggle. That was a favorite fantasy of the generals in the post-WWII era. Whether we now live in another era of Madness, when a disabling first strike again dances in the heads of the Elite, or once again in an era of MAD is an open question in my mind. But Paul Johnstone's memoir is a work of great importance in either case.

Paul Johnstone started out in Henry Wallace's Department of Agriculture during the New Deal, but was moved to the Department of War after Pearl Harbor. His job was to pick targets for conventional bombs in Japan, although not the targets for the first atom bombs.

When the Cold War commenced, he studied how targets for nuclear weapons should be selected and how much damage The Bomb would do when dropped on various corners of the USSR. He also assessed the damage of Russian nukes landing in various corners of the U.S. He worked at the most august levels of U.S. intelligence: Air Force Intelligence, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Office of Secretary of Defense.

Some of Johnstone's studies became part of the Pentagon Papers, leaked by former Pentagon official Daniel Ellsberg. Johnstone gave the manuscript for this memoir to his daughter, Diana Johnstone, when he was on his deathbed in 1981.

Faulty Intelligence

A central message of the book is the inevitable failure of intelligence. This aspect of the memoir is hard to apprehend in all its facets without actually reading it. Why can "intelligence" not be trusted?

First the intelligence agencies lie – and do so quite consciously when it suits those who command them or the desires of those who command their commanders. Anyone who does not recognize this by now has not been paying attention. Intel did this most notoriously in recent years in the case of the non-existent WMD that led the U.S. to a multitrillion dollar war on the innocent people of Iraq – which we fight to this day even though Barack Obama declared the war "officially" over.

But even when the Intel agencies are trying to make honest estimates, they face other obstacles. This is the major lesson that Paul Johnstone delivers. Let us take a few examples. On the topic of trying to assess the damage done by nuclear weapons either on the USSR or on the U.S., he writes:

–“They (the effects of nuking a target) would be researched, and in time – much time – a lot would be learned about them, although not enough ever to provide the basis for predictive measurements. So men do what men always do. They calculated what was calculable as best they could, and generally ignored, or dismissed with mere mention by name, the factors that, however relevant and crucial, were incalculable. Or they would just make a wild guess. One problem was that whatever the uncertainties, those utilizing the information were rarely in a position to understand its degree of reliability.” (p. 39 of *From Mad to Madness*, hereafter FMTM)

So the “decision makers” for nuclear war could well be acting on intel that is “a wild guess,” and they would not know it! And here is Johnstone writing on the way that the “wild guesses” and other intelligence estimates come to be made, most notably about enemy capabilities – an essential if one plans to start a nuclear war:

–“I believe that, to anyone who has been deeply immersed in it and then has had the privilege of viewing it with some measure of detachment, military intelligence must seem a world of flickering light, dark shadows, mood music and whispered rumors, half heard against trumpeted accompaniment proclaiming dire threats that imperil us from outer darkness. Shapes are partly perceived at

best, most commonly merely implied, often not seen at all, and often what you think you see is really not there at all. There are always some things you know you know, but you never know how many things there are that you have no evidence even to suspect. You do not know how much of what you see is deliberately staged to mislead you.

“What is seldom realized is that there is always a dominant mood that determines, more than the sharpest senses or the most acute reasoning, what you decide is out there and what is going on. Like all the world and all experience, it is kaleidoscopic; and the bits and pieces that flit before your eyes are what you thought you’d see before you looked.

“Always of course there are the true believers. The images immediately before their eyes are God’s own truth. It’s a matter of right or wrong, bright sunlight or utter darkness. Then there are those not fully convinced nor deeply caring, who find it least troublesome to see what others say they see. Like herded sheep they may once in a while say ‘baa,’ but though they may distrust the direction they are driven in, they feel reassured following the path forced on them by the pressure of the bodies next to them.” (FMTM, p. 63)

In other words, in the end, the data and analysis do little more than to confirm pre-existing sentiments and prejudices.

Agenda-Driven Intel

Then there were the “experts” who had their own agenda. A striking example is the “Special Studies Group” set up in the early 1950s in the Air Force Directorate of Intelligence.

Johnstone writes: “It was headed by Steve Possony, a Hungarian émigré who professed to be an expert on Communism in general and the Soviet Union in particular. Steve was the first of several Central European émigrés I met in the next few years who passed as experts on Communist Europe. ... Others were Stausz-Hupé, Kissinger, Brzezinski and many lesser lights such as Leon Gouré and Helmut Sonnenfeldt. In every case I felt that they were thinking, consciously or otherwise, as representatives of a lost cause in their native land, and I always believed that they were used by the military because their ‘obsessions’ were so useful.” (FTFM, p.80)

Of course it is not clear who was using whom here. But we can think of a latter day equivalent in Bush 2 time when neoconservatives like Paul Wolfowitz dominated the Pentagon. As they ginned up the War on Iraq, it was all too clear that their loyalty to Israel came into play. For while the wars in the Middle East and North Africa did little to advance the interests of the U.S., costing

it blood, treasure and new enemies like ISIS, those wars left in ruins potential adversaries of Israel in its neighborhood. There can be little doubt that the interests of Israel were served by these American “strategic thinkers.”

Johnstone goes on: “The one product of Possony’s group that I most distinctly remember was an annual appraisal of the strategic situation. And the reason I remember it, perhaps, is that every year that appraisal forecast a massive Russian land attack on Western Europe the following year. Several of us began to laugh about it after a while, but the forecast was always intoned awesomely and with superficial plausibility. I do not know whether many people who heard the briefings really believed the forecasts. I suspect many doubted it would really be next year, and thought it more likely the year after or even later. But even doubters approved the forecast because, they reasoned, it was better to err in this direction than to minimize the danger. Above all, it was good to say things that emphasized the need for strong defenses.” (FTFM, p. 80)

Alarmist warnings about impending Soviet invasions of Europe also were helpful in expanding U.S. military budgets.

The issues that Johnstone raises are relevant not only for scholars, but for each and every one of us since our very existence hangs by a thread increasingly frayed by the incessant anti-Russia drumbeat in our media. That drumbeat has reached a neo-McCarthyite crescendo in these days of Russia-gate where politicians crazed by hatred of Vladimir Putin like John McCain or hatred of Donald Trump like nearly every last Democrat hold sway.

A New Era of MAD

The relevance of the memoir is inescapable, and this is laid out with considerable insight in a preface and a postscript by Johnstone’s daughter, Diana, a journalist residing in Paris and a frequent commenter on French and U.S. politics. She is also the author of *The Politics of Euromissiles* (1984), *Greens in the European Parliament – A New Sense of Purpose for Europe* (1994), *Fool’s Crusade: Yugoslavia, NATO and Western Delusions* (2003), and *Queen of Chaos: The Misadventures of Hillary Clinton* (2015).

She is careful of the conclusions she draws. In addition, Paul Craig Roberts’s Foreword adds a further dimension to the book since he worked with some of Paul Johnstone’s colleagues and also inside the Reagan cabinet when the first Cold War finally came to an end. (Regrettably here we are again – in Cold War 2.0.)

I remain unconvinced only by one conclusion of the book and that lies in Diana Johnstone’s Afterword. One thesis of the Afterword is that we went from the era of MAD back to the era of Madness, that is an attempt at a nuclear first strike,

after the demise of the USSR. That may well have been true in the first decade of the Century when Russia was still on its back and China was relatively weak. (Diana Johnstone cites literature from this period to make her case. See also "The End of Mad".)

George W. Bush was in power then, and the neocons were in the driver's seat. Bush withdrew from the ABM treaty in June 2002, which opened the door to developing the ever elusive anti-missile system that would make possible a first-strike on Russia and/or China. (At times first strike capability is called "nuclear primacy".) Those ABM plans persisted and have been implemented right up to the present with their deployment in Eastern Europe nominally against Iran and in South Korea nominally against the DPRK. They are in fact aimed at Russia and China, and no one is fooled by other claims, least of all Russia and China.

But we are now 15 years out from 2002 and Russia's economy and military are much stronger under Putin. Moreover, China's GDP was only about 18 percent of the U.S. GDP in Purchasing Power Parity terms in 2002; it is now in 2017 about 120 percent that of the U.S., and the gap grows daily. And of course military power grows out of economic power.

Things have changed. Certainly, the U.S. maintains a vast edge in its military capability, but is it enough for the neocons and neoliberalcons to realistically dream any longer of a nuclear first strike? I doubt it, but the grave danger is that they are living in the past and that their "intel" is telling them that nuclear primacy is still theirs. Why? Because the intel agencies might feel that is what their bosses want to hear.

After all, who wants to abandon past glory. Empires do not have a great track record when it comes to accepting decline. Living in the past is one of the things that might concern us after reading Paul Johnstone's work. So it is a book of considerable importance for the moment. It warns us of the perilous age in which we live, and it tells us that the need to create a structure of peace in a multipolar world is urgent.

John V. Walsh is a founding member of "Come Home America" and formerly a Professor of Physiology and Neuroscience at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. He can be reached at john.endwar@gmail.com .

Trump's Need for Scapegoats

President Trump's use of Deputy Attorney General Rosenstein's credibility to

cover for the clumsy firing of FBI Director Comey has echoes of President Bush's bogus WMD claims about Iraq, says ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein came into his present job with bipartisan support and a positive reputation as an apolitical prosecutor who had served ably as a U.S. attorney under both the previous two administrations. Now many are asking how someone like that could allow himself to become a tool of Donald Trump in one of the messiest and most controversial firings ever of a senior official.

Much of the dysfunction, ruthlessness, and ineptitude associated with the sacking of James Comey as FBI director is specific to Trump and his presidency, but we have seen before the exploitation for blame-shifting purposes of the work of honest and earnest public servants.

We don't know exactly what transpired in conversation among the President, Attorney General, and Deputy Attorney General about the FBI directorship. Maybe there is a recording that someday will tell us that. But given what we know from the characteristics of the personages involved and other indications, it is easy to reconstruct a plausible way such a conversation went.

The President summons the Justice Department officials to discuss problems involving the FBI director. The conversation addresses some of Comey's missteps in handling the investigation into Hillary Clinton's emails. Rosenstein, an experienced prosecutor attuned to the details of correct relations between prosecutors and investigators, had already developed thoughts on this subject, some of which he conveys to the President in the conversation.

The President instructs Rosenstein to put down on paper a more thorough rendering of ways in which Comey did not properly observe roles and rules regarding the FBI and the Justice Department. The conversation ends, and Rosenstein goes away with his writing assignment.

The White House then uses the resulting memorandum as supposed justification in announcing the firing of Comey, with the initial White House version being that the President was acting on the recommendation of the Justice Department leadership – which primarily meant Rosenstein, given that his memo was the main piece of paper released as justification, and given that the President and whoever else in the White House may have been influencing him on this were eager to exploit Rosenstein's reputation as an upstanding and nonpartisan player with pure motivations.

Rosenstein's Surprise

But Rosenstein did not recommend that Comey be fired. His memo does not say so, and given that it doesn't, it is unlikely that he made any such recommendation orally either. It thus is not surprising to read reports that Rosenstein was so upset about the White House portraying him as responsible for firing Comey that Rosenstein was on the verge of resigning. He has a right to be upset.

Possibly the prospect of a Rosenstein resignation over this issue was part of what led Trump then to offer a much different explanation, in which Trump admitted that he had already decided to fire Comey no matter what the Justice Department leaders said and that what was on his mind in doing so was the FBI's Russia investigation.

Set aside for the moment all the other inconsistencies and falsehoods that define the Trump presidency, and there are two important takeaways from this episode and specifically Rosenstein's role in it. One is that it is erroneous to treat confirmation that a problem exists, or has existed, as if such confirmation constitutes a case for taking a specific drastic action in the name of correcting that problem – especially if the action involved is apt to have other untoward and costly consequences.

Certifying that James Comey exceeded his role or made other mistakes in handling a case last year does not constitute a case for firing him this year. There is nothing inconsistent in being sharply critical of some of Comey's earlier actions and also being opposed to cutting short what is supposed to be a ten-year term for FBI directors, a term established by law partly to try to insulate the bureau from the vicissitudes of politics. (The only other FBI director to be fired short of term, William Sessions, was dismissed for specific ethical violations involving use of public resources for private purposes.)

The other takeaway is that an honest public servant, doing his best to respect rules and assigned roles, and trying to perform his own role with objective judgment and insight, has been used by his political masters as a scapegoat for their own controversial actions. The temptation for political masters to do this sort of thing can be great, and not just for a Donald Trump.

The nonpolitical bureaucracy, or a nonpolitical individual who rises as high as Rosenstein has risen, offers a stamp of nonpartisanship, objectivity, and often expert authority that can deflect attention from less commendable motives or methods that the political masters used in arriving at their decision.

The WMD Precedent

Now roll the tape back a decade and a half, as the George W. Bush administration

was mounting its big sales campaign for launching a war in Iraq. The war was something neocons had long sought, and the sudden change in public mood after 9/11 finally brought their ambition politically within reach. But remaking the politics and economics of the Middle East according to the neocon dream would not work as the basis for selling to the American public a step as drastic as initiating the first major offensive war the United States had begun in over a century.

So the war-makers came up with a sales pitch about the horror of dictators giving weapons of mass destruction (WMD) to terrorists. Because dictators, unconventional weapons, and terrorism were all things that the U.S. intelligence community routinely follows, there was an opportunity to pick out portions of what the community says and to use that output to get the sought-after stamp of nonpartisanship, objectivity, and expert authority. That's what was done with the topic of weapons of mass destruction.

The WMD issue was not the reason the Bush administration launched the Iraq War. I have discussed at length [elsewhere](#) the whole story of why and how it was not the reason.

Some of the key facts include the longstanding prior neoconservative ambition to start exactly this war, the orders by the President to prepare war plans well before the intelligence community had even begun work on the estimate that would become pointed to most often as a rationale for the war decision, the disinterest of the administration in the intelligence except for the tidbits that could be used publicly as part of the sales campaign, and the fact that even the notorious intelligence estimate included the judgment that Saddam Hussein was unlikely to use weapons of mass destruction against U.S. interests or to give them to terrorists except in the extreme situation of an invasion of his country with the intention of overthrowing his regime by force.

As avid war promoter Paul Wolfowitz later admitted in an unguarded comment in an interview, the WMD issue was just a convenient topic on which people could agree, not the reason the war was fought.

Perhaps most important, the presumed existence of unconventional weapons in the hands of a nasty regime does not imply that it is wise to launch an offensive war to topple that regime. If it were, we should have invaded North Korea years ago. The Iraq War was another case of erroneously treating presumed confirmation of a problem as a case for taking a specific drastic action in the name of addressing that problem.

Making Scapegoats

The Iraq War also was another instance of public servants – in this case those working in the intelligence community – being used by their political masters as scapegoats for the masters' own controversial decisions. The intelligence agencies certainly did not advocate launching the war, and it would not have been their role to opine on that. With no policy process leading to Bush's decision, there was no opportunity for them to offer any such opinion even if they wanted to.

The intelligence judgments on the other major part of the sales pitch – the supposed alliance between Saddam's regime and al-Qaeda – were contrary to the assertions in the pitch. And as for what turned out to be far more important than any of the themes in the sales campaign, pre-war intelligence community analysis correctly anticipated most of the costly political and security mess and internal strife to which Iraq succumbed, and with which U.S. forces had to deal, after the invasion.

When the output of public servants is used – or rather, misused – in the way it was in these two cases, the use is not predicated on that output being accurate. Whether Rosenstein was correct, as a matter of either fact or judgment, in what he said in his memorandum about Comey had no bearing on the Trump White House's decision to use him and his memo as a public rationale for firing the FBI director. Whether the intelligence community was correct or not about the various aspects of Iraqi weapons programs did not determine how the Bush administration used the intelligence output on the subject as a public rationale for launching the war.

There also usually is not much relevance to costs and outcomes. Whatever happens in investigating connections between Trump and Russia, the investigation will not depend, with or without Comey, on how Comey handled the question of Hillary Clinton's emails. And even if every word that the intelligence agencies issued about Iraqi unconventional weapons had been correct, post-invasion Iraq still would have been just as much of a bloody mess and the U.S. occupation would have been just as much of a costly quagmire. If anything, the existence of WMD would have made the war even more bloody and costly than it actually was.

Distrust of Trump

One difference between these two cases is that the fallacy associated with the blame-shifting has endured in one case but already been shot down in the other. One still hears, especially but not only from the war promoters in the Bush administration, that the United States went to war because of faulty intelligence about weapons of mass destruction. But the notion that James Comey was fired because of something Rod Rosenstein said didn't last a week.

It probably would not have lasted even if Trump himself had not soon contradicted that rationale. The political milieu, in the partisan sense, has much to do, of course, with which beliefs endure and which do not. In the case of the invasion of Iraq, Democrats who supported going to war have been just as happy as their Republican colleagues to shift blame for their own mistake to an unpopular bureaucracy.

Supporters of Trump's move regarding the FBI director tried to generate a similar dynamic by reminding people of how unhappy many Democrats have been about Comey's handling of the Clinton email matter, but this attempt to win Democratic support did not stick.

Probably the main reason for the difference is that the themes in the Bush administration's war-selling campaign were relentlessly sustained for more than a year. The impact of this sheer repetition was reflected in how even where a theme was *not* supported by the intelligence community's judgments, as was the case regarding terrorist connections, the administration won many believers, including ones led to believe that Saddam Hussein was personally involved in 9/11. The Trump White House, by contrast, has shown that it has difficulty sustaining a theme for a week, never mind a year.

These comparisons raise a larger question of how Trump's presidency is in a league by itself regarding lack of credibility. Less than four months into this administration, much of the media and other observers already have learned not to trust anything this President and his surrogates say. This explains much of why version 1.0 of the White House's explanation for why Comey was fired was immediately met with widespread incredulity.

But it's not as if all the outrageous things this President does are wholly without precedent. It is individual statements and actions, not any one person, that can be extreme and beyond the pale. The Bush administration did an extreme thing by starting a major offensive war under false pretenses and then not owning up to the responsibility and instead shifting blame for the calamitous result. But in most other respects that administration was more of an ordinary presidency and not Trump-like. So it was better able than Trump to hoodwink people when it did do an extreme thing.

The cascade of falsehoods and other excesses that characterize Trump's presidency still has the major cost of being a self-lowering bar as far as standards of conduct are concerned, with the country's sense of propriety being dulled and with many things that would cause outrage or scandal in another presidency instead eliciting a ho-hum "that's Trump being Trump" reaction. But at least in some instances, the incredulity and suspicion that Trump has understandably generated enable the country to smell a rat more quickly than it

otherwise would.

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

Making Trump an Endless War President

A politically embattled President Trump is under pressure to reverse his campaign promise to finally bring U.S. troops home and instead commit to open-ended wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, writes Gareth Porter for Middle East Eye.

By Gareth Porter

The two top national security officials in the Trump administration – Defense Secretary James Mattis and National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster – are trying to secure long-term U.S. ground and air combat roles in the three long-running wars in the greater Middle East – Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria.

Proposals for each of the three countries are still being developed, and there is no consensus, even between Mattis and McMaster, on the details of the plans. They will be submitted to Trump separately, with the plan for Afghanistan coming sometime before a NATO summit in Brussels on May 25.

But if this power play succeeds in one or more of the three, it could guarantee the extension of permanent U.S. ground combat in the greater Middle East for many years to come – and would represent a culmination of the “generational war” first announced by the George W. Bush administration.

It remains to be seen whether President Trump will approve the proposals that Mattis and McMaster have pushed in recent weeks. Judging from his position during the campaign and his recent remarks, Trump may well balk at the plans now being pushed by his advisers.

The plans for the three countries now being developed within the Trump administration encompass long-term stationing of troops, access to bases and the authority to wage war in these three countries. These are the primordial interests of the Pentagon and the U.S. military leadership, and they have pursued those interests more successfully in the Middle East (bureaucratically

at least) than anywhere else on the globe.

U.S. military officials aren't talking about "permanent" stationing of troops and bases in these countries, referring instead to the "open-ended commitment" of troops. But they clearly want precisely that in all three.

Shifting Timetables

The George W. Bush administration and the Barack Obama administration both denied officially that they sought "permanent bases" in Iraq and Afghanistan, respectively. But the subtext in both cases told a different story. A Defense Department official testifying before Congress at the time admitted that the term had no real meaning, because the Pentagon had never defined it officially.

In fact, at the beginning of the negotiations with Iraq on the U.S. military presence in 2008, the U.S. sought access to bases in Iraq without any time limit. But the al-Maliki government rebuffed that demand and the U.S. was forced to agree to withdraw all combat forces in a strict timetable.

Despite efforts by the Pentagon and the military brass, including Gen. David Petraeus, to get the Obama administration to renegotiate the deal with the Iraqi government to allow tens of thousands of combat troops to stay in the country, the Iraqis refused U.S. demands for immunity from prosecution in Iraq, and the U.S. had to withdraw all its troops.

Now the regional context has shifted dramatically in favor of the U.S. military's ambitions. On one hand, the war against Islamic State (also known as ISIS) is coming to a climax in both Iraq and Syria, and the Iraq government recognizes the need for more U.S. troops to ensure that ISIS can't rise again; and in Syria, the division of the country into zones of control that depend on foreign powers is an overriding fact.

Meanwhile, in Afghanistan, growing Taliban power and control across the country is being cited as the rationale for a proposal to reverse the withdrawals of U.S. and NATO troops in recent years and to allow a limited return by U.S. forces to combat.

Now that Islamic State forces are being pushed out of Mosul, both the Trump administration and the Iraqi government are beginning to focus on how to ensure that the terrorists do not return. They are now negotiating on an agreement that would station U.S. forces in Iraq indefinitely. And the troops would not be there merely to defeat ISIS, but to carry out what the war bureaucracies call "stabilization operations" – getting involved in building local political and military institutions.

Plans for Syria

The question of what to do about Syria is apparently the subject of in-fighting between Mattis and the Pentagon, on one hand, and McMaster at the National Security Council, on the other. The initial plan for the defeat of ISIS in Syria, submitted to Trump in February, called for an increase in the size of U.S. ground forces beyond the present level of 1,000.

But a group of officers who have worked closely with Gen. Petraeus on Iraq and Afghanistan, which includes McMaster, has been pushing a much more ambitious plan, in which thousands – and perhaps many thousands – of U.S. ground troops would lead a coalition of Sunni Arab troops to destroy Islamic State's forces in Syria rather than relying on Kurdish forces to do the job.

Both the original plan and the one advanced by McMaster for Syria would also involve U.S. troops in "stabilization operations" for many years across a wide expanse of eastern Syria that would require large numbers of troops for many years. Both in its reliance on Sunni Arab allies and in its envisioning a large U.S. military zone of control in Syria, the plan bears striking resemblance to the one developed for Hillary Clinton by the Center for New American Security when she was viewed as the president-in-waiting.

Reversing Obama's Afghan Policy

The Pentagon proposal on Afghanistan, which had not been formally submitted by Mattis as of this week, calls for increasing the present level of 8,400 US troops in Afghanistan by 1,500 to 5,000, both to train Afghan forces and to fight the Taliban. It also calls for resuming full-scale U.S. air strikes against the Taliban. Both policy shifts would reverse decisions made by the Obama administration.

Five past U.S. commanders in Afghanistan, including Petraeus, have publicly called for the U.S. to commit itself to an "enduring partnership" with the Afghan government. That means, according to their joint statement, ending the practice of periodic reassessments as the basis for determining whether the U.S. should continue to be involved militarily in the war, an idea that is likely part of the package now being formulated by Mattis.

But the problem with such a plan is that the U.S. military and its Afghan client government have now been trying to suppress the Taliban for 16 years. The longer they have tried, the stronger the Taliban have become. The U.S. and NATO were not able to pressure the Taliban to negotiate with the government even when they had more than 100,000 troops in the country.

Committing the U.S. to endless war in Afghanistan would only reinforce the

corruption, abuses of power and culture of impunity that Gen. Stanley A. McChystal acknowledged in 2009 were the primary obstacles to reducing support for the Taliban. Only the knowledge that the U.S. will let the Afghans themselves determine the country's future could shock the political elite sufficiently to change its ways.

Most political and national security elites as well as the corporate news media support the push to formalize a permanent U.S. presence in Afghanistan, despite the fact that national polls indicate that it is the most unpopular war in U.S. history with 80 percent of those surveyed in a CNN poll in 2013 opposing its continuation.

There are signs that Trump may reject at least the plans for Afghanistan and Syria. Only days after his approval of the missile strike on a Russian-Syrian airbase, Trump told Fox Business in an interview, "We're not going into Syria."

And White House spokesman Sean Spicer seemed to suggest this week that Trump was not enamored with the plan to spend many more years trying to "transform" Afghanistan. "There is a difference between Afghanistan proper and our effort to defeat ISIS," Spicer said

Despite Trump's love for the military brass, the process of deciding on the series of new initiatives aimed at committing the U.S. more deeply to three wars in the greater Middle East is bound to pose conflicts between the political interests of the White House and the institutional interests of the Pentagon and military leaders.

Gareth Porter is an independent investigative journalist and winner of the 2012 Gellhorn Prize for journalism. He is the author of the newly published *Manufactured Crisis: The Untold Story of the Iran Nuclear Scare*. [This article originally appeared at Middle East Eye at <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/pentagon-seeks-permanent-war-iraq-afghanist-an-and-syria-1080897678>.]

The Glorious Return of Condi Rice

Exclusive: The failure to impose meaningful accountability on the Iraq War's architects allows them to return as "wise" advisers to be consulted by media outlets and today's politicians, as with Condoleezza Rice, notes James W Carden.

By James W Carden

Condoleezza Rice, the National Security Adviser at the time of the Iraq invasion and then President George W. Bush's Secretary of State, has returned to the public eye, out promoting her new book, entitled *Democracy: Stories from the Long Road to Freedom*.

In late March, Rice met at the White House with President Donald J. Trump, who she previously had said "should not be president." Rice's return to the public eye would seem to prove the truth of Professor Stephen Walt's axiom that being a neocon means never having to say your sorry.

It seems like a lifetime ago, but there was a time when Rice's star was ascendant. An August 1999 profile of Rice in *National Review* dubbed Rice as "George Bush's foreign policy czarina" and described her in rapturous terms. Rice, according to the *NR*'s Jay Nordlinger, was the "very picture of American overachievement"; "If she becomes secretary of state or even something lesser, she will be big. Rock-star big"; "She is, all agree, an immensely appealing person: poised, gracious, humbly smart"; "Her television appearances have prompted marriage proposals"; "And she is very much a jock."

Nordlinger was also of the opinion that Rice was on the cusp of becoming "A major cultural figure, adorning the bedroom walls of innumerable kids and the covers of innumerable magazines."

But it was not to be. By the end of the Bush years, Rice's reputation lay largely in tatters. "There was a time when," *New York Times* correspondent Helene Cooper wrote in September 2007, "perhaps more than Hillary Rodham Clinton or Barack Obama, Condoleezza Rice seemed to have the best shot at becoming the first woman or the first African-American to be president."

Accounts of the early Bush years, particularly following 9/11, showed that Rice was an incompetent manager of the National Security Council process, unable or unwilling to withstand the onslaught of wondrously reckless and short-sighted advice provided by Vice President Dick Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz.

Seeking Redemption

Rice's new book would seem to be (yet another) shot at redemption. (Rice had previously toured the country in support of her memoir, *No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington*.)

Writing in the *New York Times*, Walter Russell Meade, the editor of the neoconservative *American Interest*, called Rice's *Democracy* an "important new book."

“Her faith in the benefits and strategic importance of democracy promotion,” writes Meade “is as strong as, or stronger than, it was when she joined the George W. Bush administration in 2001.” Meade, a sympathetic reviewer who shares many of Rice’s assumptions about the beneficent power of the U.S. military, approvingly observes that her new book is an “attempt to hammer home the idea of democracy promotion as a key goal for American foreign policy.”

A child of segregated Alabama, Rice says that her foreign policy views are shaped by the ideals that animated the American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. For Rice, U.S. foreign policy should be a continuation of that movement, i.e., the U.S. should use its power to advance a *global* struggle for human and civil rights. It’s an idea that has intuitive appeal, yet when put into practice, the results have been little short of disastrous.

A Devastating Death Toll

The period of the last 18 years – from NATO’s ill-conceived intervention on behalf of Kosovar Muslims in Serbia in 1999 through to the present day – has been marked by an optimistic and at times unshakable faith on the part of the American political establishment in its duty and right to intervene in foreign civil conflicts under democratic or humanitarian pretexts.

The intellectual framework for this “golden age of intervention” was set forth not by an American, but by a young, dynamic British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, during the course of NATO’s bombing of Serbia in 1999. In April of that year, Blair traveled to Chicago and attempted to justify the war on humanitarian grounds. In some ways, Blair’s speech heralded the era of humanitarian intervention and global democracy promotion in which we still find ourselves.

Blair declared that “We are all internationalists now, whether we like it or not. ...We cannot turn our backs on conflicts and the violation of human rights within other countries if we want still to be secure.” The Prime Minister continued, stating his belief that “if we can establish and spread the values of liberty, the rule of law, human rights and an open society then that is in our national interests too.”

Initially, Rice was slow to sign on to such a transformational project; after all, according to the author James Mann, Rice “had risen to prominence as heir to the foreign policy traditions of Henry Kissinger and Brent Scowcroft. At Stanford and during the first Bush administration, she had been an avowed proponent of the doctrine of realism.”

In an essay entitled “Promoting the National Interest” in *Foreign Affairs* in January 2000, Rice wrote presciently that “an overly broad definition of

America's national interest is bound to backfire." As late as 2002, her Stanford colleague and fellow Russia specialist Michael McFaul (who served as Ambassador to Russia under President Obama) said of Rice, "She believes in realpolitik, that the main driving force of international relations is balance of power politics and that what happens internally [sic] inside a country should not be part of foreign policy."

Creeping Neoconservatism

Yet even before 9/11 and the emergence of George W. Bush's "Freedom Agenda," Rice had slowly been inching away from the realism of her mentor Scowcroft towards a conception of international affairs not markedly different from that of Tony Blair or the neoconservatives like William Kristol who once distrusted her.

It was during the period between 9/11 and commencement of the Iraq war that Rice's transformation from realist to a kind of "soft" neoconservative became complete. Thereafter, she became, like Bush, Blair, Hillary Clinton and Samantha Power, an emblematic figure of the age of intervention.

By mid-2003, Rice had become a true believer. In a speech in London that June, Rice asked "Why would anyone who shares the values of freedom seek to put a check on those values? Democratic institutions themselves are a check on the excesses of power." "Power in the service of freedom," said Rice, "is to be welcomed."

A valedictory piece in Foreign Affairs in July 2008, showed what a long way she traveled in eight years, from warning, on the eve of Bush's presidency, that an "overly broad definition of America's national interest is bound to backfire" to now expressing her belief that "cooperation with our democratic allies ... should not be judged simply by how we relate to one another. It should be judged by the work we do together to defeat terrorism and extremism, meet global challenges, defend human rights and dignity, and support new democracies."

For Rice, "Democratic state-building is now an urgent component of our national interest." Indeed, it is "America's job to change the world, and in its own image."

Today, when Rice talks about Iraq, or foreign policy in general, as she did recently with NPR's Rachel Martin, she is given a respectful hearing. Apparently it would be a breach of decorum or the rules of the game to ask Rice whether she was concerned, embarrassed (or aware) that the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq was ultimately responsible for the rise of ISIS.

Unchallenged, Rice is allowed to paint the war and its aftermath in the most

anodyne of terms. Today, according to Rice, Iraq “has a legislature that tries to function. It has a prime minister who is accountable. ... They have a very free and functioning press.” In her telling, Iraq is in many ways *better* now because “it’s not an authoritarian state any longer, and it’s not a totalitarian state in the way that it was under Saddam Hussein.”

And in perhaps the most astoundingly obtuse statement since Gary Johnson’s “what’s an Aleppo?” Rice told the apparently somnolent Martin that “It’s very different to be Iraqi today than to be Syrian.” Tell that to the residents of Mosul, the Iraqi city that was overrun by Islamic State extremists in 2014 and is now the scene of a bloody assault by Iraqi forces backed by U.S. and allied airstrikes.

The point here is that Rice shouldn’t be let off the hook so easily; after all, the costs of Bush’s Middle East adventures have been staggering. Ten years after the 2003 invasion, Brown University’s Cost of War project estimated that the war had killed roughly 190,000 people and cost \$2.2 trillion. By 2016, the costs of the combined military actions in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan had grown. According to the latest figures from the project:

“ –Over 370,000 people have died due to direct war violence, and at least 800,000 more indirectly

–200,000 civilians have been killed as a result of the fighting at the hands of all parties to the conflict

–10.1 million – the number of war refugees and displaced persons

–The US federal price tag for the Iraq war is about 4.8 trillion dollars”

Excusing Wars of Supremacy

Through the years – from her time as a NSC staffer for Bush the Elder, through her disastrous tenure as NSC adviser (followed by a marginally less-bad tenure as Secretary of State) during the administration of Bush the Lesser – Rice has developed what I have called a “soft-neoconservatism” which attempts to disguise and excuse the American will to global supremacy by camouflaging it in the “soft” language of human rights.

Her approach to global affairs marries a credulous belief in the power of “democracy promotion” with a belief in the efficacy of U.S. military power. Rice’s embrace of “democracy promotion” is no doubt wholehearted and genuine. But it is all the more troubling and dangerous because of it.

One wonders: is there really any difference between the vacuous, happy pieties

of “soft-neoconservatism” of which Rice, Hillary Clinton and Madeleine Albright are such ardent adepts, or the “hard” neoconservatism of Beltway Caesars like Sen. Tom Cotton, Robert Kagan and Elliot Abrams, or the outright militarism of the current crop of Trump appointees like Defense Secretary James Mattis and NSC adviser H.R. McMaster?

An equally urgent question as concerns Rice in particular and the Bush crowd generally: why have they suffered no serious consequences for the disastrous decisions that were made on their watch?

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.

The Silent Slaughter of the US Air War

Exclusive: The U.S. mainstream media voiced moral outrage when Russian warplanes killed civilians in Aleppo but has gone silent as U.S. warplanes slaughter innocents in Mosul and Raqqa, notes Nicolas J S Davies.

By Nicolas J S Davies

April 2017 was another month of mass slaughter and unimaginable terror for the people of Mosul in Iraq and the areas around Raqqa and Tabqa in Syria, as the heaviest, most sustained U.S.-led bombing campaign since the American War in Vietnam entered its 33rd month.

The Airwars monitoring group has compiled reports of 1,280 to 1,744 civilians killed by at least 2,237 bombs and missiles that rained down from U.S. and allied warplanes in April (1,609 on Iraq and 628 on Syria). The heaviest casualties were in and around Old Mosul and West Mosul, where 784 to 1,074 civilians were reported killed, but the area around Tabqa in Syria also suffered heavy civilian casualties.

In other war zones, as I have explained in previous articles (here and here), the kind of “passive” reports of civilian deaths compiled by Airwars have only ever captured between 5 percent and 20 percent of the actual civilian war deaths revealed by comprehensive mortality studies. Iraqbodycount, which used a similar methodology to Airwars, had only counted 8 percent of the deaths discovered by a mortality study in occupied Iraq in 2006.

Airwars appears to be collecting reports of civilian deaths more thoroughly than Iraqbodycount 11 years ago, but it classifies large numbers of them as “contested” or “weakly reported,” and is deliberately conservative in its counting. For instance, in some cases, it has counted local media reports of “many deaths” as a minimum of one death, with no maximum figure. This is not to fault Airwars’ methods, but to recognize its limitations in contributing to an actual estimate of civilian deaths.

Allowing for various interpretations of Airwars’ data, and assuming that, like such efforts in the past, it is capturing between 5 percent and 20 percent of actual deaths, a serious estimate of the number of civilians killed by the U.S.-led bombing campaign since 2014 would by now have to be somewhere between 25,000 and 190,000.

The Pentagon recently revised its own facetious estimate of the number of civilians it has killed in Iraq and Syria since 2014 to 352. That is less than a quarter of the 1,446 victims whom Airwars has positively identified by name.

Airwars has also collected reports of civilians killed by Russian bombing in Syria, which outnumbered its reports of civilians killed by U.S.-led bombing for most of 2016. However, since the U.S.-led bombing escalated to over 10,918 bombs and missiles dropped in the first three months of 2017, the heaviest bombardment since the campaign began in 2014, Airwars’ reports of civilians killed by U.S.-led bombing have surpassed reports of deaths from Russian bombing.

Because of the fragmentary nature of all Airwars’ reports, this pattern may or may not accurately reflect whether the U.S. or Russia has really killed more civilians in each of these periods. There are many factors that could affect that.

For example, Western governments and NGOs have funded and supported the White Helmets and other groups who report civilian casualties caused by Russian bombing, but there is no equivalent Western support for the reporting of civilian casualties from the Islamic State-held areas that the U.S. and its allies are bombing. If Airwars’ reporting is capturing a greater proportion of actual deaths in one area than another due to factors like this, it could lead to differences in the numbers of reported deaths that do not reflect differences in actual deaths.

Shock, Awe ... and Silence

To put the 79,000 bombs and missiles with which the U.S. and its allies have bombarded Iraq and Syria since 2014 in perspective, it is worth reflecting back to the “more innocent” days of “Shock and Awe” in March 2003. As NPR reporter

Sandy Tolan reported in 2003, one of the architects of that campaign predicted that dropping 29,200 bombs and missiles on Iraq would have, “the non-nuclear equivalent of the impact that the atomic weapons dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki had on Japan.”

When “Shock and Awe” was unleashed on Iraq in 2003, it dominated the news all over the world. But after eight years of “disguised, quiet, media-free” war under President Obama, the U.S. mass media don’t even treat the daily slaughter from this heavier, more sustained bombardment of Iraq and Syria as news. They cover single mass casualty events for a few days, but quickly resume normal “Trump Show” programming.

As in George Orwell’s *1984*, the public knows that our military forces are at war with somebody somewhere, but the details are sketchy. “Is that still a thing?” “Isn’t North Korea the big issue now?”

There is almost no political debate in the U.S. over the rights and wrongs of the U.S. bombing campaign in Iraq and Syria. Never mind that bombing Syria without authorization from its internationally recognized government is a crime of aggression and a violation of the U.N. Charter. The freedom of the United States to violate the U.N. Charter at will has already been politically (not legally!) normalized by 17 years of serial aggression, from the bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 to the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, to drone strikes in Pakistan and Yemen.

So who will enforce the Charter now to protect civilians in Syria, who already face violence and death from all sides in a bloody civil and proxy war, in which the U.S. was already deeply complicit well before it began bombing Syria in 2014?

In terms of U.S. law, three successive U.S. regimes have claimed that their unconstrained violence is legally justified by the Authorization for the Use of Military Force passed by the U.S. Congress in 2001. But sweeping as it was, that bill said only,

“That the President is authorized to use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11th, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons, in order to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United States by such nations, organizations or persons.”

How many of the thousands of civilians the U.S. has killed in Mosul in the past few months played any such role in the September 11th terrorist attacks? Every

person reading this knows the answer to that question: probably not one of them. If one of them was involved, it would be by sheer coincidence.

Any impartial judge would reject a claim that this legislation authorized 16 years of war in at least eight countries, the overthrow of governments that had nothing to do with 9/11, the killing of about 2 million people and the destabilization of country after country – just as surely as the judges at Nuremberg rejected the German defendants' claims that they invaded Poland, Norway and the U.S.S.R. to prevent or “preempt” imminent attacks on Germany.

U.S. officials may claim that the 2002 Iraq AUMF legitimizes the bombardment of Mosul. That law at least refers to the same country. But while it is also still on the books, the whole world knew within months of its passage that it used false premises and outright lies to justify overthrowing a government that the U.S. has since destroyed.

The U.S. war in Iraq officially ended with the withdrawal of the last U.S. occupation forces in 2011. The AUMF did not and could not possibly have approved allying with a new regime in Iraq 14 years later to attack one of its cities and kill thousands of its people.

Caught in a Web of War Propaganda

Do we really not know what war is? Has it been too long since Americans experienced war on our own soil? Perhaps. But as thankfully distant as war may be from most of our daily lives, we cannot pretend that we do not know what it is or what horrors it brings.

This month, two friends and I visited our Congresswoman's office representing our local Peace Action affiliate, Peace Justice Sustainability Florida, to ask her to cosponsor legislation to prohibit a U.S. nuclear first strike; to repeal the 2001 AUMF; to vote against the military budget; to cut off funding for the deployment of U.S. ground troops to Syria; and to support diplomacy, not war, with North Korea.

When one of my friends explained that he'd fought in Vietnam and started to talk about what he'd witnessed there, he had to stop to keep from crying. But the staffer didn't need him to go on. She knew what he was talking about. We all do.

But if we all have to see dead and wounded children in the flesh before we can grasp the horror of war and take serious action to stop it and prevent it, then we face a bleak and bloody future. As my friend and too many like him have learned at incalculable cost, the best time to stop a war is before it starts, and the main lesson to learn from every war is: “Never again!”

Both Barack Obama and Donald Trump won the presidency partly by presenting themselves as “peace” candidates. This was a carefully calculated and calibrated element in both their campaigns, given the pro-war records of their main opponents, John McCain and Hillary Clinton. The American public’s aversion to war is a factor that every U.S. president and politician has to deal with, and promising peace before spinning us into war is an American political tradition that dates back to Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt.

As Reichsmarschall Hermann Goering admitted to American military psychologist Gustave Gilbert in his cell at Nuremberg, “Naturally, the common people don’t want war; neither in Russia nor in England nor in America, nor for that matter in Germany. That is understood. But, after all, it is the leaders of the country who determine the policy and it is always a simple matter to drag the people along, whether it is a democracy or a fascist dictatorship or a Parliament or a Communist dictatorship.”

“There is one difference,” Gilbert insisted, “In a democracy, the people have some say in the matter through their elected representatives, and in the United States only Congress can declare wars.”

Goering was unimpressed by Madison’s and Hamilton’s cherished constitutional safeguards. “Oh, that is all well and good,” he replied, “but, voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them that they are being attacked and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same way in any country.”

Our commitment to peace and our abhorrence of war are too easily undermined by the simple but timeless techniques Goering described. In the U.S. today, they are enhanced by several other factors, most of which also had parallels in World War Two Germany:

–Mass media that suppress public awareness of the human costs of war, especially when U.S. policy or U.S. forces are responsible.

–A media blackout on voices of reason who advocate alternative policies based on peace, diplomacy or the rule of international law.

–In the ensuing silence regarding rational alternatives, politicians and media present “doing something,” meaning war, as the only alternative to the perennial straw man of “doing nothing.”

–The normalization of war by stealth and deception, especially by public figures otherwise seen as trustworthy, like President Obama.

–The dependence of progressive politicians and organizations on funding from labor unions that have become junior partners in the military industrial complex.

–The political framing of U.S. disputes with other countries as entirely the result of actions by the other side, and the demonization of foreign leaders to dramatize and popularize these false narratives.

–The pretense that the U.S. role in overseas wars and global military occupation stems from a well-meaning desire to help people, not from U.S. strategic ambitions and business interests.

Taken altogether, this amounts to a system of war propaganda, in which the heads of TV networks bear a share of responsibility for the resulting atrocities along with political and military leaders. Trotting out retired generals to bombard the home front with euphemistic jargon, without disclosing the hefty directors' and consultants' fees they collect from weapons manufacturers, is only one side of this coin.

The equally important flip-side is the media's failure to even cover wars or the U.S. role in them, and their systematic marginalization of anyone who suggests there is anything morally or legally wrong with America's wars.

The Pope and Gorbachev

Pope Francis recently suggested that a third party could act as a mediator to help resolve our country's nearly 70-year-old conflict with North Korea. The Pope suggested Norway. Even more importantly, the Pope framed the problem as a dispute between the United States and North Korea, not, as U.S. officials do, as North Korea posing a problem or a threat to the rest of the world.

This is how diplomacy works best, by correctly and honestly identifying the roles that different parties are playing in a dispute or a conflict, and then working to resolve their disagreements and conflicting interests in a way that both sides can live with or even benefit from. The JCPOA that resolved the U.S. dispute with Iran over its civilian nuclear program is a good example of how this can work.

This kind of real diplomacy is a far cry from the brinkmanship, threats and aggressive alliances that have masqueraded as diplomacy under a succession of U.S. presidents and secretaries of state since Truman and Acheson, with few exceptions. The persistent desire of much of the U.S. political class to undermine the JCPOA with Iran is a measure of how U.S. officials cling to the use of threats and brinkmanship and are offended that the "exceptional" United States should have to come down from its high horse and negotiate in good faith

with other countries.

At the root of these dangerous policies, as historian William Appleman Williams wrote in *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* in 1959, lies the mirage of supreme military power that seduced U.S. leaders after the allied victory in the Second World War and the invention of nuclear weapons. After running headlong into the reality of an unconquerable post-colonial world in Vietnam, this American Dream of ultimate power faded briefly, only to be reborn with a vengeance after the end of the Cold War.

Much as its defeat in the First World War was not decisive enough to convince Germany that its military ambitions were doomed, a new generation of U.S. leaders saw the end of the Cold War as their chance to “kick the Vietnam syndrome” and revive America’s tragic bid for “full spectrum dominance.”

As Mikhail Gorbachev lamented in a speech in Berlin on the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 2014, “the West, and particularly the United States, declared victory in the Cold War. Euphoria and triumphalism went to the heads of Western leaders. Taking advantage of Russia’s weakening and the lack of a counterweight, they claimed monopoly leadership and domination of the world, refusing to heed words of caution from many of those present here.”

This post-Cold War triumphalism has predictably led us into an even more convoluted maze of delusions, disasters and dangers than the Cold War itself. The folly of our leaders’ insatiable ambitions and recurrent flirtations with mass extinction are best symbolized by the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists’ Doomsday Clock, whose hands once again stand at two and a half minutes to midnight.

The inability of the costliest war machine ever assembled to defeat lightly-armed resistance forces in country after country, or to restore stability to any of the countries it has destroyed, has barely dented the domestic power of the U.S. military-industrial complex over our political institutions and our national resources. Neither millions of deaths, trillions of dollars wasted, nor abject failure on its own terms has slowed the mindless spread and escalation of the “global war on terror.”

Futurists debate whether robotic technology and artificial intelligence will one day lead to a world in which autonomous robots could launch a war to enslave and destroy the human race, maybe even incorporating humans as components of the machines that will bring about our extinction. In the U.S. armed forces and military industrial complex, have we already created exactly such a semi-human, semi-technological organism that will not stop bombing, killing and destroying unless and until we stop it in its tracks and dismantle it?

Nicolas J S Davies is the author of *Blood On Our Hands: the American Invasion and Destruction of Iraq*. He also wrote the chapters on “Obama at War” in *Grading the 44th President: a Report Card on Barack Obama’s First Term as a Progressive Leader*.

America’s Ready Supply of Enemies

The U.S. political process seems to rely on a steady supply of foreign “enemies” to hate, but sometimes politicians overcome hostilities and talk out differences, which remains the hope for the North Korean standoff, says Ann Wright.

By Ann Wright

Enemies of the United States come and go, but the longer they espouse revolutionary ideals and thus defy the United States, the longer they stay enemies. Eventually, U.S. officials try other strategies, such as engagement, to undermine or win over these adversaries.

Currently, the U.S. does not recognize/have diplomatic relations with only three countries—two built on revolutionary models that the U.S. doesn’t like, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the communist regime of North Korea – and Bhutan, a remote Asian kingdom in the Himalayan mountains that purposely isolates itself and has diplomatic relations with only India.

I’m on the way to visit a former U.S. enemy but now recognized diplomatically by the U.S.: Cuba. This trip will be my third in 18 months and the second since the U.S. reopened diplomatic relations with Cuba. The Obama administration took the big leap of talking with the “enemy” with its secret discussions with the Cuban government over a period of two years.

While discussions were proceeding, commercial businessmen and journalists provided the political cover for Obama to withstand the withering criticism from those who strongly opposed dealing with the Cuban government that has been in power since the Cuban revolution in 1959. The U.S. broke diplomatic relations with the new Cuban government on Jan. 3, 1961, because of its nationalization of U.S. businesses in Cuba and its alliance with the Soviet Union.

On July 20, 2015, U.S.-Cuban relations were reestablished after 54 years. On March 20, 2016, President Obama visited Cuba, becoming the first U.S. President in 88 years to visit the island.

Yet, despite diplomatic relations, U.S. sanctions and restrictions remain on Cuban trade and commerce, based on the "Trading with the Enemy Act" and kept in place by strong political pressure from south Florida and its Cuban émigré population, much of which moved to Florida to escape the Cuban revolution. But the U.S. and Cuban decisions to dialogue showed that long broken diplomatic ties can be reestablished.

There was hope that the Obama administration would reach a similar accommodation with Iran after almost four decades of ruptured ties resulting from the seizure of the U.S. Embassy by Iranian militants on Nov. 4, 1979, and the holding of 52 U.S. diplomats for 444 days. But negotiations with the Iranian government to constrain the Iranian nuclear program in 2015 have not yet led to reestablishment of diplomatic relations.

Both the Obama and now Trump administrations have made clear that the U.S. will not talk about reestablishing diplomatic ties because of what Washington calls Iran's meddling in the affairs of its neighbors – Iraq, Syria and Yemen. For its part, Iran notes that the U.S. has invaded and occupied countries in Iran's neighborhood for over 16 years, Afghanistan and Iraq, and has launched military operations in other countries in the region, including Syria and Yemen.

Peoples Republic of China

During much of the Cold War, Washington refused to recognize the communist Chinese government that controlled the mainland in favor of defeated Nationalists who had fled to Taiwan. However, in July 1971, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger made a secret trip to the People's Republic of China (PRC), followed by President Richard Nixon's visit to China in 1972.

The U.S. did not fully recognize the PRC until 30 years after its founding as a communist state because of the PRC's participation in the Korean War on the side of the North Koreans. Finally, on Jan. 1, 1979, during the Carter administration, the U.S. switched recognition from Taiwan to the PRC.

Russia

Interestingly, the United States never broke diplomatic relations with the communist government in the Soviet Union, from its founding in 1917 through the tense days of the Cold War. After the Soviet Union dissolved in 1992, the U.S. shifted diplomatic relations to the Russian Federation. Even with the current high tensions with Russia, dialogue continues as does cooperation in certain areas. For example, the Russians' launch-and-return responsibilities of the international astronaut corps to the International Space Station have not been interrupted.

Vietnam

In the late 1950s, the United States embarked on its longest war at the time, 15 years of attempting to overthrow the communist government of North Vietnam and to maintain a pro-U.S. regime in South Vietnam. After the defeat of the Japanese in World War II, the United States supported France in trying to reestablish its colonial control of Vietnam. After France was defeated and Vietnam was partitioned, the United States blocked elections that likely would have reunified the country under communist Ho Chi Minh and eventually the U.S. committed half a million troops to the ensuing civil war. In 1975, however, the South Vietnamese government collapsed, dealing the U.S. a humiliating defeat.

It wasn't until 1995, 20 years later, when President Bill Clinton established diplomatic relations with the Republic of Vietnam. "Pete" Peterson, an Air Force pilot during the Vietnam War who spent over six years as a prisoner of the North Vietnamese army after his plane was shot down, became the first U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam. In January 2007, Congress approved Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) for Vietnam.

North Korea

In the same region, the U.S. never diplomatically recognized the government of Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) after World War II but instead set up its own compliant government in South Korea.

During the Korean War in the early 1950s, the strategy of the United States was to crush North Korea with a scorched-earth policy that leveled virtually every town and city. Though the hot war ended with an armistice in 1953, there was never a peace treaty, leaving North Koreans to face a huge U.S. military presence in South Korea while the U.S. assisted South Korea in building a powerful economy. While South Korea blossomed economically, North Korea had to divert its human and economic resources into defending its sovereign country from continuing threats of attack, invasion and regime change from the United States.

North Korea, however, did expand its diplomatic relations with most nations. At the start of the Cold War, North Korea only had diplomatic recognition from other communist countries but it later established relations with developing countries and joined the Non-Aligned Movement. By 1976, North Korea was recognized by 93 countries and by August 2016 it was recognized by 164 countries. The United Kingdom established diplomatic relations with the DPRK in 2000 and Canada, Germany and New Zealand recognized North Korea in 2001. Today, the United States, France, Japan and Saudi Arabia are the only large states that do not have diplomatic relations with North Korea.

Under the new Trump administration, dialogue with the North Koreans has not been ruled out. However, as with the Bush and Obama administrations, the starting point for the U.S. for talks is still the North Korean government suspending or ending its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs. Those demands are non-starters for the North Korean government without a peace treaty and while the U.S. continues annual military maneuvers with the South Korean military, threatening regime change in the North. The latest set of maneuvers was code-named "Decapitation."

The North Koreans are also aware what happened to Iraq and Libya after their leaders surrendered WMD stockpiles, a move followed by U.S.-backed invasions and the executions of the two countries' leaders.

North Korean leaders consider their nuclear program the only deterrent to another U.S. invasion. So, while under the most stringent international sanctions, North Korea has developed nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles and has placed satellites into orbit.

Thus, despite U.S. threats, U.S. leaders have to contemplate the potential destruction of South Korea and much of Japan if the U.S. launches a new war against the North. That is why the only rational hope for resolving the standoff is to finally negotiate a Korean peace treaty and make the North Koreans no longer terrified of another U.S. "regime change" war.

Ann Wright served 29 years in the U.S. Army/Army Reserves and retired as a Colonel. She was a U.S. diplomat for 16 years and served in U.S. Embassies in Nicaragua, Grenada, Somalia, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Sierra Leone, Micronesia, Afghanistan and Mongolia. She resigned from the U.S. diplomatic corps in March 2003 in opposition to President Bush's war on Iraq. She is the co-author of *Dissent: Voices of Conscience*.

The Existential Question of Whom to Trust

Special Report: An existential question facing humankind is whom can be trusted to describe the world and its conflicts, especially since mainstream experts have surrendered to careerism, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The looming threat of World War III, a potential extermination event for the

human species, is made more likely because the world's public can't count on supposedly objective experts to ascertain and evaluate facts. Instead, careerism is the order of the day among journalists, intelligence analysts and international monitors – meaning that almost no one who might normally be relied on to tell the truth can be trusted.

The dangerous reality is that this careerism, which often is expressed by a smug certainty about whatever the prevailing groupthink is, pervades not just the political world, where lies seem to be the common currency, but also the worlds of journalism, intelligence and international oversight, including United Nations agencies that are often granted greater credibility because they are perceived as less beholden to specific governments but in reality have become deeply corrupted, too.

In other words, many professionals who are counted on for digging out the facts and speaking truth to power have sold themselves to those same powerful interests in order to keep high-paying jobs and to not get tossed out onto the street. Many of these self-aggrandizing professionals – caught up in the many accouterments of success – don't even seem to recognize how far they've drifted from principled professionalism.

A good example was Saturday night's spectacle of national journalists preening in their tuxedos and gowns at the White House Correspondents Dinner, sporting First Amendment pins as if they were some brave victims of persecution. They seemed oblivious to how removed they are from Middle America and how unlikely any of them would risk their careers by challenging one of the Establishment's favored groupthinks. Instead, these national journalists take easy shots at President Trump's buffoonish behavior and his serial falsehoods – and count themselves as endangered heroes for the effort.

Foils for Trump

Ironically, though, these pompous journalists gave Trump what was arguably his best moment in his first 100 days by serving as foils for the President as he traveled to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, on Saturday and basked in the adulation of blue-collar Americans who view the mainstream media as just one more appendage of a corrupt ruling elite.

Breaking with tradition by snubbing the annual press gala, Trump delighted the Harrisburg crowd by saying: "A large group of Hollywood celebrities and Washington media are consoling each other in a hotel ballroom" and adding: "I could not possibly be more thrilled than to be more than 100 miles away from [the] Washington swamp ... with much, much better people." The crowd booed references to the elites and cheered Trump's choice to be with the common folk.

Trump's rejection of the dinner and his frequent criticism of the mainstream media brought a defensive response from Jeff Mason, president of the White House Correspondents' Association, who complained: "We are not fake news. We are not failing news organizations. And we are not the enemy of the American people." That brought the black-tie-and-gown gathering to its feet in a standing ovation.

Perhaps the assembled media elite had forgotten that it was the mainstream U.S. media – particularly The Washington Post and The New York Times – that popularized the phrase "fake news" and directed it blunderbuss-style not only at the few Web sites that intentionally invent stories to increase their clicks but at independent-minded journalism outlets that have dared question the elite's groupthink on issues of war, peace and globalization.

The Black List

Professional journalistic skepticism toward official claims by the U.S. government – what you should expect from reporters – became conflated with "fake news." The Post even gave front-page attention to an anonymous group called PropOrNot that published a black list of 200 Internet sites, including Consortiumnews.com and other independent-minded journalism sites, to be shunned.

But the mainstream media stars didn't like it when Trump began throwing the "fake news" slur back at them. Thus, the First Amendment lapel pins and the standing ovation for Jeff Mason's repudiation of the "fake news" label.

Yet, as the glitzy White House Correspondents Dinner demonstrated, mainstream journalists get the goodies of prestige and money while the real truth-tellers are almost always outspent, outgunned and cast out of the mainstream. Indeed, this dwindling band of honest people who are both knowledgeable and in position to expose unpleasant truths is often under mainstream attack, sometimes for unrelated personal failings and other times just for rubbing the powers-that-be the wrong way.

Perhaps, the clearest case study of this up-is-down rewards-and-punishments reality was the Iraq War's WMD rationale. Nearly across the board, the American political/media system – from U.S. intelligence analysts to the deliberative body of the U.S. Senate to the major U.S. news organizations – failed to ascertain the truth and indeed actively helped disseminate the falsehoods about Iraq hiding WMDs and even suggested nuclear weapons development. (Arguably, the "most trusted" U.S. government official at the time, Secretary of State Colin Powell, played a key role in selling the false allegations as "truth.")

Not only did the supposed American "gold standard" for assessing information – the U.S. political, media and intelligence structure – fail miserably in the

face of fraudulent claims often from self-interested Iraqi opposition figures and their neoconservative American backers, but there was minimal accountability afterwards for the “professionals” who failed to protect the public from lies and deceptions.

Profiting from Failure

Indeed, many of the main culprits remain “respected” members of the journalistic establishment. For instance, The New York Times’ Pentagon correspondent Michael R. Gordon, who was the lead writer on the infamous “aluminum tubes for nuclear centrifuges” story which got the ball rolling for the Bush administration’s rollout of its invade-Iraq advertising campaign in September 2002, still covers national security for the Times – and still serves as a conveyor belt for U.S. government propaganda.

The Washington Post’s editorial page editor Fred Hiatt, who repeatedly informed the Post’s readers that Iraq’s secret possession of WMD was a “flat-fact,” is still the Post’s editorial page editor, one of the most influential positions in American journalism.

Hiatt’s editorial page led a years-long assault on the character of former U.S. Ambassador Joseph Wilson for the offense of debunking one of President George W. Bush’s claims about Iraq seeking yellowcake uranium from Niger. Wilson had alerted the CIA to the bogus claim before the invasion of Iraq and went public with the news afterwards, but the Post treated Wilson as the real culprit, dismissing him as “a blowhard” and trivializing the Bush administration’s destruction of his wife’s CIA career by outing her (Valerie Plame) in order to discredit Wilson’s Niger investigation.

At the end of the Post’s savaging of Wilson’s reputation and in the wake of the newspaper’s accessory role in destroying Plame’s career, Wilson and Plame decamped from Washington to New Mexico. Meanwhile, Hiatt never suffered a whit – and remains a “respected” Washington media figure to this day.

Careerist Lesson

The lesson that any careerist would draw from the Iraq case is that there is almost no downside risk in running with the pack on a national security issue. Even if you’re horrifically wrong – even if you contribute to the deaths of some 4,500 U.S. soldiers and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis – your paycheck is almost surely safe.

The same holds true if you work for an international agency that is responsible for monitoring issues like chemical weapons. Again, the Iraq example offers a good case study. In April 2002, as President Bush was clearing away the few

obstacles to his Iraq invasion plans, Jose Mauricio Bustani, the head of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons [OPCW], sought to persuade Iraq to join the Chemical Weapons Convention so inspectors could verify Iraq's claims that it had destroyed its stockpiles.

The Bush administration called that idea an "ill-considered initiative" – after all, it could have stripped away the preferred propaganda rationale for the invasion if the OPCW verified that Iraq had destroyed its chemical weapons. So, Bush's Undersecretary of State for Arms Control John Bolton, a neocon advocate for the invasion of Iraq, pushed to have Bustani deposed. The Bush administration threatened to withhold dues to the OPCW if Bustani, a Brazilian diplomat, remained.

It now appears obvious that Bush and Bolton viewed Bustani's real offense as interfering with their invasion scheme, but Bustani was ultimately taken down over accusations of mismanagement, although he was only a year into a new five-year term after having been reelected unanimously. The OPCW member states chose to sacrifice Bustani to save the organization from the loss of U.S. funds, but – in so doing – they compromised its integrity, making it just another agency that would bend to big-power pressure.

"By dismissing me," Bustani said, "an international precedent will have been established whereby any duly elected head of any international organization would at any point during his or her tenure remain vulnerable to the whims of one or a few major contributors." He added that if the United States succeeded in removing him, "genuine multilateralism" would succumb to "unilateralism in a multilateral disguise."

The Iran Nuclear Scam

Something similar happened regarding the International Atomic Energy Agency in 2009 when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the neocons were lusting for another confrontation with Iran over its alleged plans to build a nuclear bomb.

According to U.S. embassy cables from Vienna, Austria, the site of IAEA's headquarters, American diplomats in 2009 were cheering the prospect that Japanese diplomat Yukiya Amano would advance U.S. interests in ways that outgoing IAEA Director General Mohamed ElBaradei wouldn't; Amano credited his election to U.S. government support; Amano signaled he would side with the United States in its confrontation with Iran; and he stuck out his hand for more U.S. money.

In a July 9, 2009, cable, American chargé Geoffrey Pyatt said Amano was thankful for U.S. support of his election. "Amano attributed his election to support from

the U.S., Australia and France, and cited U.S. intervention with Argentina as particularly decisive," the cable said.

The appreciative Amano informed Pyatt that as IAEA director-general, he would take a different "approach on Iran from that of ElBaradei" and he "saw his primary role as implementing safeguards and UNSC [United Nations Security Council] Board resolutions," i.e. U.S.-driven sanctions and demands against Iran.

Amano also discussed how to restructure the senior ranks of the IAEA, including elimination of one top official and the retention of another. "We wholly agree with Amano's assessment of these two advisors and see these decisions as positive first signs," Pyatt commented.

In return, Pyatt made clear that Amano could expect strong U.S. financial assistance, stating that "the United States would do everything possible to support his successful tenure as Director General and, to that end, anticipated that continued U.S. voluntary contributions to the IAEA would be forthcoming. Amano offered that a 'reasonable increase' in the regular budget would be helpful."

What Pyatt made clear in his cable was that one IAEA official who was not onboard with U.S. demands had been fired while another who was onboard kept his job.

Pandering to Israel

Pyatt learned, too, that Amano had consulted with Israeli Ambassador Israel Michaeli "immediately after his appointment" and that Michaeli "was fully confident of the priority Amano accords verification issues." Michaeli added that he discounted some of Amano's public remarks about there being "no evidence of Iran pursuing a nuclear weapons capability" as just words that Amano felt he had to say "to persuade those who did not support him about his 'impartiality.'"

In private, Amano agreed to "consultations" with the head of the Israeli Atomic Energy Commission, Pyatt reported. (It is ironic indeed that Amano would have secret contacts with Israeli officials about Iran's alleged nuclear weapons program, which never yielded a single bomb, when Israel possesses a large and undeclared nuclear arsenal.)

In a subsequent cable dated Oct. 16, 2009, the U.S. mission in Vienna said Amano "took pains to emphasize his support for U.S. strategic objectives for the Agency. Amano reminded ambassador [Glyn Davies] on several occasions that he was solidly in the U.S. court on every key strategic decision, from high-level personnel appointments to the handling of Iran's alleged nuclear weapons

program.

“More candidly, Amano noted the importance of maintaining a certain ‘constructive ambiguity’ about his plans, at least until he took over for DG ElBaradei in December” 2009.

In other words, Amano was a bureaucrat eager to bend in directions favored by the United States and Israel regarding Iran’s nuclear program. Amano’s behavior surely contrasted with how the more independent-minded ElBaradei resisted some of Bush’s key claims about Iraq’s supposed nuclear weapons program, correctly denouncing some documents as forgeries.

The world’s public got its insight into the Amano scam only because the U.S. embassy cables were among those given to WikiLeaks by Pvt. Bradley (now Chelsea) Manning, for which Manning received a 35-year prison sentence (which was finally commuted by President Obama before leaving office, with Manning now scheduled to be released in May – having served nearly seven years in prison).

It also is significant that Geoffrey Pyatt was rewarded for his work lining up the IAEA behind the anti-Iranian propaganda campaign by being made U.S. ambassador to Ukraine where he helped engineer the Feb. 22, 2014 coup that overthrew elected President Viktor Yanukovich. Pyatt was on the infamous “fuck the E.U.” call with U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland weeks before the coup as Nuland handpicked Ukraine’s new leaders and Pyatt pondered how “to midwife this thing.”

Rewards and Punishments

The existing rewards-and-punishments system, which punishes truth-tellers and rewards those who deceive the public, has left behind a thoroughly corrupted information structure in the United States and in the West, in general.

Across the mainstream of politics and media, there are no longer the checks and balances that have protected democracy for generations. Those safeguards have been washed away by the flood of careerism.

The situation is made even more dangerous because there also exists a rapidly expanding cadre of skilled propagandists and psychological operations practitioners, sometimes operating under the umbrella of “strategic communications.” Under trendy theories of “smart power,” information has become simply another weapon in the geopolitical arsenal, with “strategic communications” sometimes praised as the preferable option to “hard power,” i.e. military force.

The thinking goes that if the United States can overthrow a troublesome

government by exploiting media/propaganda assets, deploying trained activists and spreading selective stories about “corruption” or other misconduct, isn’t that better than sending in the Marines?

While that argument has the superficial appeal of humanitarianism – i.e., the avoidance of armed conflict – it ignores the corrosiveness of lies and smears, hollowing out the foundations of democracy, a structure that rests ultimately on an informed electorate. Plus, the clever use of propaganda to oust disfavored governments often leads to violence and war, as we have seen in targeted countries, such as Iraq, Syria and Ukraine.

Wider War

Regional conflicts also carry the risk of wider war, a danger compounded by the fact that the American public is fed a steady diet of dubious narratives designed to rile up the population and to give politicians an incentive to “do something.” Since these American narratives often deviate far from a reality that is well known to the people in the targeted countries, the contrasting storylines make the finding of common ground almost impossible.

If, for instance, you buy into the Western narrative that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad gleefully gasses “beautiful babies,” you would tend to support the “regime change” plans of the neoconservatives and liberal interventionists. If, however, you reject that mainstream narrative – and believe that Al Qaeda and its friendly regional powers may be staging chemical attacks to bring the U.S. military in on their “regime change” project – you might favor a political settlement that leaves Assad’s fate to the later judgment of the Syrian people.

Similarly, if you accept the West’s storyline about Russia invading Ukraine and subjugating the people of Crimea by force – while also shooting down Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 for no particular reason – you might support aggressive countermeasures against “Russian aggression,” even if that means risking nuclear war.

If, on the other hand, you know about the Nuland-Pyatt scheme for ousting Ukraine’s elected president in 2014 and realize that much of the other anti-Russian narrative is propaganda or disinformation – and that MH-17 might well have been shot down by some element of Ukrainian government forces and then blamed on the Russians [see [here](#) and [here](#)] – you might look for ways to avoid a new and dangerous Cold War.

Who to Trust?

But the question is: whom to trust? And this is no longer some rhetorical or philosophical point about whether one can ever know the complete truth. It is

now a very practical question of life or death, not just for us as individuals but as a species and as a planet.

The existential issue before us is whether – blinded by propaganda and disinformation – we will stumble into a nuclear conflict between superpowers that could exterminate all life on earth or perhaps leave behind a radiated hulk of a planet suitable only for cockroaches and other hardy life forms.

You might think that with the stakes so high, the people in positions to head off such a catastrophe would behave more responsibly and professionally. But then there are events like Saturday night's White House Correspondents Dinner with self-important media stars puffing about with their First Amendment pins. And there's President Trump's realization that by launching missiles and talking tough he can buy himself some political space from the Establishment (even as he sells out average Americans and kills some innocent foreigners). Those realities show that seriousness is the farthest thing from the minds of Washington's insiders.

It's just too much fun – and too profitable in the short-term – to keep playing the game and hauling in the goodies. If and when the mushroom clouds appear, these careerists can turn to the cameras and blame someone else.

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).
