

To Russia with More Russia-Bashing

Now that President Trump is bashing Russia, not resetting relations, the mainstream U.S. media has gone from pushing “Russia-gate” conspiracies to decrying doubts about U.S. government anti-Russia claims, notes Nat Parry.

By Nat Parry

After several months of pushing the “Russia-gate” conspiracy theory – a wild-eyed, all-encompassing but somewhat nebulous narrative involving U.S. President Donald Trump, Russian President Vladimir Putin, WikiLeaks, the Russian mob, assassinations and certain indiscretions with prostitutes in a Moscow hotel – the U.S. mainstream media is now reverting to its traditional role of downplaying conspiracy theories, particularly those raising questions about the intelligence surrounding the alleged chemical weapons attack in Syria last week.

On Monday, the New York Times published an article titled “Syria Conspiracy Theories Flourish, at Both Ends of the Spectrum,” which lamented the fact that websites on the left and the right have raised doubts about the casus belli for U.S. military action against Syria.

Noting that some alternative news sites have called the chemical attack a “false flag” operation and others have raised the question of whether Trump’s military action was a “wag the dog” diversion tactic, the Times pointedly attempts to “debunk” the internet memes that have been raising doubts about the chemical attack or calling into question the justification for the U.S. military action.

With an aggressiveness not seen at all when it comes to the unsubstantiated “Russian election-hacking” allegations, the Times fires back forcefully on matters such as whether President Bashar al-Assad had reason to use chemical weapons in the first place or whether anti-Assad forces may have had advance knowledge of the sarin attack. The Times article uses curt, all-caps responses to rebut these claims, such as flatly stating, “FALSE,” “NO EVIDENCE,” or “MISLEADING.”

The Times, for example, points out that Information Clearing House has argued that Assad lacked an obvious tactical or strategic reason to use chemical weapons, and therefore the attack may have actually been carried out by one of the terrorist groups operating in Syria such as Al-Nusra Front. As the Times responds, however, “THIS IS MISLEADING.”

Floating a few reasons that Assad’s forces might have conceivably been motivated to conduct a chemical attack, the Times argues that the attack was “consistent

with Mr. Assad's calculated strategy of attempting to drive out the civilian population in rebel strongholds through bombing neighborhoods and civilian targets." The Syrian leader may have also "felt emboldened" by perceived shifts in U.S. foreign policies and priorities under Trump, the Times speculates.

Of course, this is simply guesswork on the part of the Times, which is not presenting any facts to counter doubts over the official story, but just responding to the doubts with more conjecture. The Times also seems to be cherry-picking some of the more easily "debunked" stories surrounding the Syria case, failing to address legitimate concerns over the lack of proof of Assad's culpability. These include doubts raised by the former British ambassador to Syria, Peter Ford, who told BBC Radio last week that there is "no proof that the cause of the explosion was what they said it was."

It would not make sense for Assad to launch such an attack, Ford said, claiming that it would be "totally self-defeating." He also objected to the veracity of claims made by eyewitnesses who claimed that they saw chemical bombs dropping from the air. "Well, you cannot see chemical weapons dropping from the air," he said. "Such testimony is worthless."

Question of Possession

There are also serious doubts as to whether Syria even possesses the chemical weapons in question, with the United Nations' Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons noting that since 2013, "all of the chemical weapons declared by Syria were removed and destroyed outside of Syrian territory."

While some governments have claimed that Syria's declaration about its chemical weapons program may have been incomplete, the OPCW stresses that it has adapted itself "in unprecedented ways" in efforts "to remove, transport and destroy Syria's declared chemical weapons stockpile in the midst of an active conflict zone."

With this in mind, Sacha Llorenti, the Bolivian ambassador to the United Nations, last Friday blasted the United States for unilaterally attacking Syria, saying that it recalls the decision 14 years earlier to attack Iraq based on equally questionable intelligence.

It is "vital to remember what history teaches us," Llorenti said, citing the 2003 invasion of Iraq and holding up a photo of then-Secretary of State Colin Powell delivering false testimony to the U.N. Security Council on Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction.

"Whereas an investigation would have allowed us to establish in an objective manner who is responsible for the [chemical] attacks [in Syria], this is an

extreme, extreme violation of international law," he said.

In addition to the doubts that have been raised at the United Nations, a number of the U.S.'s closest G7 allies have refused to implement additional sanctions against Syria without proof of Assad's guilt.

As the BBC reported on Tuesday, "Sanctions against Russia and Syria will not be put in place until after an investigation into last week's apparent chemical attack, British government sources said. Members of the G7 group of leading industrialized nations agreed to delay implementing sanctions until there was 'hard and irrefutable evidence' over the alleged chemical attack."

Yet the New York Times and other mainstream U.S. outlets continue to report as undisputed fact that Assad's government intentionally carried out this attack, and furthermore, that Moscow knew about it in advance.

The sorts of unequivocal retorts that the Times uses against journalists and bloggers for raising doubts about the official stories could, of course, just as easily be applied to the official stories themselves. When the Associated Press, for example, reported on Tuesday that "The United States has made a preliminary conclusion that Russia knew in advance of Syria's chemical weapons attack last week," the Times could have responded with an emphatic all-caps retort such as "NO EVIDENCE."

These retorts could also be used against the accusations of the Russian government engaging in a convoluted conspiracy to undermine Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton's electoral chances by hacking John Podesta's and the DNC's emails in order to expose the Democratic establishment's undermining of Bernie Sanders's insurgent campaign while simultaneously "elevating" Trump's candidacy in the media through the so-called "pied piper" strategy, with the evil geniuses of the Kremlin somehow knowing beyond a doubt that this information would sway voters in favor of voting for the least popular major-party nominee in a generation.

Just as the New York Times has denounced theories surrounding the Syria chemical attack as lacking evidence, so too could the entire Russia-gate narrative be picked apart as lacking any foundation in fact. All that one needs to do is actually read the U.S. intelligence assessment that dubiously concluded that Russia "interfered" in the election without offering anything approaching hard proof of this claim – spending seven full pages instead bashing the Russian network RT for its perceived biases.

Going through the Director of National Intelligence report from last January, the reader is left with few details as to how the extraordinary conclusion was

reached that Russia “hacked” the election, which Sen. John McCain, R-Arizona, and others have called an “act of war.”

The closest thing to evidence that could be found in the DNI report was regarding so-called Russian fingerprints on the hacking attacks of Podesta’s and the DNC’s emails, including malware associated with Russian hackers, as well as some Cyrillic letters and the phrase “Felix Edmundovich,” a reference to the founder of the Soviet Union’s secret police.

However, as revealed in subsequent WikiLeaks’ disclosures of the so-called Vault 7 documents, the CIA has developed numerous tools, including a library of foreign malware, that can be used to falsely implicate a foreign intelligence service in a cyber-attack.

These revelations called into question the entire basis for Washington’s case against Moscow for allegedly interfering in the U.S. election, but besides a few articles in the alternative press, including at Consortiumnews, the revelations received scant attention.

Apparently, the disclosures of CIA hacking activities – including new revelations of the CIA deploying malware in Samsung televisions as covert listening devices to spy on unwitting Americans – were not the sort of conspiracy theory considered worthy of sustained media coverage in the United States. In contrast to the months of wall-to-wall coverage of Russia-gate, the Vault 7 leaks were largely treated as a one-day story by the mainstream press.

The disparity in coverage speaks to a longstanding aversion of the mainstream media to what it considers illegitimate “new media” encroaching on its territory and peddling conspiracy theories and what is today called “fake news.” This hostility can be traced to the earliest days of the internet.

‘Conspiracy Freaks’

Twenty years ago, responding to a proliferation of alternative news sites on the World Wide Web – or what was called back then the “information superhighway” – Newsweek magazine ran a 1,800-word article entitled “Conspiracy Mania Feeds Our Growing National Paranoia.” In the piece, Newsweek denounced what it called “conspiracy freaks.”

Explaining a growing acceptance of conspiracy theories as evidence of “mass psychosis,” the article warned that the “ranks of the darkly deluded may be growing” as “conspiracism has become a kind of para-religion.”

It took particular aim at the African-American community, which it described as “a hotbed of this kind of suspicion and mistrust,” for believing that “the

CIA had spread the crack epidemic by backing Nicaraguan drug dealers whose profits went to the contras.”

Newsweek also criticized Oliver Stone, director of “Platoon” and “JFK,” and Chris Carter, the creator of the popular “X-Files” television series, for promoting dangerous ideas that had the effect of eroding trust in the government. “On ‘The X-Files,’ everything from who killed JFK to why the Buffalo Bills lose so many Super Bowls is traceable to a single master plan,” Newsweek sneered.

Of course, Newsweek wasn’t alone in scoffing at popular conspiracy theories in the 1990s. In fact, it was conventional wisdom among “respectable” media that government leaders simply do not cross certain lines, and that certain stories, for example, regarding CIA involvement in the cocaine trade – no matter how much evidence backed them up – were off-limits. Those who failed to get on board with this groupthink, for example Gary Webb who wrote a widely disseminated series for the San Jose Mercury News about the CIA-crack cocaine connection, had their careers destroyed.

This trend continued into the 2000s, with millions of angry Americans still seething over the stolen election in 2000 told to “get over it,” and then called crazy for doubting the basis for George W. Bush’s case for invading Iraq in 2003.

A couple years later, those who raised questions about the government’s botched response to Hurricane Katrina were accused by the Washington Post of “racial paranoia” and hawking “conspiracy theories,” such as the widespread belief that New Orleans’ levees may have been intentionally blown up to protect rich neighborhoods at the expense of poorer ones, or to drive low-income African Americans out of town.

But skip ahead a decade, and oddly, this same media that historically has been so hostile to conspiracy theories was seen eagerly pushing conspiracy theories surrounding Clinton’s loss to Trump. Headlines of “Russian election hacking” were freely used by the Washington Post, CNN and the New York Times, despite the fact that there is zero evidence that Russia manipulated any voting machines in any state to alter the outcome of the election, or even any substantial proof offered to support the claims that the Kremlin attempted to influence voters’ decisions by exposing private emails between DNC officials.

Russia, Russia, Russia!

Nevertheless, the Democrats and the media have coalesced around the conventional wisdom that the election was lost due to a Russian plot, which conveniently

absolves the national Democratic Party of any responsibility for losing the election – for example by writing off the white working-class vote or nominating a deeply flawed establishment candidate during a decidedly anti-establishment year – while simultaneously calling into question the legitimacy of Trump’s presidency.

It also feeds into the rallying cry that the Democrats have embraced since losing the election, which has been variations of the theme “This is not normal,” expressed by the hashtag #NotNormal on social media. This theme laments the loss of a more “normal” time, presumably personified by Trump’s predecessor, Barack Obama.

Typically, the slogan refers to Trump’s controversial dealings with Russia, his unconventional communication style and his extensively documented conflicts of interests, as well as perceived misogyny, nepotism, racism and incompetence in his administration.

Clearly, there is very little that can be considered “normal” about this administration, including the strange role of Trump’s daughter, Ivanka, who has moved into the White House while the First Lady, Melania Trump, lives in New York. The First Daughter reportedly was instrumental in convincing the President to carry out the unilateral attack on Syria.

“Ivanka is a mother of three kids and she has influence. I’m sure she said: ‘Listen, this is horrible stuff,’” Ivanka’s brother Eric Trump told the Telegraph.

While that is certainly not normal, what the Democrats and the media are revealing through their #NotNormal campaign and the official conspiracy theories that they are promoting – while downplaying other theories or doubts about government claims – is how much they actually consider “normal.”

In today’s America, what is normal, according to the bipartisan consensus, are unilateral strikes against countries without evidence and in violation of international law. It is also apparently normal for televisions to spy on law-abiding citizens, and with drone strikes shooting up 432 percent under the Trump presidency so far, it is apparently quite normal to use flying robots to bomb suspected terrorists (and their eight-year old daughters) half-way around the world. Indefinite detention at the legal black hole of Guantanamo is also rather normal.

After all, these are all policies that have been in place for a decade and a half under both Democratic and Republican administrations, and hope seems to be dwindling for returning to a period of actual normalcy.

Nat Parry is co-author of *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush*. [This article first appeared at <https://essentialopinion.wordpress.com/2017/04/11/notnormal-democrats-and-mass-medias-double-standards-on-conspiracy-theories/>]

Trump Should Rethink Syria Escalation

More than two dozen ex-U.S. intelligence officials urge President Trump to rethink his claims blaming the Syrian government for the chemical deaths in Idlib and to pull back from his dangerous escalation of tensions with Russia.

MEMORANDUM FOR: The President

FROM: Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS)*

SUBJECT: Syria: Was It Really “A Chemical Weapons Attack”?

1 – We write to give you an unambiguous warning of the threat of armed hostilities with Russia – with the risk of escalation to nuclear war. The threat has grown after the cruise missile attack on Syria in retaliation for what you claimed was a “chemical weapons attack” on April 4 on Syrian civilians in southern Idlib Province.

2 – Our U.S. Army contacts in the area have told us this is not what happened. There was no Syrian “chemical weapons attack.” Instead, a Syrian aircraft bombed an al-Qaeda-in-Syria ammunition depot that turned out to be full of noxious chemicals and a strong wind blew the chemical-laden cloud over a nearby village where many consequently died.

3 – This is what the Russians and Syrians have been saying and – more important – what they appear to believe happened.

4 – Do we conclude that the White House has been giving our generals dictation; that they are mouthing what they have been told to say?

5 – After Putin persuaded Assad in 2013 to give up his chemical weapons, the U.S. Army destroyed 600 metric tons of Syria’s CW stockpile in just six weeks. The mandate of the U.N.’s Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW-UN) was to ensure that all were destroyed – like the mandate for the U.N. inspectors for Iraq regarding WMD. The U.N. inspectors’ findings on WMD

were the truth. Rumsfeld and his generals lied and this seems to be happening again. The stakes are even higher now; the importance of a relationship of trust with Russia's leaders cannot be overstated.

6 – In September 2013, after Putin persuaded Assad to relinquish his chemical weapons (giving Obama a way out of a tough dilemma), the Russian President wrote an op-ed for the New York Times in which he said: “My working and personal relationship with President Obama is marked by growing trust. I appreciate this.”

Détente Nipped in the Bud

7 – Three-plus years later, on April 4, 2017, Russian Prime Minister Medvedev spoke of “absolute mistrust,” which he characterized as “sad for our now completely ruined relations [but] good news for terrorists.” Not only sad, in our view, but totally unnecessary – worse still, dangerous.

8 – With Moscow's cancellation of the agreement to de-conflict flight activity over Syria, the clock has been turned back six months to the situation last September/October when 11 months of tough negotiation brought a ceasefire agreement. U.S. Air Force attacks on fixed Syrian army positions on Sept. 17, 2016, killing about 70 and wounding another 100, scuttled the fledgling ceasefire agreement approved by Obama and Putin a week before. Trust evaporated.

9 – On Sept 26, 2016, Foreign Minister Lavrov lamented: “My good friend John Kerry ... is under fierce criticism from the US military machine, [which] apparently does not really listen to the Commander in Chief.” Lavrov criticized JCS Chairman Joseph Dunford for telling Congress that he opposed sharing intelligence with Russia on Syria, “after the [ceasefire] agreement, concluded on direct orders of Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Barack Obama, had stipulated that the two sides would share intelligence. ... It is difficult to work with such partners. ...”

10 – On Oct. 1, 2016, Russia's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova warned, “If the US launches a direct aggression against Damascus and the Syrian Army, it would cause a terrible, tectonic shift not only in the country, but in the entire region.”

11 – On Oct 6, 2016, Russian defense spokesman Maj. Gen. Igor Konashenkov cautioned that Russia was prepared to shoot down unidentified aircraft – including any stealth aircraft – over Syria. Konashenkov made a point of adding that Russian air defenses “will not have time to identify the origin” of the aircraft.

12 – On Oct 27, 2016, Putin publicly lamented, “My personal agreements with the

President of the United States have not produced results,” and complained about “people in Washington ready to do everything possible to prevent these agreements from being implemented in practice.” Referring to Syria, Putin decried the lack of a “common front against terrorism after such lengthy negotiations, enormous effort, and difficult compromises.”

13 – Thus, the unnecessarily precarious state into which U.S.-Russian relations have now sunk – from “growing trust” to “absolute mistrust.” To be sure, many welcome the high tension, which – admittedly – is super for the arms business.

14 – We believe it of transcendent importance to prevent relations with Russia from falling into a state of complete disrepair. Secretary Tillerson’s visit to Moscow this week offers an opportunity to stanch the damage, but there is also a danger that it could increase the acrimony – particularly if Secretary Tillerson is not familiar with the brief history set down above.

15 – Surely it is time to deal with Russia on the basis of facts, not allegations based largely on dubious evidence – from “social media,” for example. While many would view this time of high tension as ruling out a summit, we suggest the opposite may be true. You might consider instructing Secretary Tillerson to begin arrangements for an early summit with President Putin.

* Background on Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS), a list of whose issuances can be found at <https://consortiumnews.com/vips-memos/>.

A handful of CIA veterans established VIPS in January 2003 after concluding that Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld had ordered our former colleagues to manufacture intelligence to “justify” an unnecessary war with Iraq. At the time we chose to assume that President George W. Bush was not fully aware of this.

We issued our first Memorandum for the President on the afternoon of Feb. 5, 2003, after Colin Powell’s ill-begotten speech at the United Nations. Addressing President Bush, we closed with these words:

No one has a corner on the truth; nor do we harbor illusions that our analysis is “irrefutable” or “undeniable” [adjectives Powell applied to his charges against Saddam Hussein]. But after watching Secretary Powell today, we are convinced that you would be well served if you widened the discussion ... beyond the circle of those advisers clearly bent on a war for which we see no compelling reason and from which we believe the unintended consequences are likely to be catastrophic.

Respectfully, we offer the same advice to you, President Trump.

* * *

For the Steering Group, Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity

Eugene D. Betit, Intelligence Analyst, DIA, Soviet FAO, (US Army, ret.)

William Binney, Technical Director, NSA; co-founder, SIGINT Automation Research Center (ret.)

Marshall Carter-Tripp, Foreign Service Officer and former Office Director in the State Department Bureau of Intelligence and Research, (ret.)

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Neocons Have Trump on His Knees

Exclusive: The Democrats' Russia-made-Hillary-lose hysteria has pushed a weakened President Trump into the arms of the neocons who now have a long list of endless-war ideas for him to implement, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

After slapping Donald Trump around for several months to make him surrender his hopes for a more cooperative relationship with Russia, the neocons and their liberal-interventionist allies are now telling the battered President what he must do next: escalate war in the Middle East and ratchet up tensions with nuclear-armed Russia.

Star neocon Robert Kagan spelled out Trump's future assignments in a column on Sunday in The Washington Post, starting out by patting the chastened President on the head for his decision to launch 59 Tomahawk missiles at an airstrip in Syria supposedly in retaliation for a chemical weapons attack blamed on the Syrian government (although no serious investigation was even conducted).

Trump earned widespread plaudits for his decisive action and his heart-on-the-sleeve humanitarianism as his voice filled with emotion citing the chemical-weapons deaths on April 4 of "small children and even beautiful little babies."

The U.S. media then helpfully played down reports from Syria that Trump's April 6 retaliatory missile strike had killed about 15 people, including nine civilians, four of whom were children.

However, for Kagan, the missile strike was only a good start. An advocate for "regime change" in Syria and a co-founder of the Project for the New American Century which pushed for the Iraq War, Kagan praised Trump "for doing what the Obama administration refused to do," i.e. involve the U.S. military directly in attacks on the Syrian government.

"But," Kagan added, "Thursday's action needs to be just the opening salvo in a broader campaign not only to protect the Syrian people from the brutality of the Bashar al-Assad regime but also to reverse the downward spiral of U.S. power and influence in the Middle East and throughout the world. A single missile strike unfortunately cannot undo the damage done by the Obama administration's policies over the past six years."

Kagan continued: "Trump was not wrong to blame the dire situation in Syria on President Barack Obama. The world would be a different place today if Obama had carried out his threat to attack Syria when Assad crossed the famous 'red line' in the summer of 2013. The bad agreement that then-Secretary of State John F. Kerry struck with Russia not only failed to get rid of Syria's stock of chemical weapons and allowed the Assad regime to drop barrel bombs and employ widespread torture against civilian men, women and children. It also invited a full-scale Russian intervention in the fall of 2015, which saved the Assad regime from possible collapse."

A Seasoned Propagandist

Kagan, who cut his teeth in the Reagan administration running a State Department propaganda shop on Central America, has never been particularly interested in nuance or truth, so he wouldn't care that Obama pulled back from attacking Syria in summer 2013, in part, because his intelligence advisers told him they lacked proof that Assad was responsible for a mysterious sarin attack. (Since then, the evidence has indicated that the attack was likely a provocation by Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate with help from Turkish intelligence.)

But groupthink dies hard – and pretty much every Important Person in Official Washington just knows that Assad did carry out that sarin attack, just like they all knew that Iraq's Saddam Hussein was hiding WMDs in 2003. So, it follows in a kind of twisted logical way that they would build off the fake history regarding the 2013 Syria-sarin case and apply it to the new groupthink that Assad has carried out this latest attack, too. Serious fact-finding investigations are not needed; everyone just "knows."

But Kagan is already looking ahead. Having pocketed Trump's capitulation last week on Syria, Kagan has shifted his sights onto the much juicier targets of Russia and Iran.

"Russia has ... greatly expanded its military presence in the eastern Mediterranean," Kagan wrote. "Obama and Kerry spent four years panting after this partnership, but Russia has been a partner the way the mafia is when it presses in on your sporting goods business. Thanks to Obama's policies, Russia has increasingly supplanted the United States as a major power broker in the region. Even U.S. allies such as Turkey, Egypt and Israel look increasingly to Moscow as a significant regional player.

"Obama's policies also made possible an unprecedented expansion of Iran's power and influence. ... If you add the devastating impact of massive Syrian refugee flows on European democracies, Obama's policies have not only allowed the deaths of almost a half-million Syrians but also have significantly weakened America's global position and the health and coherence of the West."

Trump's Probation

Yes, all that was Obama's fault for not invading Syria with a couple of hundred thousand U.S. troops because that's what would have been required to achieve Kagan's "regime change" goal in Syria. And there's no reason to think that the Syrian invasion would have been any less bloody than the bloody Kagan-advocated invasion of Iraq. But Kagan and the neocons never take responsibility for their various bloodbaths. It's always someone else's fault.

And now Kagan is telling Trump that there is still much he must do to earn his way back into the good graces of the neocons.

Kagan continued, "Trump, of course, greatly exacerbated these problems during his campaign, with all the strong rhetoric aimed at allies. Now he has taken an important first step in repairing the damage, but this will not be the end of the story. America's adversaries are not going to be convinced by one missile strike that the United States is back in the business of projecting power to defend its interests and the world order. ...

"The testing of Trump's resolve actually begins now. If the United States backs down in the face of these challenges, the missile strike, though a worthy action in itself, may end up reinforcing the world's impression that the United States does not have the stomach for confrontation."

And confrontation is surely what Kagan has in mind, adding:

"Instead of being a one-time event, the missile strike needs to be the opening

move in a comprehensive political, diplomatic and military strategy to rebalance the situation in Syria in America's favor. That means reviving some of those proposals that Obama rejected over the past four years: a no-fly zone to protect Syrian civilians, the grounding of the Syrian air force, and the effective arming and training of the moderate opposition, all aimed at an eventual political settlement that can bring the Syrian civil war, and therefore the Assad regime, to an end.

"The United States' commitment to such a course will have to be clear enough to deter the Russians from attempting to disrupt it. This in turn will require moving sufficient military assets to the region so that neither Russia nor Iran will be tempted to escalate the conflict to a crisis, and to be sure that American forces will be ready if they do. ...

"Let's hope that the Trump administration is prepared for the next move. If it is, then there is a real chance of reversing the course of global retreat that Obama began. A strong U.S. response in Syria would make it clear to the likes of Putin, Xi Jinping, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and Kim Jong Un that the days of American passivity are over."

On His Knees

To put this message in the crude terms that President Trump might understand, now that the neocons have forced him to his knees, they are demanding that he open his mouth. They will not be satisfied with anything short of a massive U.S. military intervention in the Middle East and a full-scale confrontation with Russia (and perhaps China).

This sort of belligerence is what the neocons and liberal hawks had expected from Hillary Clinton, whom Kagan had endorsed. Some sources claim that a President Hillary Clinton planned to appoint Kagan's neocon wife, Victoria Nuland, as Secretary of State.

As Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs under Obama, Nuland oversaw the U.S.-backed putsch that overthrew Ukraine's elected President Viktor Yanukovich in 2014, replacing him with a fiercely anti-Russian regime, the move that touched off civil war in Ukraine and sparked the New Cold War between the U.S. and Russia. [For more on Kagan clan, see Consortiumnews.com's "[A Family Business of Perpetual War.](#)"]

Clinton's defeat was a stunning setback but the neocons never give up. They are both well-organized and well-funded, dominating Official Washington's think tanks and media outlets, sharing some power with their junior partners, the liberal interventionists, who differ mostly in the rationales cited for invading

other countries. (The neocons mostly talk about global power and democracy promotion, while the liberal hawks emphasize “human rights.”)

In dealing with the narcissistic and insecure Trump, the neocons and liberal hawks conducted what amounted to a clever psychological operation. They rallied mainstream media personalities and Democrats horrified at Trump’s victory. In particular, Democrats and their angry base were looking for any reason to hold out hope for Trump’s impeachment. Hyping alleged Russian “meddling” in the election became the argument of choice.

Night after night, MSNBC and other networks competed in their Russia-bashing to boost ratings among Trump-hating Democrats. Meanwhile, Democratic politicians, such as Rep. Adam Schiff of California, saw the Russia-gate hearings as a ticket to national glory. And professional Democratic strategists could evade their responsibility for running a dismal presidential campaign by shifting the blame to the Russians.

However, besides creating a convenient excuse for Clinton’s defeat, the anti-Russian hysteria blocked Trump and his team from any move that they might try to make regarding avoidance of a costly and dangerous New Cold War. The Russia-hating frenzy reached such extremes that it paralyzed the formulation of any coherent Trump foreign policy.

Now, with the neocons regaining influence on the National Security Council via NSC adviser Gen. H.R. McMaster, a protégé of neocon favorite Gen. David Petraeus, the neocon holding action against the New Détente has shifted into an offensive to expand the hot war in Syria and intensify the New Cold War with Russia. As Kagan recognized, Trump’s hasty decision to fire off missiles was a key turning point in the reassertion of neocon/liberal-hawk dominance over U.S. foreign policy.

It’s also suddenly clear how thoroughly liberal Democrats were taken for a ride on the war train by getting them to blame Russia for Hillary Clinton’s defeat. The liberals (and even many progressives) hated Trump so much that they let themselves be used in the service of neocon/liberal-hawk endless war policies. Now, it may be too late to turn the train around.

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](#)).

Bill Maher's Muddled Attacks on Islam

As an edgy comedian, Bill Maher prides himself on his “politically incorrect” religion-bashing, but his excessive attacks on Islam more aptly reflect a “politically correct” bigotry, as JP Sottile explains.

By JP Sottile

Bill Maher thinks he knows exactly why they hate us. In the world according to Bill, all those agitated Muslims on the receiving end of multiple interventions, numerous “double-tap” drone strikes, countless tons of falling bombs, the systematic imprisonment of “rendered” individuals and the widespread use of lawless torture are, simply put, the outgrowth of a backwards belief system. And those beliefs also inspire a type of religious violence that’s become a destructive force unparalleled in today’s world.

The “today” part is important to Maher because he doesn’t like the “false equivalence” of historical context. Instead, he’s decidedly on the side of “that was then, this is now.” So, forget Christian Crusaders, Spanish Inquisitors, Philistine-purging Israelites or, one would assume, any of human history’s numerous examples of holy war-making.

Also not equivalent are recent mass murders of Sikhs in Wisconsin and of Muslims in Quebec. And don’t bother bringing up the growing list of identity-based violence against Muslims or, perhaps most tellingly, of mistaken identity-based violence against those who are ignorantly thought to be Muslims, but aren’t.

Somehow, America’s long, demonstrable history of putting ethnic cleanliness next to its own obsessive Godliness doesn’t quite cut it either, burning crosses and Native American genocide notwithstanding. No, history doesn’t reverberate in the Islamophobic echo chamber ... unless, of course, we’re talking about the “warlike” history of long-since faded Islamic empires. Then all’s fair in this one-sided front on the anti-religious war being waged by the so-called “New Atheists.”

The New Atheism

Maher and his confrontational cohorts – like famed geneticist Richard Dawkins and anti-Muslim gadfly Sam Harris – have targeted Islam as something far more pernicious than just another fantasy-based religion with the usual roster of fundamentalists, self-appointed prophets and violent opportunists.

For them, Islam is *sui generis*. Islam is, according to their unique atheist orthodoxy, both violent and repressive in ways that make it wholly unique. Islam

is not just an intellectual error, but a dangerous cultural cancer.

Essentially, these New Atheists have simplified a question almost as old as the “War on Terror” it so inadequately tries to explain. For them, the answer is clear. They hate us because Islam is the enemy of the “liberal” values and, by extension, of the entire civilized world.

Perhaps that’s why Maher doesn’t think jihadi terrorist groups or random incidents of jihadi-inspired violence are better explained as the irrational acts of individual insanity or as the predictable blowback from 75 years of American meddling the Middle East. That is, of course, if you consider “meddling” an adequate description of America’s history of profitable relationships with brutal dictators.

Maher’s “they-hate-our-liberal values” explanation is certainly an inadequate characterization of 25 years of continuous bombing in the region ... and of CENTCOM’s random application of kinetic force in numerous Muslim countries over the same period. “Meddling” also falls short of describing the multi-year drone war on “suspected militants” and, all-too-often, on innocent civilians.

On the other hand, “meddling with benefits” might best describe the post-colonial period in a poorly-partitioned region where receding Western powers exploited the maps they’d drawn to great effect. The divided nations they created were fairly easy for corporate neo-colonialists to conquer or control – whether they sought oil, or sold weapons to those who had the oil, but needed protection ... sometimes from their “own people.” And then there’s Uncle Sam’s meddling (a.k.a. complicity) in the never-ending displacement of the Palestinian people.

But those niggling details tend to cloud the clear-as-day view of Islam that Maher shares with those who see it as an enemy of civilization. That’s certainly the view of die-hard evangelicals like Franklin Graham, of defense industry shills at the American Enterprise Institute and Heritage Foundation, and of the assorted denizens of the increasingly profitable Islamophobia industry.

In effect, Maher and the New Atheists have joined a legion of doomsayers led by the indefatigable Pamela Geller, the paranoia-stricken Frank Gaffney, Steve Bannon’s profit-seeking Breitbart and Trump’s momentary National Security Advisor Lt. General Michael Flynn.

Packaged for Liberals

To be fair, Maher doesn’t employ the same type of paranoid histrionics that both buoys and enriches those right-wing poseurs and the other troubling Islamophobes who’ve found a home in Trump’s White House. Rather, Maher makes a “liberal”

argument about the need to stand up for “progressive” values like equality for women, free speech and freedom of religious conscience. He rightly points to countries like Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan as places where a basic level of human rights is not available to women, to religious minorities, to homosexuals or to anyone not willing to conform to fundamentalist orthodoxy.

Ironically, and perhaps not coincidentally, some of the places where progressive values are least likely to be embraced are the same countries America has mostly closely supported – Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Egypt, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Also not coincidentally, the places where America has exerted the most influence are also the places that produce many of the violent individuals and groups through which Maher judges the planet’s Muslims.

Unsurprisingly, Maher and the New Atheists are loathe to concede the notable shades of gray around the Islamic world – from the women serving in parliament and working as professionals in Iran to the quite different Muslim experiences found in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Balkans. Nor do they mention the fact that Muslim-majority nations have had more women reach the top political spot (eleven) than the United States (zero). It doesn’t quite fit into their zero-sum game.

Punchy Lines

Still, if Maher was making the point that the United States is too often a handmaiden to ... or crass beneficiary of ... repression in regimes that hold some economic and/or strategic value to the defense industry and/or the oil industry, he’d likely garner support from many of the progressives he often scolds. But he doesn’t.

Instead he and his fellow finger-pointers rail against the Quran as the “motherlode of bad ideas.” Maher says Islam is “the only religion that acts like the Mafia” and even assured Muslim-American Rep. Keith Ellison, D-Minnesota, that the Quran is “a hate-filled holy book.”

Maher’s presentation is a “schlock and awe” shtick that burnishes his credentials as a self-appointed bullshit detector. It preserves his long-standing brand as an anti-PC crusader and, like so many great comedians before him, as someone willing to “go there” even if it makes people uncomfortable.

Perhaps that’s why Maher’s accused his fellow liberals of giving Islam a “free pass” when it comes to their “repressive” culture. And why he’s reprimanded anyone who disagrees with his assertion that Islam is both a particularly violent and a peculiarly “backward” religion that is totally incompatible with the modern world (whatever that is).

He's made a point of criticizing the "cultural relativism" that compares Islamic-based violence with violence linked to other religions – particularly violence linked to Christianity. As Maher infamously told Charlie Rose back in 2014, to "claim that this religion is like other religions is just naive and plain wrong."

This politically incorrect posture has made fans of die-hard Christian commentators. But this is also where his punchy argument – and his disdain for context – betrays him. Why? Because it fails to account for the cruel crimes against humanity currently being driven by hard-line, radical Buddhists in Myanmar. Yes, it's true ... Buddhists have fomented a widespread program of ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya minority which is, oddly enough, a Muslim minority.

Hindus Too?

Maheer's posture ignores the rise of Hindu extremism in India, where the problem of religious violence and persecution is growing under the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Vice reported that religious minorities in India "averaged one attack per day" in 2015. Muslims in particular have experienced an increase of random violence since Modi came to power. And last year, attacks on the Christian minority grew three-fold with a church "burnt down or a cleric beaten on average 10 times a week," according to a report by Open Doors UK & Ireland.

It is also true that the radical settler movement in Israel has its own hyper-fundamentalists who believe divine right has given them carte blanche to purge the Holy Land of both Muslims and Christians. In 2016, radicalized settlers produced "an average of 2 incidents of settler violence per week," according to a United Nations report. Yes, we know about Hamas' radical Islamic violence.

But human rights organization B'Tselem is monitoring the persistent problem of Jewish violence because there is such a thing as "radical Judaism." And Israel's "Ultra-Orthodox" fundamentalists have a familiar, anti-liberal problem with women worshipping next to men, riding the bus with men and with a belief in the "unclean" nature of the feminine.

Let's be honest ... it's a fundamentalist tendency shared among the three Abrahamic cousins. Even now America's Vice President Mike Pence believes married men shouldn't risk cavorting with other women, may believe it's possible to "pray the Gay away," absolutely believes gay marriage is tantamount to "societal collapse" and is the standard bearer for a well-established Evangelical political movement that "inspired" violence against abortion providers. And, as noted earlier, there are those troubling, religiously-inspired burning crosses

of the Ku Klux Klan.

Do these religiously-sourced incidents, some of which are part of long, identifiable patterns, mean that the religions themselves are inherently pernicious? Is it possible that Maher, like the politically correct liberals he scorns, is handing out free passes to these non-Muslim religions? Or is it that religions are – like most belief or political systems – potentially useful tools to those seeking righteous justification or an organizing rationale for their rage and anger?

As a guest on Maher's HBO show recently said regarding the "lone wolf" attack outside the Houses of Parliament in London, "it has nothing to do with Islam the same way Timothy McVeigh had nothing to do with Roman Catholicism."

But Maher wasn't having it. And when he was then presented with the fact that Irish Catholic separatists engaged in a deadly campaign of bombings and terrorism against those they perceived as their Protestant oppressors, again Maher bristled. He said that was "the past" (like the Inquisition, the Crusades and, apparently, those uniquely American burning crosses).

And he punctuated his point by dropping this headline-grabbing punch-line: "Every time some bomb goes off, before it goes off, somebody yells 'Allahu Akbar!' I never hear anybody go 'Merry Christmas! This one's for the flying nun!'"

It got a nice chuckle from the crowd. But history usually gets the last laugh.

History Matters

First of all, not only did the IRA and IRA "elements" repeatedly attack Christmas shoppers in London in the week before the holiday, but one such attack outside Harrod's on Dec. 17, 1983, killed five shoppers and wounded 91 others. That bombing led to annual fears of a "Christmas Bombing" campaign all the way into the 1990s.

No, the proudly Catholic authors of that attack did not say "Merry Christmas," but their intention was clear. The bombings were not *in spite of* the most important religious holiday for Christians, but *because of* the added impact that holiday had in creating a feeling of terror among the intended target. The timing of the bombing was itself a terrifying message.

Secondly and, perhaps more pertinently, the United States used the Christmas holiday as a backdrop for one of the most brutal bombing campaigns of the post-World War II era. Officially it was called "Linebacker II," but ever since it began on Dec. 18, 1972, the round-the-clock bombardment of Hanoi, Haiphong and

the surrounding environs has been known as the "Christmas Bombing." It was ordered by President Nixon as a punitive measure meant to terrorize the Vietnamese people and, therefore, designed to apply pressure on the Communist government to (ironically) sign a peace agreement in Paris.

Although there was a pause on Christmas Day, this momentary "gift" was cold comfort to the 1,600 people who died in that campaign. Hanoi was laid waste as America's fleet B-52s flew a total of 741 sorties and "dropped at least 20,000 tonnes" of bombs, according to a 40th anniversary report on the bombing by the BBC. Another report put the total at 40,000 tons. A Vietnamese source says the total – and the lingering toll on the Vietnamese people – was much higher still.

LobeLog's David Bacon wrote a retrospective look at the psychological impact of the B-52 as an instrument of *de facto* terrorism. He dug up a newspaper report on a delegation visiting in the wake of the Christmas Bombing. It was led by Nuremburg jurist Telford Taylor. It also included Joan Baez and Yale University Divinity School Associate Dean Michael Allen, who said, "The most horrible scene that I've ever seen in my life was when we visited the residential area of Khan Thieu, and as far as I could see, everything was destroyed."

Like the IRA, Nixon didn't shout "Merry Christmas" when he delivered his explosive message. Then again, he didn't really have to. As noted journalist and columnist Anthony Lewis wrote in the New York Times, "To send B-52s against populous areas such as Haiphong or Hanoi could have only one purpose: terror." And Lewis wasn't alone in his assessment that Nixon's purpose was, in fact, terrorism.

Newspapers around the United States and the world condemned the bombing and the word "terror" was used by The Washington Post ("Terror Bombing in the Name of Peace," Dec. 28), the New York Times ("Terror From the Skies," Dec. 26), Joseph Kraft ("senseless terror") and Dan Rather ("large scale terror bombing"). The Christmas bombing message was clear to all.

God-Fearing 'Freedom'

But that simple symmetry is not the end of the story. That's because the underlying propaganda of that the war – like all of America's Cold War interventions, proxy battles and ad hoc bombings – was something Americans have (perhaps unsurprisingly, perhaps conveniently) forgotten. The plain fact is that Vietnam and the entire post-World War II period was sold as a struggle against "Godless Communism." That may sound like a quirky anachronism today, but rest assured that the "Godlessness" of Commies, Pinkos and interloping Socialists was not only a core foundation of Cold War propaganda, but it also fed the monster of paranoia that helped create McCarthyism.

Indeed, at the same time Sen. Joe McCarthy, R-Wisconsin, was railing against Commies in 1954, Congress was moving to add "One Nation Under God" to the pledge of allegiance. As the New York Times recalled in a 2002 article on a challenge to the constitutionality of that addition:

"The change was made to draw attention to the difference between the system of government in this country and 'godless Communism.' ... Introducing his resolution in the Senate, Senator Homer Ferguson, Republican of Michigan, declared, 'I believe this modification of the pledge is important because it highlights one of the real fundamental differences between the free world and the Communist world, namely belief in God.' No one in the Senate or the House spoke in opposition."

In fact, the vocal merger of American Christianity with Cold War anti-Communism has been cited as a spur for the 16 percent rise in church membership between 1940 and 1970. In a 2003 review of a well-received book of the topic, Dr. Merrilyn Thomas of University College London noted that it should be "self-evident" that "religion played a significant role in the Cold War ... given the powerful influence of Christianity on the lives of millions of people on both sides of the Iron Curtain."

It may not be "self-evident" now because it is simply taken for granted. We've inherited that era's holy warriorism and pushed it deep into our collective subconsciously through our gaping memory hole. It's a subtext that came to the fore when the 9/11 "changed everything." But, then again ... it really changed nothing.

Lessons Unlearned

Perhaps the saddest fact to emerge from the bloodiest episode in America's war on Godless Communism is that Ho Chi Minh didn't really have to be America's enemy. He actually thought America – with its own revolutionary past – might be an ally in his drive to liberate Vietnam from French colonial rule. It made sense since he'd worked with the OSS to battle the Japanese in World War II. But that nascent alliance became impossible as an almost religious form of zealous anti-Communism consumed Truman's presidency, the foreign policy establishment and, by the mid-1950s, most of America's institutions.

Instead of seeing Ho Chi Minh as a nationalist first and a Communist second, America policymakers missed an important fact. His main goal was to liberate his nation from foreign occupation. But the foreign policy establishment viewed Vietnam and the entire world through a Manichean lens. It was the Free World versus Communism. It was good versus evil. It was a civilizational battle between the God-fearing and the God-less. And this simplistic template made it

impossible to see that Communism was often as much a means to an end as it was an end unto itself.

That's one lesson Cornell University professor and historian Frederik Logevall took from writing his 2012 book *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam*.

As Logevall said in an interview referenced by the New York Times, Ho "saw communism as the best path of development for his country, but it was always *his country*." And it was the liberation of "*his country*" that mattered most. Even the New York Times noted in its Sept. 4, 1969 obituary that Ho was a "remarkable" statesman who "pursued his goal of Vietnamese independence" by successfully "blending Communism with nationalism."

And that's the unlearned lesson of the entire Cold War period. Wherever we look back and see Communist, Socialist and other radicalized insurgencies, we usually see a larger historical process of decolonization. The years after World War II are filled with examples of former colonies fighting against the re-imposition of empire after the end of World War II. Or we see the revolt of newly-liberated peoples against the post-colonial proxies, kleptocrats and petty dictatorships that essentially stood between the people and their right of true self-determination and/or economic power.

To be sure, there were also many instances of dyed-in-the-wool Reds who were true believers. Places like Cuba, China and the Soviet Union were secure enough on their own to turn inward and, ironically, transform the communist project into a statist-style religion with personality cults that smack of religion. We see it now today in North Korea. But it is undeniable that Communism was also an effective organizing and recruitment tool that gave adherents a strong sense of group cohesion and ideological discipline that made them both effective fighters and committed believers.

Moreover, Communism was itself often criticized as a pseudo-religious paradigm that crystallized the terms of the fight into divided the world into the oppressors and the oppressed (a.k.a. infidels and believers). This mirrored the way America divided the world into the God-loving free world and the "Evil" empire of Godless Communism. In many ways, Communism became the logical "belief system" for those organizing resistance to the real or perceived American imperialism of the post-war period. It's almost an irrefutable matter of political physics that the forceful imposition of the American Century would elicit an equal and opposite reaction. These reactions are as predictable as gravity.

Belief System Breakdown

Sadly, the coming of the War on Terror revealed exactly how little America learned from the bloodletting of Vietnam. Osama bin Laden began his Holy War as a project to eject “infidels” from Saudi Arabia – the holiest of Islam’s lands and his home nation. The infidels were American troops and they were there because they were “meddling” in Iraq – a place where America’s one-time client had become its foe. But America’s oil-thirsty neo-colonial protection racket put it right in the crosshairs of bin Laden and many others who resented America’s presence. Ironically, that resentment had its roots in yet another resistance movement – the CIA-generated plot to expel another set of invaders from a Muslim land.

That’s right ... like Ho Chi Minh, Mao Zedong and countless other ideological leaders of the Twentieth Century ... the CIA realized the power of a coherent belief system to create exactly the type group cohesion and hard-won discipline necessary to fight an asymmetrical war against a superior invader. That’s what Saudi Wahhabism and Salafism offered the adherents who flocked to the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan.

Perhaps the CIA took note of the power of Shiite fundamentalism to organize resistance when their hand-picked, highly-Westernized leader in Iran was quickly toppled by a religious coup that was as much an anti-colonial fight as it was anything else. It’s a lesson as Russia learned in neighboring Afghanistan when they were ejected by comparatively lightly-armed foe reinforced by their hardcore beliefs.

It’s strangely fitting that the Muslim faith of the Mujahedeen helped to bring down the “Evil Empire” of Godless Communism. Unfortunately, their American benefactors filled that vacuum with their own ambitions for a unipolar world and, in the process, left Afghanistan with little more than rubble to show for their help.

With America now unopposed on the world stage, it began a renewed era of “meddling” around the Muslim world that led to the arrival troops in Saudi Arabia (1990), the basing of the Fifth Fleet in Bahrain (1995), the establishment of Camp Lemmonier in Djibouti (2002) and a vast array of smaller deployments around the globe. This compounded the damage from U.S. indifference to Palestinian aspirations for self-determination and from a decade of sanctions and bombing in Iraq that reportedly led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of children.

Albright’s Endorsement

Whether that story is a fact or a myth, all that really matters is that the story was widely known. In 1996, it was bitterly reinforced by then-U.S.

Ambassador to the U.N. Madeleine Albright when she infamously told Lesley Stahl of *60 Minutes* that the Iraq's sanction-related deaths were "worth it."

Why? Because America's former client – Saddam Hussein – needed to be punished. This is the same Saddam Hussein the United States armed in the 1980s to fight Iran. That's the same Iran the United States was simultaneously – and quite illegally – arming to fight Saddam. And this, like so many other details, may be inexorably stuffed somewhere in America's bottomless memory hole.

But, like a long litany of interventions, drone-delivered executions and troubling crimes committed since 9/11 (yes, torture and extralegal imprisonment are crimes), it's a fact widely known around the Muslim world. Don't doubt for a minute that Gitmo, Abu Ghraib and the ever-present menace of hovering drones are foremost in the hearts and minds of many Muslims.

Given that fact, it is any real surprise that the Muslim world sees the United States and its allies as enemies? Is it really because – as the New Atheists and Right-wing Islamophobes believe (note that is, in fact, a belief) – the Muslim faith is uniquely ill-equipped to be part of their "civilized" world? Or is it that Islam is just the latest example of an ideology or religion being used to organize, to inspire and to marshal angry, displaced and/or aspirational human beings in a fight against a superior foe?

If history is our guide, radical jihadism looks like an opportune way to organize resistance to what many Muslims see as an American Century of violent "meddling" and political imposition through brutal proxies and neo-colonial adventurism. It is blowback. The New Atheists – and befuddled Americans – should look no further than the most recent slaughters of civilians in Yemen and Mosul for the replenishment of the already manifold reasons why they hate us.

And as for the often-cited the rejection of Western "liberal" values? Like the rejection of "decadent Capitalism" by fundamentalist Communism during the Cold War, it makes sense that Islamic fundamentalism would target anything that smacks of the Western world. And like other ideologies of resistance and revolution, it directs people's anger toward the accouterments and symbols of the dominant power in their lives – whether directly imposed or imposed through proxies.

If that's what radical Muslim jihadism is ... then it is infinitely more comprehensible than Bill Maher, the New Atheists and Right-wing Islamophobes are willing to accept or admit. Maybe Islam isn't a puzzling cancer that has to be excised. Maybe jihadism is a means, not an end. And maybe the brutal insanity of the Islamic State is more an echo of the excesses of the Khmer Rouge, Stalin's purges, Mao's Cultural Revolution and Robespierre's Reign of Terror than it is a

logical conclusion of the Islamic faith. And maybe ... just maybe ... the radicalism around Muslim world can be seen in a larger context of history. That means acknowledging the extent to which America and its repressive proxies have set the terms of the debate around the Muslim world for the better part of a century.

Ultimately, it's most important to recognize that Maher is, at best, misguided when he says there aren't "Christian terrorist armies like ISIS." As far as many Muslims on the receiving end of officially-sanctioned violence from the U.S. military, that's probably a distinction without much of a difference. And if there's any doubt about America's own lingering fundamentalism, take note that few things would be more futile today than trying to get Congress to scrub that Cold War-era religious test from the Pledge of Allegiance.

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Where Was CIA's Pompeo on Syria?

Exclusive: As President Trump was launching his missile strike against Syria, CIA Director Pompeo and other intelligence officials weren't at the table, suggesting their doubts about Bashar al-Assad's guilt, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

There is a dark mystery behind the White House-released photo showing President Trump and more than a dozen advisers meeting at his estate in Mar-a-Lago after his decision to strike Syria with Tomahawk missiles: Where are CIA Director Mike Pompeo and other top intelligence officials?

Before the photo was released on Friday, a source told me that Pompeo had personally briefed Trump on April 6 about the CIA's belief that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was likely not responsible for the lethal poison-gas incident in northern Syria two days earlier – and thus Pompeo was excluded from the larger meeting as Trump reached a contrary decision.

At the time, I found the information dubious since Trump, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and other senior U.S. officials were declaring quite confidently that Assad was at fault. Given that apparent confidence, I assumed that Pompeo and the CIA must have signed off on the conclusion of Assad's guilt even though I

knew that some U.S. intelligence analysts had contrary opinions, that they viewed the incident as either an accidental release of chemicals or an intentional ploy by Al Qaeda rebels to sucker the U.S. into attacking Syria.

As strange as the Trump administration has been in its early months, it was hard for me to believe that Trump would have listened to the CIA's views and then shooed the director away from the larger meeting before launching a military strike against a country not threatening America.

After the strike against Syria by 59 Tomahawk missiles, which Syrian officials said killed seven people including four children, Trump gave a speech to the American people declaring flatly:

"On Tuesday, Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad launched a horrible chemical weapons attack on innocent civilians. Using a deadly nerve agent, Assad choked out the lives of helpless men, women, and children. It was a slow and brutal death for so many. Even beautiful babies were cruelly murdered in this very barbaric attack. No child of God should ever suffer such horror."

As much as Trump stood to benefit politically by acting aggressively in attacking Syria – and thus winning praise even from his harshest critics – the idea that he would ignore the views of the U.S. intelligence community on an issue of war or peace was something that I found hard to believe.

So, I put aside what I had heard from the source about the discordant Pompeo-Trump meeting as the sort of tidbit that may come from someone who lacks first-hand knowledge and doesn't get all the details right.

After all, in almost every similar situation that I had covered over decades, the CIA Director or the Director of National Intelligence has played a prominent role in decisions that depend heavily on the intelligence community's assessments and actions.

For instance, in the famous photo of President Obama and his team waiting out the results of the 2011 raid to kill Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, CIA Director Leon Panetta is the one on the conference screen that everyone is looking at.

Even when the U.S. government is presenting false information, such as Secretary of State Colin Powell's 2003 speech laying out the bogus evidence of Iraq hiding WMDs, CIA Director George Tenet was seated behind Powell to lend credibility to the falsehoods.

At the Table

But in the photo of Trump and his advisers, no one from the intelligence community is in the frame. You see Trump, Secretary of State Tillerson, National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster, White House chief of staff Reince Priebus, strategic adviser Steve Bannon, son-in-law Jared Kushner and a variety of other officials, including some economic advisers who were at Mar-a-Lago in Florida for the meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping.

However, you don't see Pompeo or Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats or any other intelligence official. Even The New York Times noted the oddity in its Saturday editions, writing: "If there were C.I.A. and other intelligence briefers around, ... they are not in the picture."

That made me wonder whether perhaps my original source did know something. The claim was that CIA Director Pompeo had briefed Trump personally on the analysts' assessment that Assad's forces were not responsible, but – then with Pompeo sidelined – Trump conveyed his own version of the intelligence to his senior staff.

In other words, the other officials didn't get the direct word from Pompeo but rather received a second-hand account from the President, the source said. Did Trump choose to rely on the smug certainty from the TV shows and the mainstream news media that Assad was guilty, rather than the contrary view of U.S. intelligence analysts?

After the attack, Secretary of State Tillerson, who is not an institutional intelligence official and has little experience with the subtleties of intelligence, was the one to claim that the U.S. intelligence community assessed with a "high degree of confidence" that the Syrian government had dropped a poison gas bomb on civilians in Idlib province.

While Tillerson's comment meshed with Official Washington's hastily formed groupthink of Assad's guilt, it is hard to believe that CIA analysts would have settled on such a firm conclusion so quickly, especially given the remote location of the incident and the fact that the initial information was coming from pro-rebel (or Al Qaeda) sources.

Thus, a serious question arises whether President Trump did receive that "high degree of confidence" assessment from the intelligence community or whether he shunted Pompeo aside to eliminate an obstacle to his desire to launch the April 6 rocket attack.

If so, such a dangerous deception more than anything else we've seen in the first two-plus months of the Trump administration would be grounds for impeachment – ignoring the opinion of the U.S. intelligence community so the

President could carry out a politically popular (albeit illegal) missile strike that killed Syrians.

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](#)).

Trampling the US Constitution for War

Donald Trump's unilateral decision to attack Syria under a preposterous claim of protecting a "vital national security interest" of the U.S. was another case of a President violating the U.S. Constitution, as Daniel C. Maguire explains.

By Daniel C. Maguire

I am old enough to remember the last time the United States declared war in accord with Article 1, Section 8 of the U.S. Constitution. The date was Dec. 8, 1941, and I was ten-years-old. I remember hearing on the radio all the Yay votes and I was jarred to hear one female vote saying Nay. That was Rep. Jeannette Rankin of Montana.

War, by definition, is state sponsored violence. It kills people and animals and savages the natural environment. It is "development" in full reverse, a dreadfully serious undertaking, a power that kings once wielded arbitrarily on their own impulse and authority. But the Founders would have none of that.

So, the U.S. Constitution gave the war power to the Congress, "the immediate representatives of the people." Congress also received the crucial power of the purse to continue or discontinue war after it starts.

James Madison, the Constitution's principal architect, wrote: "In no part of the Constitution is more wisdom to be found than in the clause which confides the question of war and peace to the legislature and not to the executive department."

Yet, in recent decades, the United States has repeatedly trashed that wisdom and done so as recently as April 6, 2017, as President Trump displayed his bully virility and his need to use kill-power to bolster his sagging ratings.

As military analyst Robert Previdi writes: "We have distorted the Constitution by allowing all Presidents since Harry S. Truman to use military power on their

own authority. ... For more than 160 years, from Washington to Roosevelt, no President claimed that he had the power to move the country from peace to war without first getting authority to do so from Congress."

But a servile Congress has whittled away its signal prerogative to make war. In the Tonkin Gulf Resolution in 1964, Congress gave President Lyndon Johnson a blank check signed by a responsibility-shedding Congress.

In 1973, with the War Powers Resolution, it allowed the President to commit troops anywhere in the world for up to 60 days without congressional involvement. By that time in modern warfare, the die would be cast with Congress left holding the President's coat as he uses the power abandoned by congressional defection.

The Iraq Resolution in October of 2002 transferred war-making authority to President George W. Bush for him to use or not use at his whim and discretion. And so it came to pass that another George in American history was given kingly power with predictably disastrous results, much as the arrogance of King George III precipitated Great Britain's break with its American colonies.

Barack Obama, after winning the Nobel Peace prize, went on to make war in places such as Somalia, Yemen, Syria, Libya, Iraq Afghanistan, and Pakistan without a congressional declaration of war. The sort of abuse of executive power has become "second nature" to us now.

But at least Obama asked Congress to authorize war on Syria, a move that contributed to the decision to avoid a full-scale U.S. military intervention in another Mideast war. There were other moments of sanity when constitutional restraint peeked through. On April 5, 1954, when President Eisenhower was under pressure to do an air strike in Indochina, he replied to Secretary of State John Foster Dulles: "Such a move is impossible" and would be "completely unconstitutional and indefensible." (Remember when Republicans could say such things!)

Commander-in-Chief?

The term "Commander-in-Chief" is perverted to justify Congressional surrender of its constitutional war-declaring power to the royal president. The term runs like a greased pig through political discourse these days.

As Robert Previdi notes: "The President's power as Commander-in-Chief in time of war takes over only *after* authority to deploy our forces has been received from Congress." The key word there is *after*.

And here is another irony in this story of serially rampaging bombs-away

presidents. Richard Falk writes that World War II ended with an historic understanding that recourse to war by individual nations could no longer be treated as “a matter of national discretion.”

The legal framework embodied in the United Nations Charter, largely shaped by American jurists, was “to entrust the Security Council with administering a prohibition of recourse to international force (Article 2, Section 4) by states except in circumstances of self-defense, which itself was restricted to response to a prior ‘armed attack’ (Article 51) and only then until the Security Council had the chance to review the claim.”

This is known in the literature as “the policing paradigm.” It means that state-sponsored violence can only be justified in a community context with legal and internationally enforceable restrictions comparable to the restraints we put upon our police. This civilizing understanding lies amid the smoking rubble of a world of endless war.

A president can become the despotic shepherd only when the people become his sheep. In recent decades, the *vox populi* has only bleated when it should have been screaming. Teddy Roosevelt said: “To announce that there must be no criticism of the President, or that we are to stand by the President, right or wrong, is not only unpatriotic and servile, but is morally treasonable to the American People.”

Yes, members of Congress, with a few noble exceptions, are groveling wimps and aliens to the lost art of diplomacy, but it’s also true that an ill-informed, lazy and indolent citizenry is neck high in treasonous negligence. In the end, the buck stops with us.

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Mainstream Media as Arbiters of Truth

Exclusive: An angry mainstream U.S. media is shaking its fist at anyone who won’t clamber onboard the Russia-gate groupthink bandwagon, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The mainstream U.S. media is never more unctuous and unprofessional as when it asserts that it alone must be the arbiter of what is true and what is not, regardless of what the evidence shows or doesn't show.

For instance, New York Times columnist Charles W. Blow declared on Monday that the public can no longer debate whether Russia leaked to WikiLeaks the emails from the Democratic National Committee and Hillary Clinton's campaign chairman John Podesta despite the failure of the U.S. government or private researchers to present evidence that establishes that claim as fact.

Blow acknowledged that "We are still not conclusively able to connect the dots on the question of whether there was any coordination or collusion between members of Donald Trump's campaign and the Russians ... but those dots do continue to multiply at an alarming rate."

But Blow also asserted that "It is absolutely clear that the Russians did interfere in our election. This is not a debatable issue. This is not fake news. This is not a witch hunt. This happened."

Blow chastised people who still wanted evidence of this now non-debatable issue, seeing them at fault "because this fact [of the Russian meddling] keeps getting obscured in the subterfuge of deflection, misdirection and ideological finger-pointing about what has yet to be proven."

So, if you insist on asking for proof of the core allegation in Russia-gate, you are guilty of "subterfuge..., misdirection and ideological finger-pointing."

And if that indictment doesn't quiet you up, there's the column by The Washington Post's E.J. Dionne Jr. who explains that the real victims in Russia-gate are the accusers who have promoted this guilt-by-association scandal that has impugned the integrity of a growing number of Americans who either talked to Russians or who expressed doubts about the investigation.

While the Russia-gate accusers have essentially deemed these Americans "traitors" or the Kremlin's "useful idiots" or some other derogatory phrase, Dionne sees the much greater offense coming from the people so accused who have complained about what they see as McCarthyism. Dionne writes:

"These days, any liberal who raises alarms about Trump's relationship with Russia confronts charges of McCarthyism, hysteria and hypocrisy. The inclination of many on the left to assail [Russian President Vladimir] Putin is often ascribed to partisan anger over his success in undermining Clinton's candidacy.

“There’s no doubt that liberals are angry, but ask yourself: Shouldn’t everyone, left, right and center, be furious over Russia’s efforts to inject calumny and falsehood into the American political bloodstream?”

So, Dionne suggests that people who question the credibility of the Russia-gate allegations are somehow un-American by favoring the injection of “calumny and falsehood into the American political bloodstream.” But that mainstream hostility toward skepticism has been at the heart of the Russia-bashing campaign that we have witnessed for the past several years.

Blacklisting Journalists

And, that campaign indeed has been replete with McCarthyism. You even have The Washington Post [promoting a blacklist of 200 Internet news sites](#) (including Consortiumnews.com and other prominent independent-minded outlets) as guilty of “Russian propaganda” for reporting skeptically on some State Department claims about the New Cold War.

But Dionne also is dishonest in claiming that the alleged leaks blamed on Russia are false. The central allegation in Russia-gate is that the Russians obtained two batches of Democratic emails and released them to the American public via WikiLeaks. Even if that is the case, nothing in those emails was fabricated.

The emails represented real news including evidence that the DNC displayed improper bias against Sen. Bernie Sanders’s insurgent campaign; excerpts of Hillary Clinton’s paid speeches to Wall Street that she was trying to hide from the voters; and revelations about pay-to-play aspects of the Clinton Foundation’s dealing with foreign entities.

So, even if the Russians did give the emails to WikiLeaks – although WikiLeaks denies that the Russians were the source – the core reality is that the emails provided real information that the American people had a genuine right to know. But Dionne and the mainstream U.S. media have conflated this truth-telling with cases of “fake news,” i.e., made-up stories that investigations have shown had no connection to Russia, simply to sleazy entrepreneurs seeking to make some money via lots of clicks. In other words, Dionne is lying or engaging in “fake news” himself.

Such phony journalism is reminiscent of other shameful chapters of the mainstream media’s history of serving as propaganda conduits and marginalizing independent reporters who displayed professional skepticism toward the dangerous groupthink of Official Washington.

A pivotal moment in the chaos that is now consuming the planet came on Feb. 6, 2003, when The Washington Post’s editorial and op-ed pages presented a solid

phalanx of misguided consensus that ruled out any further dissent about the existence of Iraq's WMD after Secretary of State Colin Powell presented his slam-dunk case before the United Nations the day before.

The Post's editorial board – led by editorial page editor Fred Hiatt – judged Powell's WMD case “irrefutable,” an opinion echoed across the Post's op-ed page.

“The evidence he [Powell] presented to the United Nations – some of it circumstantial, some of it absolutely bone-chilling in its detail – had to prove to anyone that Iraq not only hasn't accounted for its weapons of mass destruction but without a doubt still retains them,” wrote Post columnist Richard Cohen. “Only a fool – or possibly a Frenchman – could conclude otherwise.”

The Post's senior foreign policy columnist Jim Hoagland then demanded the surrender of any WMD-doubting holdouts: “To continue to say that the Bush administration has not made its case, you must now believe that Colin Powell lied in the most serious statement he will ever make, or was taken in by manufactured evidence. I don't believe that. Today, neither should you.”

This enforced WMD consensus contributed to arguably the most disastrous U.S. foreign policy decision in history as President George W. Bush launched an illegal invasion of Iraq that got nearly 4,500 U.S. soldiers killed along with hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and spread bloody chaos across the Middle East and now into Europe. There was also the problem that no hidden caches of WMD were discovered.

So, you might assume that editorial-page editor Fred Hiatt and other prominent mainstream journalists who pushed the bogus WMD claims and pushed the few dissenters to the fringes of the public debate, received some appropriate punishments – at least being unceremoniously fired in disgrace. Of course, if you thought that, you don't understand how the U.S. mainstream media works. To this day, Fred Hiatt is still the editorial-page editor of The Washington Post.

Slandering Dr. King

One might note, however, that historically the mainstream U.S. media has performed no better than it has in recent years.

Fifty years ago, on April 4, 1967, at Riverside Church in New York City, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave one of the most important speeches in U.S. history, taking to task American militarism and the Vietnam War. Famously and courageously, King denounced his own government as “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today.”

King, whose life was increasingly at risk, was then put at even greater risk by being denounced by The New York Times and The Washington Post. The Post blasted King for spreading what today we might call “fake news,” accusing him of “sheer inventions of unsupported fantasy.” The Times chimed in that King’s words were “facile” and “slander” while urging him to focus instead on “the intractability of slum mores and habits,” i.e. those lazy and immoral black folks. (Exactly a year later, King was shot dead.)

But you might ask, don’t the Post and Times at least get the big investigative stories right and thus warn the American people about abuses to their democratic process? Well, not exactly.

Take, for example, the case of Richard Nixon conspiring with South Vietnamese leaders to sabotage President Lyndon Johnson’s Paris peace talks in fall 1968 so Nixon could eke out a victory over Vice President Hubert Humphrey. Nixon’s manipulation of that election – while half a million American soldiers were in the war zone – was treated by the Post and Times as a conspiracy theory for nearly half a century, even as honest journalists chipped away at Nixon’s denials by uncovering evidence of the deal that continued the war for another four years.

Some reporters, such as the Christian Science Monitor’s Beverly Deepe, were onto the story in real time. Others, including Seymour Hersh, advanced knowledge about these events over the decades. Five years ago, I uncovered a top secret file that Johnson’s National Security Adviser Walt Rostow dubbed “The X-Envelope” which contained wiretap proof of what Johnson called Nixon’s “treason.” Besides writing up the details, I posted the documents on the Internet so anyone could see for themselves.

Yet, as recently as last October, The New York Times ignored all this evidence when referencing the supposed “October Surprise” of 1968, citing – instead of Nixon’s peace-talk sabotage – the fact that Johnson had ordered a bombing halt of North Vietnam. In other words, the Times was still promoting Nixon’s version of the story nearly a half century later.

Only early this year, when a scholar uncovered some cryptic notes by Nixon’s chief of staff H.R. Haldeman that seemed to reference Nixon’s instructions regarding the sabotage did the Times finally deign to acknowledge the reality (because the Times published the finding on its op-ed page, which I guess makes it true). But the Times did so without acknowledging all the hard work that journalists had done over the years so the cryptic notes would fit into a complex puzzle that made sense.

Nor did the Times acknowledge its own role in obscuring this history for so

long.

Rumor-Mongers

To add insult to the historical injury, the Times pretended that it was right to have ignored the earlier work. Times columnist Nicholas Kristof dismissively treated those decades of investigative journalism by writing: “Nixon’s initiative, long rumored but confirmed only a few months ago, was meant to improve his election chances that year.”

“Long rumored”? The reality was that Nixon’s perfidy had long ago been proven by independent-minded journalists but their work was ignored by The New York Times and pretty much everyone else in the mainstream media until the self-proclaimed truth monitors decided that the discovery of one new piece of the mosaic was the appropriate time to proclaim that the reality could now be accepted as a reality.

To explain the near half-century gap in the Times’ failure to investigate this historic act of treason, the Times then smeared the journalists who had done the investigating as rumor-mongers.

So, in light of the mainstream media’s dismal performance over the decades, what is one to make of the dictate now that we must accept that the Russians did leak the emails to WikiLeaks even if no one is showing us the evidence? It also appears that we are supposed to dismiss the contents of the emails as “fake news” (even though they are genuine) so that will buttress the narrative that Russia is undermining our democracy by disseminating “fake news.”

Perhaps getting people to accept this false narrative is crucial to giving credibility to the Times’ full-page ads professing the newspaper’s undying love of the truth and to The Washington Post’s new melodramatic slogan, “Democracy Dies in Darkness.”

While there’s no doubt that truth is important to an informed electorate, there is something scary when the mainstream media, which has such a checkered history of misreporting the truth, asserts that it is the one that gets to decide what the truth is.

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).

MLK's Warning of America's Spiritual Death

From the Archive: A half century ago, The New York Times accused Martin Luther King Jr. of "slander" for decrying the Vietnam War and The Washington Post detected "unsupported fantasies" in his speech, recalled more favorably by Gary G. Kohls.

By Gary G. Kohls (Originally published on Jan. 19, 2014; slightly edited for time element)

Martin Luther King Jr.'s Riverside Church speech was titled "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence." It was delivered exactly one year before his April 4, 1968 assassination in Memphis. In the speech, King declared, "A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death."

The people who heard that speech recognized it as one of the most powerful speeches ever given articulating the immorality of the Vietnam War and its destructive impact on social progress in the United States. In explaining his decision to follow his conscience and speak out against U.S. militarism, King said:

"I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic destructive suction tube. So I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such."

But King went farther, diagnosing the broader disease of militarism and violence that was endangering the soul of the United States. King said, "I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today – my own government."

Poisoning America's Soul

King knew very well that the disease of violence was killing off more than social progress in America. Violence was sickening the nation's soul as well. He added, "If America's soul becomes totally poisoned, part of the autopsy must read 'Vietnam'." King urged his fellow citizens to take up the causes of the world's oppressed, rather than taking the side of the oppressors. He said:

"I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a 'thing-oriented' society to a 'person-oriented' society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism and militarism are incapable of being conquered.

"We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time. Life often leaves us standing bare, naked and dejected with a lost opportunity. We still have a choice today; nonviolent coexistence or violent co-annihilation. We must move past indecision to action. We must find new ways to speak for peace and justice throughout the developing world a world that borders on our doors.

"If we do not act we shall surely be dragged down the long, dark and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality and strength without sight."

King pointed to an alternate path into the future: "Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter but beautiful struggle for a new world. This is the calling of the sons of God, and our brothers wait eagerly for our response. Shall we say the odds are too great? Shall we tell them the struggle is too hard?"

Signing His Own Death Warrant

By denouncing so forcefully the war crimes that the U.S. military was committing daily in the killing fields of Vietnam, some of King's followers understood that he had just signed his own death warrant. But King, being a person of conscience, was compelled to express his deep sense of moral outrage over the horrific maiming, suffering and dying of millions of innocent Vietnamese civilians in that unjust war that afflicted mostly unarmed women and children and that was going to leave behind lethal poisons in the soil, water and unborn babies that would last for generations.

He knew that non-combatants are always the major victims of modern warfare, especially wars that indiscriminately used highly lethal weapons that rained down from the air, especially the U.S. Air Force's favorite weapon, napalm – the flaming, jellied gasoline that burned the flesh off of whatever part of the burning adult or child it splashed onto.

King also connected the racist acts (of American soldiers joyfully killing dispensable non-white "gooks" and "slants" – often shooting at "anything that

moves”) on the battlefields of Southeast Asia to the oppression, impoverishment, imprisoning and lynching of dispensable, deprived non-white “niggers” in America.

King saw the connections between the violence of racism and the violence of poverty. He saw that the withholding of economic and educational opportunities came from the fear of “the other” and the perceived need to protect the white culture’s wealth and privilege with violence if necessary.

King knew, too, that fortunes are made in every war, and the war in Vietnam was no exception. In his speeches, he talked about that unwelcome reality that the ruling class preferred not be discussed. That meant his well-attended Riverside Church speech threatened not only the powerful interests already arrayed against his civil rights struggle but also the interests of the war profiteers and the national security establishment.

War is Good Business

The longer the Vietnam War lasted, the more the weapons manufacturers thrived. With their huge profits, there was a strong incentive for these financial elites to continue the carnage. And therefore the Wall Street war profiteers financed, out of their ill-gotten gains, battalions of industry lobbyists and pro-military propagandists who descended upon Washington, DC, and the Pentagon to claim even more tax dollars for weapons research, development and manufacture.

With that funding secured, armies of desperate jobs-seekers were hired to work in thousands of weapons factories that were strategically placed in congressional districts almost everywhere, with weapons research grants likewise being awarded to virtually every university in the nation. Thus, weapons-manufacturing and R&D soon became vitally important for almost every legislator’s home district economy as well as for the household budgets of millions of American voters who indirectly benefitted from the U.S. military’s killing, maiming, displacement, starvation and suffering of non-white people in war zones.

King’s anti-war stance was based on his Christianity and on the ethics and life of Jesus, but it was also based on his standing as a revered international peace and justice icon. Those factors made him a dangerous threat to the military/industrial/congressional/security complex.

The powerful forces that were working hard to discredit King had already infiltrated the civil rights movement. Their efforts, cunningly led by the proto-fascist and racist J. Edgar Hoover and his obedient FBI, accelerated after the Riverside speech. The FBI ramped up the smear campaigns against King.

Eventually he was “neutralized” with a bullet to the head. [The case for believing that King’s murder was not simply the act of lone gunman James Earl Ray is laid out in many studies, including attorney William F. Pepper’s *An Act of State: The Execution of Martin Luther King.*]

King’s Prophetic Vision

Now, five decades after his anti-war speech (which was widely kept from the public), it is clear how prophetic King’s observations were. America is indeed losing its soul. Violence, racism, militarism and economic oppression are still American epidemics.

Both upper- and middle-class investors of get-rich-quick schemes in America have succumbed to predatory lenders, cannibalistic corporate mergers and acquisitions, psychopathic multinational corporate schemers, corrupt crony capitalists, and the rapist/exploiters of the land and water by extractive industries all schemes that will eventually burst as part of predictable economic bubbles.

Those busted bubbles regularly wipe out investors (except for the large, deep-pocketed “insiders” who, usually being forewarned, will have sold their holdings just in time, before the publicly revealed “bust”), leaving the taxpayers to bail out the financial messes that were created by the so-called “invisible hand of the market” but are really caused by the cunning work of corporate gamblers.

King was trying to warn us not just about the oncoming epidemic of violence toward victims at home but also about the tens of millions of people around the world who were and are still being victimized by U.S. military misadventures. King was also warning us about the multinational corporate war profiteers whose interests are facilitated and protected by the U.S. military whether they are operating in Asia, Latin America, Africa or the Middle East.

The Pentagon budget averages well over \$700 billion per year, including wars that are often illegal and unconstitutional. That amounts to \$2 billion per day with no visible return on investment, except for the military contractors, the oil industries and Wall Street financiers.

Vast sums also are needed to address the physical and mental health costs needed for the palliative care for the permanently maimed and psychologically-traumatized veterans. Hundreds of millions of dollars more are spent paying down the interest payments on past military debts.

All those potentially bankrupting costs represent money that will never be available for programs of social uplift like combatting racism, poverty and hunger, or paying for affordable housing/healthcare, universal education or

meaningful job creation. Can anyone else hear a demonic laugh reverberating down Wall Street?

King was warning America about its oncoming spiritual death if it didn't convert itself away from military violence. But most observers of the U.S. see America still worshipping at the altars of the Gods of War and Greed. Our children may be doomed.

The vast majority of American Christian churches (whether fundamentalist, conservative, moderate or liberal, with very few exceptions) have failed King's vision, despite the lip service they sometimes give to King on MLK Day. Churches whose members were brought up on the Myth of American Exceptionalism (and the myth of being "God's chosen people") consistently refuse to take a stand against the satanic nature of war.

Past the Point of No Return?

If America is to avert future financial and military catastrophes, King's central warnings about the "triple evils" of militarism, racism and economic oppression must be heeded. That means a retreat from worldwide network of budget-busting military bases. And, if America wants to shed the justified label of "Rogue Nation," the covert killing operations of its secret black ops mercenary military units all around the world must be stopped, as should the infamous extrajudicial assassinations by America's unmanned drones.

If King's 50-year-old warning continues to be ignored, America's future is bleak. The future holds the dark seeds of economic chaos, hyperinflation, unendurable poverty, increasing racial/minority hostility, worsening malnutrition, armed rebellion, street fighting, and perhaps, ultimately, institution of a reactionary totalitarian/surveillance police state in order to control citizen protests and quell rebellions.

In 1967, many Americans considered King hopeful vision for a better future as irrational idealism. He was told that the task was too great, the obstacles were too imposing, and there was no will for even the churches to reverse their age-old, conservative pseudo-patriotism and society's institutional racism. I suspect that many of the churches that called King a communist and therefore ignored him back then wish that they could turn back the clock and give King's (and Jesus's) path a try.

King finished his speech with these challenges: "War is not the answer. We still have a choice today; nonviolent coexistence or violent co-annihilation. We must move past indecision to action. We must find new ways to speak for peace and justice throughout the developing world a world that borders on our doors. If we

do not act we shall surely be dragged down the long dark and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality and strength without sight.”

And he had these sobering words for the churches that are immersed in a polytheistic culture (the worship of multiple gods, including the gods of war and mammon) and thus are tempted to quietly ally themselves with those gods rather than the God of Love that King was devoted to:

“I have traveled the length and breadth of Alabama, Mississippi and all the other southern states. I have looked at her beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward. I have beheld the impressive outlay of her massive religious education buildings. Over and over again I have found myself asking: ‘What kind of people worship here? Who is their God?’”

Today, the task is even tougher, the obstacles much more imposing, but the path that King outlined remains.

Dr. Gary G. Kohls is a retired physician who writes about peace, justice, militarism, mental health and religious issues.

Blaming Russia for Everything

Exclusive: The Senate Intelligence Committee launched its Russia-gate investigation by inviting some “experts” in to rant about how everything that goes wrong in the United States is the fault of the Russians, observes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

It’s almost getting comical how everything that happens in the United States gets blamed on Russia! Russia! Russia! And, if any American points out the absurdity of this argument, he or she must be a “Moscow stooge” or a “Putin puppet.”

When Sen. Marco Rubio’s presidential campaign fails seemingly because he was a wet-behind-the-ears candidate who performed like a robot during debates repeating the same talking points over and over, you might have cited those shortcomings to explain why “Little Marco” flamed out. However, if you did, that would make you a Russian “useful idiot”! The “real” reason for his failure, as we learned from Thursday’s Senate Intelligence Committee hearing, was Russia!

When Americans turned against President Obama's Pacific trade deals, you might have thought that it was because people across the country had grown sick and tired of these neoliberal agreements that have left large swaths of the country deindustrialized and former blue-collar workers turning to opioids and alcohol. But if you did think that, that would mean you are a dupe of the clever Russkies, as ex-British spy Christopher Steele made clear in one of his "oppo" research reports against Donald Trump. As Steele's dossier explained, the rejection of Obama's TPP and TTIP trade deals resulted from Russian propaganda!

When Hillary Clinton boots a presidential election that was literally hers to lose, you might have thought that she lost because she insisted on channeling her State Department emails through a private server that endangered national security; that she gave paid speeches to Wall Street and tried to hide the contents from the voters; that she called half of Donald Trump's supporters "deplorables"; that she was a widely disliked establishment candidate in an anti-establishment year; that she was shoved down the throats of progressive Democrats by a Democratic Party hierarchy that made her nomination "inevitable" via the undemocratic use of unelected "super-delegates"; that some of her State Department emails were found on the laptop of suspected sex offender Anthony Weiner (the husband of Clinton's close aide Huma Abedin); and that the laptop discovery caused FBI Director James Comey to briefly reopen the investigation of Clinton's private email server in the last days of the campaign.

You might even recall that Clinton herself blamed her late collapse in the polls on Comey's announcement, as did other liberal luminaries such as New York Times columnist Paul Krugman. But if you thought those thoughts or remembered those memories, that is just more proof that you are a "Russian mole"!

As we all should know in our properly restructured memory banks and our rearranged sense of reality, it was all Russia's fault! Russia did it by undermining our democratic process through the clever means of releasing truthful information via WikiLeaks that provided evidence of how the Democratic National Committee rigged the nomination process against Sen. Bernie Sanders, revealed the contents of Clinton's hidden Wall Street speeches, and exposed pay-to-play features of the Clinton Foundation in its dealings with foreign entities.

You see the evil Russians undermined American democracy by arming the American people with truthful information! How dastardly is that! Could Boris and Natasha do any better or worse? And although the Soviet spies in FX's "The Americans" were in their prime in the 1980s and would be pretty old by now, do we know where they are in the present day? Though WikiLeaks denies getting the two batches of emails – the DNC's and Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta's –

from the Russians, have we ruled out that the emails might have been slipped to WikiLeaks by the FX characters Philip and Elizabeth Jennings, presumably in disguise?

Oddly, too, when similar factual revelations come from Western-favored leaks, such as the purloined financial records of a Panamanian law firm known as the "Panama Papers," we hail the disclosures regardless of the dubious methods that were used to steal them, especially if the contents can be spun to undermine disfavored governments like Russia (while also inconveniently embarrassing a few unimportant "'allies").

But if you make that comparison or you note how the U.S. Agency for International Development and the U.S. government-funded National Endowment for Democracy have supported various "independent" journalists and news outlets to advance U.S. propaganda, that makes you guilty of "moral equivalence," another serious offense.

Crazy Talk

So now that you know how the game is played, you had the Senate Intelligence Committee eliciting testimony from people like media watcher Clint Watts, who seems to believe that any criticism of a U.S. government official (at least anyone he likes) must be directed by Russia!

"This past week we observed social media accounts discrediting U.S. Speaker of the House Paul Ryan," said Watts, who is billed in The Washington Post as "an expert in terrorism forecasting and Russian influence operations."

Gee, I know you might say that you went on Facebook last week to criticize Ryan for bungling the "repeal and replace" of Obamacare by proposing a scheme that managed to alienate both right-wing and moderate Republicans as well as all Democrats. But that only proves you are indeed a Russian disinformation agent! (Watts also claimed that Sen. Rubio's presidential bid "anecdotally suffered" from an online Russian campaign against him.)

As Watts describes these nefarious Russian schemes, they are so nefarious that they don't have any discernible earmarks or detectable predictability. In his view, the Russians don't want to help any particular person or group, just undermine America's faith in its democracy.

As Watts puts it, Russians attack "people on both sides of the aisle ... solely based on what they [the Russians] want to achieve in their own landscape, whatever the Russian foreign policy objectives are. They win because they play both sides." In other words, any political comment that an American might make might just prove that you're a traitor.

But Watts singled out President Trump for special criticism because he supposedly has tweeted about Russian-planted conspiracy theories. "Part of the reason active measures have worked in this U.S. election is because the commander-in-chief has used Russian active measure at times against his opponent," Watts said, citing Trump's bogus claims about 2016 voter fraud and his earlier silliness about President Obama's Kenyan birthplace. Yes, as we all know, every goofy idea is manufactured in Russia. Americans are incapable of developing their own nonsense.

Watts then suggested that some kind of Ministry of Truth is needed to stamp out unapproved information. "Until we get a firm basis on fact and fiction in our own country, ... we're going to have a big problem," Watts said. He warned of a dangerous future from Russian information: "Somewhere in their cache right now there's tremendous amounts of information laying around they can weaponize against other Americans."

Perhaps what is even more frightening than the Russians letting Americans in on how Washington's political process really works – by somehow slipping WikiLeaks some evidence of Democratic Party bigwigs tilting the Democratic primaries to ensure Clinton's nomination and revealing what Clinton told those Wall Street bankers – is the idea that the U.S. government should be enlisted to enforce what Americans get to see and hear.

The PropOrNot Smear

Watts and his alarums showed up in another context in the weeks after the 2016 election when [The Washington Post ran a front-page story](#) highlighting the claims by an anonymous group, PropOrNot, which was pushing a blacklist of 200 Internet news sites, including such independent sources of information as Counterpunch, Truthdig, Naked Capitalism, Zero Hedge, Truth-out and Consortiumnews.

Though the Post granted PropOrNot anonymity so it could safely slander independent-minded journalists, the Post turned to Watts to bolster PropOrNot's case. "They [the Russians] want to essentially erode faith in the U.S. government or U.S. government interests," Watts said. "This was their standard mode during the Cold War. The problem is that this was hard to do before social media."

The Post then linked to an article that Watts had co-authored entitled, ["Trolling for Trump: How Russia Is Trying to Destroy Our Democracy."](#) which, in turn, cited as proof RT articles that mentioned Hillary Clinton's health problem last September (which was later acknowledged to be a bout with pneumonia) and that discussed the vulnerabilities of the Federal Reserve (in an age of escalating public and private debt). Both might seem to you like reasonable

topics for journalists, but you must understand that RT – because it is Russian-sponsored – has become the favorite whipping boy of anyone trying to make the case that America is besieged by Russian propaganda. And don't you dare mention that almost no one in America actually watches RT or you might end up on PropOrNot's list, too.

Watts and his cohorts continue: "***Social issues*** currently provide a useful window for Russian messaging. Police brutality, racial tensions, protests, anti-government standoffs, online privacy concerns, and alleged government misconduct are all emphasized to magnify their scale and leveraged to undermine the fabric of society."

And, we know for sure that you're a Russian agent if you express any concern that the heightened tensions between the U.S. and Russia might lead to nuclear war. As Watts and friends write, "More recently, Moscow turned to stoking fears of nuclear war between the United States and Russia" – and their "proof" was a link not to RT but to the financial Web site, Zero Hedge, which already had made it onto PropOrNot's black list.

So, let's see if we got this right: We are not to worry our pretty little heads about nuclear war or a future financial meltdown or police brutality toward racial minorities or race relations in general or armed right-wing clashes with authorities or spying on our Internet use or any government wrongdoing at all or even citizen protests against that wrongdoing. Because if we debate such issues – if we even read about such issues – we are playing into Vladimir Putin's evil plans.

What Democracy?

Which makes me wonder what kind of "democracy" these brave "defenders of democracy" have in mind. The New York Times, The Washington Post and some establishment-approved Internetsites already have begun work on establishing standards for what information the American people will be allowed to see and hear – with disapproved sources of news marginalized by Internet search engines or prevented from earning any money by exclusion from Google and other ad programs.

Presumably, the 200 or so Web sites on PropOrNot's black list would be the first cut for the new Ministry of Truth since many of them have published articles that raised questions about the accuracy of claims made by the U.S. State Department or they have expressed the belief that there may be two sides to complex issues – when Americans are supposed to hear only the side that Official Washington wants them to hear.

Some of these “Russian propaganda” Web sites – prior to the Iraq War – even raised doubts about the U.S. government’s certainty that Saddam Hussein had stockpiles of WMDs. Thank goodness the Internet wasn’t as widely used back then or perhaps many Americans would have doubted the truth-telling by The New York Times and The Washington Post, which dutifully passed on the U.S. government’s pronouncements about Hussein’s secret WMDs.

Surely, in 2002-03, the Russians must have been behind the resistance by those few Web sites to the WMD group think that all the respectable people just knew to be true. How else can you explain the skepticism? And maybe Russia was responsible for the U.S. government’s failure to find any of those WMD stockpiles. Curse you, Russia!

With the Senate Intelligence Committee’s hearing on Thursday, this determination to squelch any dissenting American views as “Russian disinformation” moved up a notch, beyond some think-tank chatter, some newspaper articles or some initial planning for private-sector censorship.

The craziness has now become the focus of an official Senate investigation into Russian “meddling” in American political life. We have taken another step down the path of a New Cold War that blends a New McCarthyism with a New Orwellianism.

[For more on this topic, see Consortiumnews.com’s [“The Orwellian War on Skepticism”](#) and [“How US Flooded the World with Psyops.”](#)]

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](#)).

Duping Americans on Healthcare and War

Exclusive: The American people have been sold a deadly bill of goods both for their lousy healthcare system and for their perpetual war machine – and there’s no end in sight, as Nicolas J S Davies explains.

By Nicolas J S Davies

President Trump and his wealthy friends have just discovered how complicated healthcare is in this country – for the rest of us that is. They will soon find

out that U.S. militarism is just as complicated, and for many of the same reasons.

Healthcare is uniquely complicated in the United States because the U.S. is the only wealthy country in the world where for-profit corporate interests have carved out such a dominant role in the sickness and health of its people. The lucrative role of for-profit insurance companies is unique in the entire world; prescription drugs cost many times more than in other countries; and for-profit corporations have taken over 21 percent of U.S. hospitals since 1965.

Every other wealthy country provides universal healthcare to its people mainly through its public sector, with smaller roles for private, usually non-profit entities. Drug prices are contained by the negotiating power of these large public healthcare systems.

These systems all face challenges as they try to maintain the quality of patient care amid the rising costs of new medicines and medical technology, but the basic structure of the healthcare system in each country is well-established and stable.

If people in other wealthy countries pay attention to the U.S. healthcare crisis at all, it must seem that we're making a meal of this for peculiar cultural reasons. We must enjoy having these huge debates over healthcare every few years for the same reasons that we eat in our cars or play different sports than they do. Outside the U.S., it's inconceivable that a rich country would really allow tens of thousands of people to die prematurely every year for lack of access to healthcare, or that the public lacks the political power to prevent this from happening.

Race to the Bottom

For the past generation, the U.S. has led a "race to the bottom" among developed countries to ensure that the rewards of advanced technology and increased productivity are allocated to wealthy investors and corporate executives, instead of to the working people actually developing, operating and maintaining these new technologies, in the U.S. and around the world.

A central element in this neoliberal counter-revolution is the expansion of the corporate for-profit sector into areas of life otherwise rooted in the public sector, like health, education, utilities, transportation and criminal justice.

Despite huge imbalances in market power between ordinary people and large corporations, the quasi-religious belief in "markets" as the most efficient mechanism for managing all aspects of society requires that even public services like healthcare and education be privatized and submitted to the "magic of the

market.” U.S. political and business leaders are determined to prove that privatized healthcare can work, and then to export it to the rest of the world as part of the relentless expansion of U.S.-based capitalism.

But if public services like healthcare and education cannot be successfully abandoned to the vagaries of “the market,” even in the United States, then the public sector will have proven to be more essential than the architects of neoliberalism have claimed.

When the U.S. finally admits that its brutal experiment in privatized healthcare has failed and it is forced to hand the reins of this critical part of American life over to the public sector, it will be a powerful signal that the neoliberal project has passed its high point – and that the political pendulum has begun to swing back toward a more rational and democratic future.

Deterrence or Aggression?

Like the privatized U.S. healthcare system, U.S. militarism is also uniquely complicated, in ways that the world is barely coming to grips with after 18 years of U.S.-led wars that have killed about two million people and left half a dozen countries in ruins.

It is hardly a coincidence that our healthcare and warfare crises have some disturbing things in common, since they are products of the same unique political and economic system.

Our dysfunctional medical industry and our murderous war machine are by far the most expensive “healthcare” and “defense” systems in the world. Both are hugely profitable, but neither provides value for money in the form of a healthier or a safer society, the stated missions that justify their existence and their endlessly-expanding demands on our resources.

These are also the two areas of public policy in which bad policy predictably and inevitably leads to massive losses of human life. In terms of keeping people safe from disease and war respectively, U.S. “healthcare” and U.S. “defense” both fail catastrophically despite their ever-growing price tags. In fact, the huge amounts of money involved contribute to their failures by corrupting and distorting the non-commercial purposes they are both supposed to serve.

The Even-Worse War Machine

But U.S. militarism involves complications that dwarf even the ravages of the privatized U.S. healthcare system. While U.S. “news” media provide 24-hour “talking heads” coverage of the CIA and the Democratic Party’s accusations of Russian meddling in the U.S. election, American bombs are killing thousands of

Iraqi civilians in Mosul, as they have been doing across Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and other Muslim countries since 2001.

In contrast to our endless healthcare debate, the contradictions of U.S. militarism have barely been debated at all. Politicians only discuss the purposes of the U.S. military in euphemistic terms, and any objective or honest appraisal of the death, violence and chaos we have unleashed in country after country for the past 18 years is strictly taboo across the political spectrum.

There is an inherent contradiction in trying to use weapons of war to keep the peace. I remember asking my father, a British navy doctor, how he resolved this contradiction, which was more glaring in his case as a doctor committed to "first do no harm." He told me that he believed a strong defense was the most effective deterrent to aggression.

Apart from one day in June 1954, when his ship's 6-inch guns "bombarded terrorist positions" on Kedah Peak in Malaya, my father spent his entire career in a shrinking peacetime navy as the sun set on the British Empire. The U.K. stayed out of Vietnam, aside from some covert operations, and no other country attacked the U.K., so my Dad's view of his naval career as a deterrent to aggression survived largely unscathed.

Even President Trump subscribes to the view that the legitimate role of military power is as a deterrent to aggression by others. On Feb. 27, he declared his intention to add \$54 billion per year to the Obama administration's military budget, which already set a post-WWII record. But in a speech a few days earlier, Trump couched his promise to build a bigger, more expensive war machine strictly in terms of deterrence, as he did regularly throughout his election campaign.

"And, hopefully, we'll never have to use it, but nobody is going to mess with us," he said. "Nobody. It will be one of the greatest military build-ups in American history."

Big-Stick Bullying

My father and our new president were both echoing Teddy Roosevelt's warning to "speak softly and carry a big stick." But there is an obvious distinction between carrying a big stick to let others know that you are prepared to defend yourself, and actually threatening and attacking other people with it.

Many Americans keep guns in their homes to protect themselves against crime, but long-standing statistics show that guns in the home are about 20 times more

likely to end up injuring or killing someone in a suicide attempt, domestic violence or an accident than in self-defense against a criminal intruder. (My wife and I were once almost shot in our own home when we returned home late at night and startled a house guest who hadn't even warned us she was armed.) Could we be making a similar mistake on an international scale in our desire to maintain a "strong defense"?

The idea that U.S. diplomacy should be backed up by threats of force has become central to post-Cold War U.S. policy, but it is not long since this was seen as a risky strategy, even in official circles. After catastrophic wars in Korea and Vietnam, U.S. leaders were wary of war, and therefore avoided making threats that would drag the U.S. into new wars.

They did not renounce the use of force altogether, but waged it through proxy forces supported by small deployments of U.S. special forces in Central America and by the CIA in Angola and Afghanistan. These "disguised, quiet, media-free" military operations, as senior officers have called them, were shielded from public scrutiny by layers of secrecy and propaganda, yet they still met with resistance from a war-wary U.S. public and Congress.

The Credible Threat Problem

In heated debates within the Reagan administration, Secretary of State George Schultz argued that U.S. diplomacy should be backed up by the threat of force, while Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger warned against threats or uses of force that could lead to another disaster like the war in Vietnam. Weinberger's view was shared by U.S. military leaders, many of whom had fought as junior officers in Vietnam.

After the bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut and the U.S. invasion of Grenada in 1983, Secretary Weinberger publicly laid out a doctrine of limited war in 1984, in which he accepted the thrust of Schultz's argument, but defined strict limits and conditions on U.S. threats and uses of force. The Weinberger Doctrine declared that the U.S. should threaten or use proportionate force only for clearly defined and achievable objectives, only when "vital" national or allied interests were at stake, and only with the support of the American public and Congress.

But the notion of a credible threat to support diplomacy is a dangerously seductive idea, and the Weinberger Doctrine became "the camel's nose inside the tent" that was soon followed by the rest of the camel.

As U.S. leaders looked for ways to exploit the post-Cold War "power dividend," hawkish officials and pundits suggested that General Manuel Noriega in Panama

and President Saddam Hussein in Iraq had failed to surrender under threat of U.S. attack because they did not believe that the U.S. would follow through on its threats. The hawks insisted that, if the U.S. would only threaten and use force more readily and consistently, its threats would be “credible” and its enemies would give up without a fight.

The Deceitful Colin Powell

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Colin Powell was a former protégé of Weinberger but has made a career of covering up crimes and selling dangerous policies to the public, from his roles in Vietnam, Iran Contra and the First Gulf War to his misleading and treacherous performance at the UN Security Council in 2003. Powell embraced and promoted the “credible threat” theory in a *Foreign Affairs* article in October 1992, writing that, “threats of military force will work only when U.S. leaders have decided that they are prepared to use force... The president can only persuade an opponent of his seriousness when, indeed, he is serious.”

At about the same time, in what one of his acolytes dubbed the “Ledeem Doctrine,” military-industrial propagandist Michael Ledeen put the “credible threat” theory more bluntly in a speech to the American Enterprise Institute, “Every ten years or so, the United States needs to pick up some small crappy little country and throw it against the wall, just to show the world we mean business.”

Obviously, it is not a legitimate purpose of diplomacy for powerful countries to bully or destroy weaker ones as Ledeen described. In fact it is illegal under the U.N. Charter, which was formulated expressly to try to prevent this kind of international behavior.

Twenty-five years later, we can see clearly that threats of force by the U.S. and its allies, however credible, have not persuaded any of our country’s adversaries to back down, and have served only as pretexts for catastrophic wars, or escalations of them, in country after country: Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Somalia, Syria and so on.

Dooming Diplomacy

This is not because U.S. threats lack credibility, nor because our war machine is under-funded, as President Trump seems to believe. It is because threats undermine diplomacy by locking both sides into hostile positions that would be politically humiliating to back down from. When the side making the threats is a powerful, heavily armed country like the U.S., this effect is even more pronounced, not less, as the political pressure on both sides is even greater.

To his credit, President Obama stepped back from the brink after threatening a devastating attack on Syria in 2013, because U.S. intelligence agencies doubted that the Syrian government was responsible for the chemical weapons attack in Ghouta, the American public overwhelmingly told Obama and Congress that it was opposed to war, and Russia negotiated a diplomatic resolution. But Obama's retreat from the brink was so exceptional that he is still loudly condemned for it by hawkish U.S. officials and pundits.

U.S. leaders still claim that U.S. sanctions and threats "brought Iran to the table" over its nuclear program. But this does not bear serious scrutiny. In fact, during Obama's first term, his "dual track" approach to Iran, conducting negotiations in parallel with sanctions and threats, was an abysmal failure. This policy only succeeded in spurring Iran to build 20,000 centrifuges to produce its own nuclear material, while sanctions punished the people of Iran for asserting their right to a civilian nuclear program under the terms of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

All the while, as a senior State Department official (and former U.S. Embassy hostage) explained to author Trita Parsi, it was the U.S. that refused to "take 'Yes'" for an answer, not Iran. The dispute was only resolved after John Kerry took over from Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State and began serious negotiations that were not undermined by new threats or sanctions.

The failure of U.S. post-Cold War diplomacy based on the threat and use of force would not surprise the American diplomats who drafted the U.N. Charter and witnessed its signing in San Francisco in 1945. Article 2:3 of the Charter reads, "All Members shall settle their international disputes by peaceful means in such a manner that international peace and security, and justice, are not endangered." In the very next clause, they backed this up with a prohibition, not only against the "use of force," but against "the *threat or* use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state."

After the two most deadly and destructive wars in human history, American diplomats of that generation needed no prompting to recognize that the threat of force more often than not sets the stage for the use of force, and that a world order based on the overriding necessity for peace must nip the danger of war in the bud by prohibiting the threat as well as the use of force.

Big Stick or Suicide Vest?

I hope this brief retracing of recent history illustrates what should be obvious, that there is a gaping chasm between the kind of "strong defense" most Americans believe in as a deterrent to war and the aggression of current U.S. war policy. In political rhetoric, there may seem to be a fine line between

carrying a “big stick” to deter aggression and building a huge war machine to threaten and attack other countries, but, in practice, the difference is obvious.

Our dangerous post-Cold War strategy of “credible threats” is finally, and predictably, bringing us into confrontation with countries that can defend themselves more effectively than the relatively defenseless countries we have attacked and destroyed since 1999. The U.S. and our allies have failed to decisively defeat lightly armed resistance forces in Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, Libya, Somalia, Pakistan, Syria, Palestine or Ukraine. Are we now “credibly threatening” to attack North Korea? Iran? Russia? China?

Like a gun in the home, the credibility of our threats has proved to be a double-edged sword that is ultimately as dangerous to us as to our enemies. We have twisted, “Speak softly and carry a big stick,” into something more like, “Threaten everybody and wear a suicide vest.”

It is time to take off the suicide vest, turn our backs on brinksmanship and war, and return to legitimate diplomacy that is not based on threats, credible or otherwise. The problem with our threats is not that other countries don’t think we really mean them. The more serious problem is that we do, and that this is a prescription for war, not a way to keep the peace.

I deliberately write “war,” not “endless war,” because every war does end, one way or another, and this one will too. But the escalating global war we have unleashed cannot possibly end well for our country or the world unless our leaders make a decisive choice to end it peacefully and diplomatically.

This would be a fundamental paradigm shift in U.S. policy, on a par with providing universal healthcare to all Americans. But the alternative should be unthinkable.

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*.
