

Trump's Foreign Policy at a Crossroads

Exclusive: Recent U.S. foreign policy – driven by neocons and liberal hawks – has spread chaos and death around the globe. But can “crazy” Donald Trump bring sanity to how the U.S. approaches the world, asks Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

If you wanted to bring sanity to a U.S. foreign policy that has spun crazily out of control, there would be some immediate steps that you – or, say, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson – could take, starting with a renewed commitment to tell the truth to the American people.

Instead of the endless “perception management” or “strategic communication” or “psychological operations” or whatever the new code words are, you could open up the files regarding key turning-point moments and share the facts with the citizens – the “We the People” – who are supposed to be America’s true sovereigns.

For instance, you could release what the U.S. government actually knows about the Aug. 21, 2013 sarin gas attack in Syria; what the files show about the origins of the Feb. 22, 2014 coup in Ukraine; what U.S. intelligence analysts have compiled about the July 17, 2014 shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over eastern Ukraine. And those are just three examples of cases where U.S. government propagandists have sold a dubious bill of goods to the American and world publics in the “information warfare” campaign against the Syrian and Russian governments.

If you wanted to base U.S. foreign policy on the firm foundation of reality, you also could let the American people in on who is actually the principal sponsor of the terrorism that they’re concerned about: Al Qaeda, Islamic State, the Taliban – all Sunni-led outfits, none of which are backed by Shiite-ruled Iran. Yet, all we hear from Official Washington’s political and media insiders is that Iran is the chief sponsor of terrorism.

Of course, that is what Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states and Israel want you to believe because it serves their regional and sectarian interests, but it isn’t true. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states are the ones arming and financing Al Qaeda and Islamic State with Israel occasionally bombing Al Qaeda’s military enemies inside Syria and providing medical support for Al Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate operating near the Golan Heights.

The reason for this unsavory network of alliances is that Israel, like Saudi

Arabia and the Sunni-led Gulf states, sees Iran and the so-called "Shiite crescent" – from Tehran through Damascus to Beirut – as *their* principal problem. And because of the oil sheiks' financial wealth and Israel's political clout, they control how pretty much everyone in Official Washington's establishment views the Middle East.

But the interests of Israel, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states are not in line with the interests of the American people – nor the average European – who are not concerned about militant Shiites as much as militant Sunnis. After all, the worst terror attacks on Europe and the U.S. have come from Sunni extremists belonging to or inspired by Al Qaeda and Islamic State.

This gap between the reality of Sunni-extremist terrorism and the fantasy of Official Washington's "group think" fingering Shiite-ruled Iran explains the cognitive dissonance over President Trump's travel ban on people from seven mostly Muslim countries. Beyond the offensive anti-Muslim prejudice, there is the fact that he ignored the countries that produced the terrorists who have attacked the U.S., including the 9/11 hijackers.

This bizarre feature of Trump's executive order shows how deep Official Washington's dysfunction goes. Trump has picked a major constitutional battle over a travel ban that targets the wrong countries.

But there's a reason for this dysfunction: No one in Official Washington can speak the truth about terrorism without suffering severe political damage or getting blacklisted by the mainstream media. Since the truth puts Israel and especially Saudi Arabia in an uncomfortable position, the truth cannot be spoken.

Hope for Trump

There was some hope that President Trump – for all his irascibility and unpredictability – might break from the absurd "Iran is the principal source of terrorism" mantra. But so far he has not.

Nor has Trump moved to throw open the files on the Syrian and Ukraine conflicts so Americans can assess how the Obama administration sought to manipulate them into supporting these "regime change" adventures.

But Trump has resisted intense pressure to again entrust U.S. foreign policy to the neoconservatives, a number of whom lost their jobs when President Obama left office, perhaps most significantly Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland, who helped orchestrate the violent overthrow of Ukraine's elected president and is an architect of the New Cold War with Russia.

Other neocons who angled for jobs in the new administration, including John Bolton and James Woolsey, have failed to land them. Currently, there is pressure to ensconce Elliott Abrams, a top neocon dating back to the Reagan administration, in the key post of Deputy Secretary of State but that idea, too, has met resistance.

The neocon threat to Trump's stated intent of restoring some geopolitical realism to U.S. foreign policy is that the neocons operate almost as an ideological cabal linked often in a subterranean fashion – or as I. Lewis Libby, Vice President Dick Cheney's neocon chief of staff, once wrote in [a cryptic letter](#) to neocon journalist Judith Miller that aspen trees “turn in clusters, because their roots connect them.”

In other words, if one neocon is given a key job, other neocons can be expected to follow. Then, any Trump deviation from neocon orthodoxy would be undermined in the classic Washington tradition of strategic leaking to powerful media and congressional allies.

So far, the Trump inner circle has shown the administrative savvy to avoid bringing in ideologues who would dedicate their efforts to thwarting any significant change in U.S. geopolitical directions.

What is less clear is whether Trump, Tillerson and his fledgling State Department team have the intellectual heft to understand why U.S. foreign policy has drifted into the chaos and conflicts that now surround it – and whether they have the skill to navigate a route toward a safe harbor.

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

Trump Confronts New McCarthyism

President Trump has hit back forcefully against the New McCarthyism, including a stunning rebuke of Sen. John McCain for fanning a New Cold War with Russia and risking World War III, writes Gilbert Doctorow.

By Gilbert Doctorow

The original McCarthyism of the early 1950s appeared with the consolidation of

the Cold War. It was a witch hunt over supposed communist subversion of America's democratic institutions. It was all about the Red Menace and the Russians are coming. Today's New McCarthyism grew with the onset of a New Cold War and also has been about the Russians, especially the vilification of Vladimir Putin.

This anti-Russian hysteria reached a point of near absurdity in the last days of the Obama Administration with its trust-us allegations that the Russians defeated Hillary Clinton by releasing some emails showing how the Democratic National Committee sabotaged Bernie Sanders and other emails revealing what Clinton had told Wall Street banks but didn't want the voters to know. If you noted that Clinton had previously blamed her defeat on FBI Director James Comey for reopening and re-closing the investigation into her use of a private email server, you risked being labeled a "Putin apologist" or a "Kremlin stooge."

Of course, the anger toward anyone who resisted the "Russia-did-it" conformism did not come from nowhere. One can trace the current hostility to dissenters against U.S. foreign policy back to the presidency of George W. Bush when he gutted the Bill of Rights in promulgating the Patriot Act with almost no public challenge. In the post-9/11 climate – when any resistance to Bush's edicts was regarded as close to treason – many of us became uneasy while talking politics on the phone or looking up certain topics on the Internet or taking books out of the library.

This intimidating surveillance did not go away when the Democrats retook the White House and Congress in the 2008 elections, but we stopped thinking about it because supposedly the "right people" now held the levers of power and surely wouldn't repeat the abuses of Bush-43. However, not only did the surveillance state consolidate its powers under Barack Obama but the former constitutional lawyer sharply escalated the legal persecution of whistleblowers who dared give the American people a look behind the curtain.

Obama's unprecedented assault on government transparency was compounded by the liberal-chic contempt meted out to anyone who questioned the wisdom of imposing "liberal values," "human rights," and "democracy promotion" on countries around the world. "Political correctness" dominated not only domestic U.S. debates but also the formulation of foreign policy.

Vladimir Putin was viewed as a retrograde force in the world, in part, because he aligned himself with Russia's conservative social values and because he fell short of an ideal notion of what liberal democracy is supposed to be. The fact that the U.S. government also was falling far short of those standards – from ordering targeted assassinations with minimal due process to imprisoning patriotic whistleblowers – was largely ignored by an Obama Administration that

saw itself as too wonderful to have flaws.

Blacklisting Dissent

So, when the U.S. confrontation with Russia over Ukraine, Crimea and the Donbas began in the summer of 2013, those of us who did not accept what was becoming the Washington Consensus, which held Putin to blame for everything, began to see ourselves as dissidents in the Soviet sense or at least in the manner of the old McCarthy era. In effect, we were blacklisted, largely excluded from publication in the professional journals, not to mention mainstream print and broadcast media. On campus, we mostly kept our mouths shut fearing for our jobs.

In the narrow, but politically important field of Russian studies, just how bleak the times had become was revealed in the December 2015 “Christmas issue” of *Johnson’s Russia List*, an important daily digest of expert and generalist writings about Russia which contained a 40-page propaganda barrage against Putin and his ill-begotten country. But the content of that daily issue merely reflected what was entering the editor-publisher’s in-basket each day. Still, the silence of dissenters should not be confused with agreement.

For all his blustery and egotistical faults, Donald Trump has punched huge holes in the dominant neocon ideology that underlay the Washington Consensus on foreign policy during the presidencies of both George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Trump’s tweets and campaign messages asked, aloud and repeatedly, what could be wrong with the United States getting along with Russia and cooperating on common interests, starting with a joint campaign against ISIS.

Yet, Trump’s rejection of Washington’s foreign-policy orthodoxy went beyond relations with Russia; Trump was questioning the consensus on how America has conducted its role as global leader and he was challenging the arrogance of intervening in other nations’ affairs, whether by finger-waving lectures or various regime-change schemes.

As noisy and messy as Trump’s political approach has been – with a number of unnecessary diversions and self-inflicted wounds – there is a significant and “revolutionary” side of Trump’s approach. It represents a potential reordering of the two major political parties, a revamped struggle for power within the Right-Left dimension.

He restated this “revolutionary” aspect of his foreign policy in his Inaugural Address when he renounced the idea of endless interference in other countries’ politics and a return to the traditional role of America as an example, not an interventionist. This was an in-your-face condemnation of most of those sitting beside and behind him on the rostrum who favored a “values-based” foreign

policy, globalization and American exceptionalism.

Taking on McCain

From the Oval Office, Trump has continued his frontal assault on this foreign-policy orthodoxy with his closely watched and disputed tweets. Much ridicule has been directed at Trump for ruling by tweets since they often reveal a lack of intellectual depth and his facile narcissism. But what they lack in refinement, Trump's tweets make up for in feistiness and courage.

For instance, in a Jan. 30 tweet, Trump urged Republican neocon Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham to "focus their energies on ISIS, illegal immigration and border security *instead of always looking to start World War III*" [emphasis mine]. This was, in its own way, as significant as the pithy and devastating rebuke issued by attorney Joseph N. Welch to Sen. Joe McCarthy on June 9, 1954, after McCarthy attacked the patriotism of a young Army lawyer: "Have you no sense of decency, sir? At long last, have you left no sense of decency?" Welch asked.

In a way, Trump's reference to the behavior of McCain and Graham, running around the world advocating for one war after another, including a military confrontation with nuclear-armed Russia, was as precise and cutting as Welch's putdown of McCarthy. In doing so, Trump broke the decades-long taboo on criticizing McCain despite his behavior as a loose cannon on the deck of foreign affairs, especially during the Obama years.

Behaving as if he had won rather than lost the 2008 election, McCain has traveled to such hot spots as Syria, Georgia and Ukraine with the goal of making U.S. foreign policy in the field, urging militants onward into violent clashes with their own governments or pushing U.S.-client states into conflicts with their neighbors.

Trump began his challenge to McCain during the campaign when he publicly questioned the "war hero" status of the Arizona senator by rhetorically asking in what way spending years in captivity as a Vietnam prisoner of war made McCain a war hero.

McCain took his revenge shortly before the inauguration when he informed the press that he had just handed over to the FBI for follow-up a dubious report generated by a former British intelligence agent accusing Trump of being vulnerable to Russian blackmail because of alleged cavorting with prostitutes during a visit to Moscow years ago.

To stymie any new détente with Russia, McCain also introduced a bill in the Senate calling for new and expanded sanctions against Russia. So, the White

House tweet was a direct challenge to McCain for his actions that Trump warned were inviting World War III. In doing so, Trump is at least prying open space for a fuller debate about U.S. foreign policy and the wisdom of neocon interventionism.

So, notwithstanding all the self-righteous exclamations before media microphones by Establishment figures from both parties over the foibles of this populist president and notwithstanding the shouting in the streets by demonstrators, it appears that the President is advancing via his tactic of frontal attack.

A week ago, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Trump's bellwether choice to oversee a new foreign policy, was confirmed by the Senate to the surprise and pleasure of those of us who had kept our fingers crossed. It is too early to say how or why Trump won this test of strength. But initial fierce opposition from ranking Republicans John McCain, Lindsey Graham and Marco Rubio was beaten back.

Now, the question is whether Tillerson and Trump's other foreign policy appointees can achieve genuine change in the direction of U.S. foreign policy.

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Castigating Trump for Truth-Telling

Exclusive: President Trump says much that is untrue, but he draws some of Official Washington's greatest opprobrium when he speaks the truth, such as noting that senior U.S. officials have done a lot of killing, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Gaining acceptance in Official Washington is a lot like getting admittance into a secret society's inner sanctum by uttering some nonsensical password. In Washington to show you belong, you must express views that are patently untrue or blatantly hypocritical.

For instance, you might be called upon to say that "Iran is the principal source of terrorism" when that title clearly belongs to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf state allies that have funded Al Qaeda, the Taliban and the Islamic State. But truth has no particularly value in Official Washington; adherence to "group

think" is what's important.

Similarly, you might have to deny any "moral equivalence" between killings attributed to Russian President Vladimir Putin and killings authorized by U.S. presidents. In this context, the fact that the urbane Barack Obama scheduled time one day a week to check off people for targeted assassinations isn't relevant. Nor is the reality that Donald Trump has joined this elite club of official killers by approving a botched and bloody raid in Yemen that slaughtered a number of women and children (and left one U.S. soldier dead, too).

You have to understand that "our killings" are always good or at least justifiable (innocent mistakes do happen from time to time), but Russian killings are always bad. Indeed, Official Washington has so demonized Putin that any untoward death in Russia can be blamed on him whether there is any evidence or not. To suggest that evidence is needed shows that you must be a "Moscow stooge."

To violate these inviolable norms of Official Washington, in which participants must intuitively grasp the value of such "group think" and the truism of "American exceptionalism," marks you as a dangerous outsider who must be marginalized or broken.

Currently, President Trump is experiencing this official opprobrium as he is widely denounced by Republicans, Democrats and "news" people because he didn't react properly to a question from Fox News' Bill O'Reilly terming Putin "a killer."

"There are a lot of killers." Trump responded. "We've got a lot of killers. What do you think – our country's so innocent. You think our country's so innocent?"

Aghast at Trump's heresy, O'Reilly sputtered, "I don't know of any government leaders that are killers."

Trump: "Well – take a look at what we've done too. We made a lot of mistakes. I've been against the war in Iraq from the beginning."

O'Reilly: "But mistakes are different than –"

Trump: "A lot of mistakes, but a lot of people were killed. A lot of killers around, believe me."

'Moral Equivalence'

Though Trump is justly criticized for often making claims that aren't true, here he was saying something that clearly was true. But it has drawn fierce

condemnation from across Official Washington, not only from Democrats but from Trump's fellow Republicans, too. Neoconservative Washington Post opinion writer Charles Krauthammer objected fiercely to Trump's "moral equivalence," and CNN's Anderson Cooper chimed in, lamenting Trump's deviation into "equivalence," i.e. holding the U.S. government to the same ethical standards as the Russian government.

This "moral equivalence" argument has been with us at least since the Reagan administration when human rights groups objected to President Reagan's support for right-wing governments in Central America that engaged in "death squad" tactics against political dissidents, including the murders of priests and nuns and genocide against disaffected Indian tribes. To suggest that Reagan and his friends should be subjected to the same standards that he applied to left-wing authoritarian governments earned you the accusation of "moral equivalence."

Declassified documents from Reagan's White House show that this P.R. strategy was refined at National Security Council meetings led by U.S. intelligence propaganda experts. Now the "moral equivalence" theme is being revived to discredit a new Republican president who dares challenge this particular Official Washington "group think."

Lots of Killing

The unpleasant truth is that all leaders of major countries and many leaders of smaller countries are "killers." President Obama admitted that he had ordered military strikes in seven different countries to kill people. His Secretary of State Hillary Clinton rejoiced over the grisly murder of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi with a clever twist on a famous Julius Caesar boast of conquest: "We came, we saw, he died," Clinton chirped.

President George W. Bush launched an illegal war against Iraq based on false pretenses, causing the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, many of them children and other civilians.

President Bill Clinton ordered a vicious bombing campaign against the Serbian capital of Belgrade, which included intentionally targeting the Serb TV building and killing 16 civilian employees because Clinton considered the station's news reports to be "propaganda," i.e., not in line with U.S. propaganda.

President George H.W. Bush slaughtered scores of Panamanians who happened to live near the headquarters of the Panamanian Defense Forces and he killed tens of thousands of Iraqis, including incinerating a civilian bomb shelter in Baghdad, after he brushed aside proposals for resolving Iraq's invasion of Kuwait peacefully. (Bush wanted a successful war as a way to rally the American

people behind future foreign military operations, so, in his words, the country could kick “the Vietnam Syndrome once and for all.”)

Other U.S. presidents have had more or less blood on their hands than these recent chief executives, but it is hard to identify any modern U.S. president who has not been a “killer” in some form, inflicting death upon innocents whether as part of some “justifiable” mission or not.

But the mainstream U.S. press corps routinely adopts double standards when assessing acts by a U.S. president and those of an “enemy.” When the U.S. kills people, the mainstream media bends over backwards to rationalize the violence, but does the opposite if the killing is authorized by some demonized foreign leader.

That is now the case with Putin. Any accusation against Putin – no matter how lacking in evidence – is treated as credible and any evidence of Putin’s innocence is ridiculed or suppressed.

That was the case with a documentary that debunked claims that hedge fund accountant Sergei Magnitsky was murdered in a Russian prison because he was a whistleblower when the documentary showed that he was a suspect in a massive money-laundering scheme and died of natural causes. Although produced by a documentarian who started out planning to do a sympathetic portrayal of Magnitsky, the facts led in a different direction that caused the documentary to be shunned by the European Union and given minimal distribution in the United States.

By contrast, the ease with which Putin is called a murderer – based on “mysterious deaths” inside Russia – is reminiscent of how American right-wing groups suggested that Bill and Hillary Clinton were murderers by distributing a long list of “mysterious deaths” somehow related to the Clinton “scandals” from their Arkansas days. While there was no specific evidence connecting the Clintons to any of these deaths, the sheer number created suspicions that were hard to knock down without making you a “Clinton apologist.” Similarly, a demand for actual evidence proving Putin’s guilt in a specific case makes you a “Putin apologist.”

However, as a leader of a powerful nation facing threats from terrorism and other national security dangers, Putin is surely a “killer,” much as U.S. presidents are killers. That appears to have been President Trump’s point, that the United States doesn’t have clean hands when it comes to shedding innocent blood.

But telling such an unpleasant albeit obvious truth is not the way to gain

entrance into the inner sanctum of Official Washington's Deep State. The passwords for admission require you to say a lot of things that are patently false. Any inconvenient truth-telling earns you the bum's rush out into the alley, even if you're President of the United States.

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](#)).

America's Lost Tradition on Non-Intervention

By implicitly criticizing U.S. interventionism, President Trump's inaugural speech drew denunciations from the Washington establishment as a dangerous deviation, but his message actually fit with U.S. traditions, says Ivan Eland.

By Ivan Eland

Although the media trashed Donald Trump's inaugural address as radical and scary to the United States and the world, his views on American security policy nevertheless may be closest to that of the nation's founders than those of any U.S. president since the early 1800s.

In his speech, the new president pledged that, "We do not seek to impose our way of life on anyone, but rather to let it shine as an example for everyone to follow."

After George W. Bush's disastrous invasion of Iraq for no good reason and Barack Obama's military overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, which also resulted in chaos and an increase in terrorism, U.S. re-adoption of its long abandoned foreign policy of being a "shining city on a hill," if put into practice, would be a refreshing return to the founders' vision.

Thus, Trump seemed to pledge less U.S. military intervention abroad while still defending the United States. He noted that "we've defended other nation's borders while refusing to defend our own." And he complained that the United States has "spent trillions of dollars overseas," including on the armies of other countries, "while America's infrastructure has fallen into disrepair and decay."

All of this factually true. For example, the United States alone accounts for 75 percent of the defense spending of the 28 mostly well-to-do countries of NATO, making it a very one-way street in terms of alliance costs and benefits.

Yet as the 9/11 attacks were occurring, the U.S. military – which has been geared to be an offensive force to project American power overseas to police the world rather than to be a force to defend the United States – scrambled jets and sent them ineffectually out over the ocean. In contrast, Trump promised to focus on eradicating the genuine threat to the United States of radical Islamic terrorism.

Founders' Vision

Because the founders wanted to avoid the militarism of Europe's monarchs, who continuously waged war with the costs in blood and treasure falling on their people, the U.S. Constitution authorizes the government only to "provide for the common defence."

The founders correctly believed that unneeded overseas martial adventures undermined the republic at home, something our post-World War II interventionist foreign policy establishment has forgotten.

So maybe Trump's inaugural address failed to unify the Western alliance and even scared the United States' wealthy free-loading allies. So be it; the platitude of invoking the need to "unify" is often a way to beat back uncomfortable but necessary threats to reform the status quo.

Trump was correct when he earlier labeled NATO "obsolete," because it wasn't a very effective vehicle for addressing terrorism, and when he accused allied nations of not paying their fair share for Western security.

And nations around the world may be alarmed that the United States will no longer spend truckloads of money attempting to solve their problems – but usually abysmally failing – by using counterproductive military intervention or feckless foreign aid.

Trump's inaugural address demonstrated that shaking things up was not just campaign rhetoric. Doing so in America's failed security policy is long overdue.

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A Reprise of the Iraq-WMD Fiasco?

Exclusive: Official Washington's new "group think" – accepting evidence-free charges that Russia "hacked the U.S. election" – has troubling parallels to the Iraq-WMD certainty, often from the same people, writes James W Carden.

By James W Carden

The controversy over Russia's alleged interference in the 2016 presidential election shows no sign of letting up. A bipartisan group of U.S. senators recently introduced legislation that would impose sanctions on Russia in retaliation for its acts of "cyber intrusions."

At a press event in Washington on Tuesday, Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Illinois, called Election Day 2016 "a day that will live in cyber infamy." Previously, Sen. John McCain, R-Arizona, called the Russian hacks of the Democratic National Committee "an act of war," while Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-South Carolina, has claimed that there is near unanimity among senators regarding Russia's culpability.

Despite all this, the question of who exactly is responsible for the providing WikiLeaks with the emails of high Democratic Party officials does not lend itself to easy answers. And yet, for months, despite the lack of publicly disclosed evidence, the media, like these senators, have been as one: Vladimir Putin's Russia is responsible.

Interestingly, the same neoconservative/center-left alliance which endorsed George W. Bush's case for war with Iraq is pretty much the same neoconservative/center-left alliance that is now, all these years later, braying for confrontation with Russia. It's largely the same cast of characters reading from the Iraq-war era playbook.

It's worth recalling Tony Judt's observation in September 2006 that "those centrist voices that bayed most insistently for blood in the prelude to the Iraq war ... are today the most confident when asserting their monopoly of insight into world affairs."

While that was true then, it is perhaps even more so the case today.

The prevailing sentiment of the media establishment during the months prior to the disastrous March 2003 invasion of Iraq was that of certainty: George Tenet's

now infamous assurance to President Bush, that the case against Iraq was a “slam drunk,” was essentially what major newspapers and television news outlets were telling the American people at the time. Iraq posed a threat to “the homeland,” therefore Saddam “must go.”

The Bush administration, in a move equal parts cynical and clever, engaged in what we would today call a “disinformation” campaign against its own citizens by planting false stories abroad, safe in the knowledge that these stories would “bleed over” and be picked up by the American press.

WMD ‘Fake News’

The administration was able to launder what were essentially “fake news” stories, such as the aluminum tubes fabrication, by leaking to Michael R. Gordon and Judith Miller of The New York Times. In September 2002, without an ounce of skepticism, Gordon and Miller regurgitated the claims of unnamed U.S. intelligence officials that Iraq “has sought to buy thousands of specially designed aluminum tubes ... intended as components of centrifuges to enrich uranium.” Gordon and Miller faithfully relayed “the intelligence agencies’ unanimous view that the type of tubes that Iraq has been seeking are used to make centrifuges.”

By 2002, no one had any right to be surprised by what Bush and Cheney were up to; since at least 1898 (when the U.S. declared war on Spain under the pretense of the fabricated Hearst battle cry “Remember the Maine!”) American governments have repeatedly lied in order to promote their agenda abroad. And in 2002-3, the media walked in lock step with yet another administration in pushing for an unnecessary and costly war.

Like The New York Times, The Washington Post also relentlessly pushed the administration’s case for war with Iraq. According to the journalist Greg Mitchell, “By the *Post*’s own admission, in the months before the war, it ran more than 140 stories on its front page promoting the war.” All this, while its editorial page assured readers that the evidence Colin Powell presented to the United Nations on Iraq’s WMD program was “irrefutable.” According to the *Post*, it would be “hard to imagine” how anyone could doubt the administration’s case.

But the *Post* was hardly alone in its enthusiasm for Bush’s war. Among the most prominent proponents of the Iraq war was The New Yorker’s Jeffrey Goldberg, who, a full year prior to the invasion, set out to link Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda. Writing for The New Yorker in March 2002, Goldberg retailed former CIA Director James Woolsey’s opinion that “It would be a real shame if the C.I.A.’s substantial institutional hostility to Iraqi democratic resistance groups was keeping it from learning about Saddam’s ties to Al Qaeda in northern Iraq.”

Indeed, according to Goldberg, “The possibility that Saddam could supply weapons of mass destruction to anti-American terror groups is a powerful argument among advocates of regime change,” while Saddam’s “record of support for terrorist organizations, and the cruelty of his regime make him a threat that reaches far beyond the citizens of Iraq.”

Writing in Slate in October 2002, Goldberg was of the opinion that “In five years . . . I believe that the coming invasion of Iraq will be remembered as an act of profound morality.”

Likewise, The New Republic’s Andrew Sullivan was certain that “we would find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. I have no doubt about that.” Slate’s Jacob Weisberg supported the invasion because he thought Saddam Hussein had WMD and he “thought there was a strong chance he’d use them against the United States.”

Even after it was becoming clear that the war was a debacle, the neoconservative pundit Charles Krauthammer declared that the inability to find WMDs was “troubling” but “only because it means that the weapons remain unaccounted for and might be in the wrong hands. The idea that our inability to thus far find the weapons proves that the threat was phony and hyped is simply false.”

Smearing Skeptics

Opponents of the war were regularly accused of unpatriotic disloyalty. Writing in National Review, the neoconservative writer David Frum accused anti-intervention conservatives of going “far, far beyond the advocacy of alternative strategies.” According to Frum, “They deny and excuse terror. They espouse a potentially self-fulfilling defeatism. They publicize wild conspiracy theories. And some of them explicitly yearn for the victory of their nation’s enemies.”

Similarly, The New Republic’s Jonathan Chait castigated anti-war liberals for turning against Bush. “Have Bush haters lost their minds?” asked Chait. “Certainly some have. Antipathy to Bush has, for example, led many liberals not only to believe the costs of the Iraq war outweigh the benefits but to refuse to acknowledge any benefits at all.”

Yet of course we now know, thanks, in part, to a new book by former CIA analyst John Nixon, that everything the U.S. government thought it knew about Saddam Hussein was indeed wrong. Nixon, the CIA analyst who interrogated Hussein after his capture in December 2003, asks “Was Saddam worth removing from power?” “The answer,” says Nixon, “must be no. Saddam was busy writing novels in 2003. He was no longer running the government.”

It turns out that the skeptics were correct after all. And so the principal lesson the promoters of Bush and Cheney’s war of choice should have learned is

that blind certainty is the enemy of fair inquiry and nuance. The hubris that many in the mainstream media displayed in marginalizing liberal and conservative anti-war voices was to come back to haunt them. But not, alas, for too long.

A Dangerous Replay?

Today something eerily similar to the pre-war debate over Iraq is taking place regarding the allegations of Russian interference in the U.S. presidential election. Assurances from the intelligence community and from anonymous Obama administration "senior officials" about the *existence* of evidence is being treated as, well, *actual* evidence.

State Department spokesman John Kirby told CNN that he is "100% certain" of the role that Russia played in U.S. election. The administration's expressions of certainty are then uncritically echoed by the mainstream media. Skeptics are likewise written off, slandered as "Kremlin cheerleaders" or worse.

Unsurprisingly, The Washington Post is reviving its Bush-era role as principal publicist for the government's case. Yet in its haste to do the government's bidding, the Post has published two widely debunked stories relating to Russia (one on the scourge of Russian inspired "fake news", the other on a non-existent Russian hack of a Vermont electric utility) onto which the paper has had to append "editor's notes" to correct the original stories.

Yet, those misguided stories have not deterred the Post's opinion page from being equally aggressive in its depiction of Russian malfeasance. In late December, the Post published an op-ed by Rep. Adam Schiff and former Rep. Jane Harmon claiming "Russia's theft and strategic leaking of emails and documents from the Democratic Party and other officials present a challenge to the U.S. political system unlike anything we've experienced."

On Dec. 30, the Post editorial board chastised President-elect Trump for seeming to dismiss "a brazen and unprecedented attempt by a hostile power to covertly sway the outcome of a U.S. presidential election." The Post described Russia's actions as a "cyber-Pearl Harbor."

On Jan. 1, the neoconservative columnist Josh Rogin told readers that the recent announcement of sanctions against Russia "brought home a shocking realization that Russia is using hybrid warfare in an aggressive attempt to disrupt and undermine our democracy."

Meanwhile, many of the same voices who were among the loudest cheerleaders for the war in Iraq have also been reprising their Bush-era roles in vouching for the solidity of the government's case.

Jonathan Chait, now a columnist for New York magazine, is clearly convinced by what the government has thus far provided. "That Russia wanted Trump to win has been obvious for months," writes Chait.

"Of course it all came from the Russians, I'm sure it's all there in the intel," Charles Krauthammer told Fox News on Jan. 2. Krauthammer is certain.

And Andrew Sullivan is certain as to the motive. "Trump and Putin's bromance," Sullivan told MSNBC's Chris Matthews on Jan. 2, "has one goal this year: to destroy the European Union and to undermine democracy in Western Europe."

David Frum, writing in The Atlantic, believes Trump "owes his office in considerable part to illegal clandestine activities in his favor conducted by a hostile, foreign spy service."

Jacob Weisberg agrees, tweeting: "Russian covert action threw the election to Donald Trump. It's that simple." Back in 2008, Weisberg wrote that "the first thing I hope I've learned from this experience of being wrong about Iraq is to be less trusting of expert opinion and received wisdom." So much for that.

Foreign Special Interests

Another, equally remarkable similarity to the period of 2002-3 is the role foreign lobbyists have played in helping to whip up a war fever. As readers will no doubt recall, Ahmed Chalabi, leader of the Iraqi National Congress, which served, in effect as an Iraqi government-in-exile, worked hand in hand with the Washington lobbying firm Black, Kelly, Scruggs & Healey (BKSH) to sell Bush's war on television and on the op-ed pages of major American newspapers.

Chalabi was also a trusted source of Judy Miller of the Times, which, in an apology to its readers on May 26, 2004, wrote: "The most prominent of the anti-Saddam campaigners, Ahmad Chalabi, has been named as an occasional source in Times articles since at least 1991, and has introduced reporters to other exiles. He became a favorite of hard-liners within the Bush administration and a paid broker of information from Iraqi exiles." The pro-war lobbying of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee has also been exhaustively documented.

Though we do not know how widespread the practice has been as of yet, something similar is taking place today. Articles calling for confrontation with Russia over its alleged "hybrid war" with the West are appearing with increasing regularity. Perhaps the most egregious example of this newly popular genre appeared on Jan. 1 in Politico magazine. That essay, which claims, among many other things, that "we're in a war" with Russia comes courtesy of one Molly McKew.

McKew is seemingly qualified to make such a pronouncement because she, according to her bio on the Politico website, served as an “adviser to Georgian President Saakashvili’s government from 2009-2013, and to former Moldovan Prime Minister Filat in 2014-2015.” Seems reasonable enough. That is until one discovers that McKew is actually registered with the Department of Justice as a lobbyist for two anti-Russian political parties, Georgia’s UMN and Moldova’s PLDM.

Records show her work for the consulting firm Fianna Strategies frequently takes her to Capitol Hill to lobby U.S. Senate and Congressional staffers, as well as prominent U.S. journalists at The Washington Post and The New York Times, on behalf of her Georgian and Moldovan clients.

“The truth,” writes McKew, “is that fighting a new Cold War would be in America’s interest. Russia teaches us a very important lesson: losing an ideological war without a fight will ruin you as a nation. The fight is the American way.” Or, put another way: the truth is that fighting a new Cold War would be in McKew’s interest – but perhaps not America’s.

While you wouldn’t know it from the media coverage (or from reading deeply disingenuous pieces like McKew’s) as things now stand, the case against Russia is far from certain. New developments are emerging almost daily. One of the latest is a report from the cyber-engineering company Wordfence, which concluded that “The IP addresses that DHS [Department of Homeland Security] provided may have been used for an attack by a state actor like Russia. But they don’t appear to provide any association with Russia.”

Indeed, according to Wordfence, “The malware sample is old, widely used and appears to be Ukrainian. It has no apparent relationship with Russian intelligence and it would be an indicator of compromise for any website.”

On Jan. 4, BuzzFeed reported that, according to the DNC, the FBI never carried out a forensic examination on the email servers that were allegedly hacked by the Russian government. “The FBI,” said DNC spokesman Eric Walker, “never requested access to the DNC’s computer servers.”

What the agency did do was rely on the findings of a private-sector, third-party vendor that was brought in by the DNC after the initial hack was discovered. In May, the company, CrowdStrike, determined that the hack was the work of the Russians. As one unnamed intelligence official told BuzzFeed, “CrowdStrike is pretty good. There’s no reason to believe that anything that they have concluded is not accurate.”

Perhaps not. Yet CrowdStrike is hardly a disinterested party when it comes to Russia. CrowdStrike’s founder and chief technology officer, Dmitri Alperovitch,

is also a senior fellow at the Washington think tank, The Atlantic Council, which has been at the forefront of escalating tensions with Russia.

As I reported in The Nation in early January, the connection between Alperovitch and the Atlantic Council is highly relevant given that the Atlantic Council is funded in part by the State Department, NATO, the governments of Latvia and Lithuania, the Ukrainian World Congress, and the Ukrainian oligarch Victor Pinchuk. In recent years, it has emerged as a leading voice calling for a new Cold War with Russia.

Time to Rethink the 'Group Think'

And given the rather thin nature of the declassified evidence provided by the Obama administration, might it be time to consider an alternative theory of the case? William Binney, a 36-year veteran of the National Security Agency and the man responsible for creating many of its collection systems, thinks so. Binney believes that the DNC emails were leaked, not hacked, writing that "it is puzzling why NSA cannot produce hard evidence implicating the Russian government and WikiLeaks. Unless we are dealing with a leak from an insider, not a hack."

None of this is to say, of course, that Russia did not and could not have attempted to influence the U.S. presidential election. The intelligence community *may* have intercepted damning evidence of the Russian government's culpability. The government's hesitation to provide the public with more convincing evidence *may* stem from an understandable and wholly appropriate desire to protect the intelligence community's sources and methods. But as it now stands the publicly available evidence is open to question.

But meanwhile the steady drumbeat of "blame Russia" is having an effect. According to a recent you.gov/Economist poll, 58 percent of Americans view Russia as "unfriendly/enemy" while also finding that 52 percent of Democrats believed Russia "tampered with vote tallies."

With Congress back in session, Armed Services Committee chairman John McCain is set to hold a series of hearings focusing on Russian malfeasance, and the steady drip-drip-drip of allegations regarding Trump and Putin is only serving to box in the new President when it comes to pursuing a much-needed detente with Russia.

It also does not appear that a congressional inquiry will start from scratch and critically examine the evidence. On Friday, two senators – Republican Lindsey Graham and Democrat Sheldon Whitehouse – announced a Senate Judiciary subcommittee investigation into Russian interference in elections in the U.S. and elsewhere. But they already seemed to have made up their minds about the

conclusion: “Our goal is simple,” the senators said in a joint statement “To the fullest extent possible we want to shine a light on Russian activities to undermine democracy.”

So, before the next round of Cold War posturing commences, now might be the time to stop, take a deep breath and ask: Could the rush into a new Cold War with Russia be as disastrous and consequential – if not more so – as was the rush to war with Iraq nearly 15 years ago? We may, unfortunately, find out.

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Dangers of Democratic Putin-Bashing

Exclusive: As national Democratic leaders continue to blame Russian President Putin for their 2016 defeat, they’re leading their party into a realignment with the neocons and other war hawks, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The Washington establishment’s hysteria over its favorite new “group think” – that Russian President Vladimir Putin put Donald Trump in the White House – could set the stage for the Democratic Party rebranding itself as America’s “war party” alongside the neoconservative wing of the Republican Party.

This political realignment – with the Democrats becoming the party of foreign interventionism and the Trump-led Republicans a more inwardly looking America First party – could be significant for the future. However, in another way, what we’re seeing is not new. It is a replay of other “group thinks” in which some foreign leader is demonized beyond all reason allowing any accusation to be lodged against him with virtually no pushback from anyone interested in maintaining a U.S. mainstream career.

We saw this pattern, for instance, in the run-up to the Iraq War when Saddam Hussein was demonized to such a degree that any accusation against him was accepted without question, such as him hiding WMDs and colluding with Al Qaeda. In that context, some individuals supposedly with “first-hand knowledge” – “Iraqi defectors” – showed up to elaborate on and personalize the anti-Saddam propaganda message. We learned only later that many were scripted by the U.S.-

government-funded Iraqi National Congress.

Since 2011, we saw the same demonization treatment applied to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad who was depicted as a ruthless monster opposed by a “moderate opposition” which, in turn, was embraced by “human rights” groups, touted by Western media and applauded even by citizen “peace groups” around the United States and Europe. The Assad demonization obscured the fact that many “opposition” groups were part of an externally funded “regime change” project spearheaded by radical jihadists connected to Al Qaeda.

A Reagan Strategy

For me, this pattern goes back even further. I have witnessed these techniques since the 1980s when the Reagan administration tapped into CIA psychological warfare methods to rally the American people around a more interventionist foreign policy – to “kick the Vietnam Syndrome,” the public skepticism toward war that followed the Vietnam debacle.

Back then, senior CIA propagandist Walter Raymond Jr. was assigned to the National Security Council staff where he tutored young neocons, the likes of Elliott Abrams and Robert Kagan, drumming into them that the key was to personalize the propaganda by demonizing a particular leader, making him eminently worthy of hate.

Raymond counseled his acolytes that the goal was always to “glue” black hats on the side in Washington’s crosshairs and white hats on the side that Washington favored. The grays of the real world were to be avoided and any politician or journalist who sought to deal in nuance was disparaged as a fill-in-the-blank “apologist.”

So, in the 1980s, the Reagan administration targeted Nicaragua’s President Daniel Ortega, “the dictator in designer glasses,” as President Reagan dubbed him.

In 1989, before the invasion of Panama, Gen. Manuel Noriega got the treatment. In 1990, it was Saddam Hussein’s turn, deemed “worse than Hitler” by President George H.W. Bush. During the Clinton administration, the demon du jour was Serbia’s Slobodan Milosevic. In all these cases, there were legitimate criticisms of these leaders, but their evils were inflated to fantastical proportions to justify bloody military interventions by the U.S. government and its allies.

Regime Change in Moscow?

The main difference in recent years is that Official Washington’s neocons and

liberal interventionists have taken aim at Russia with the goal of “regime change” in Moscow, a strategy that risks the world’s nuclear annihilation. But except for the stakes, the old script is still being followed.

Rather than a realistic assessment of what happened in Ukraine, the American people and the West in general have been fed a steady diet of propaganda. As U.S. neocons and liberal interventionists pushed for and achieved the violent overthrow of elected President Viktor Yanukovich, he was lavishly smeared as the embodiment of corruption over such items as a sauna in his official residence. Yanukovich wore the black hat and the street fighters of the Maidan, led by ultra-nationalists and neo-Nazis, wore the white hats.

However, after Yanukovich’s unconstitutional ouster, his supporters, concentrated in Ukraine’s ethnic Russian areas, resisted the putsch. But the Western storyline was simply a Russian “invasion.” The absence of any evidence – like photos of an amphibious landing in Crimea or tanks crashing across Ukraine’s borders – didn’t seem to matter. Since Americans and Europeans had already been prepped to hate Putin, no evidence apparently was needed. The New York Times and other mainstream publications just reported any accusations as flat fact.

Even the exposure of a pre-coup phone call in which neocon U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland discussed with U.S. Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt who would lead the post-coup regime and how to “glue this thing” or “midwife this thing” didn’t matter either. Evidence of U.S. coup plotting wasn’t welcome because it didn’t fit the narrative of brave young Ukrainians promoting democracy by overthrowing the democratically elected leader.

Indeed, the leaked phone call, which the Western media attributed to Russian intelligence, became – rather than proof of U.S. coup plotting – an example of Moscow’s use of “kompromat” (i.e., compromising material) against the “victim,” Assistant Secretary Nuland, who was embarrassed because she had also disparaged the European Union’s lack of aggressiveness with the pithy remark, “Fuck the E.U.”

So, while many of these U.S. propaganda patterns can be traced back to Reagan and his desire to “kick the Vietnam Syndrome,” they have truly become bipartisan. Up had become down whichever party was in office with the mainstream media reinforcing the propaganda themes and deceptions.

The Trump Future

One can expect that the Trump administration will come to enjoy its own control over the levers of propaganda – especially given President Trump’s obsession

with always being right no matter what the contrary evidence – but there has been some addition by subtraction in the changeover of administrations.

Many of the neocons and liberal hawks who nested in the Obama administration – people like Victoria Nuland – are gone. That at least creates the possibility for some fresh thinking on such issues as continuing the “information war” against Putin and Russia. A more realistic assessment regarding the Kremlin may be possible given the fact that Secretary of State-designate Rex Tillerson and National Security Advisor Michael Flynn are not Russo-phobes and have personal experience with the Kremlin.

But the Democrats – and even progressives – appear determined to keep alive the anti-Russian hysteria that reached “group think” levels in the final weeks of the Obama administration and is now being carried forward by leading liberal organizations.

As James W. Carden reported for The Nation, “In the time between the November election and [Trump’s] inauguration, the Center for American Progress (CAP) and its president, former Hillary Clinton aide Neera Tanden, have been at the forefront of what some are calling ‘the resistance.’ Yet one troubling aspect of ‘the resistance’ seems to be its belief that Trump owes his surprise victory in the early morning hours of November 9 to the Russian government.”

Carden cited a session at CAP’s Washington headquarters at which Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Illinois, and Tanden hammered home the U.S. intelligence community’s still evidence-free claims that Putin ordered his intelligence services to sabotage Clinton’s campaign and help Trump. Again, details and nuance were unwelcome and unnecessary since the villains were the thoroughly demonized Putin and the widely despised (at least in Democratic circles) Trump.

But there are multiple dangers from the continuation of this propaganda narrative: the obvious one is the risk that the Washington establishment will make the Putin-Trump “guilt” a certified “group think” rather than a charge that needs careful analysis and that certitude could lead to an eventual nuclear showdown with Russia.

Democratic Delusions

Another risk, however, is that the Democrats will come to believe that Putin’s interference defeated Hillary Clinton and thus a desperately needed self-evaluation won’t happen.

Even if Putin did have his intelligence agents hack Democratic emails and then slipped them to WikiLeaks (although its founder Julian Assange and an associate, former U.K. Ambassador Craig Murray, have denied this), it is clear that the

contents of the emails were legitimate and revealed some newsworthy facts about both the Democratic National Committee's tilting the playing field against Sen. Bernie Sanders and what Clinton told Wall Street bankers in paid speeches that she was hiding from the voters. In other words, the emails weren't disinformation; they provided real facts that the American people had a right to know before heading to the polls.

But the other key point is that these emails had little impact on the election. Even Clinton herself initially put the blame for her defeat on FBI Director James Comey for briefly reopening and then re-closing an investigation into her use of a private email server as Secretary of State. It was then that her poll numbers began to crater – and Putin had nothing to do with either her reckless decision to conduct State Department business through her private email server or Comey's decisions regarding the investigation.

But the blame-Putin diversion has enabled the national Democratic Party to avoid reexamining its own contributions to Trump's Electoral College victory, particularly its insistence on nominating Clinton despite many polls showing her high unfavorable numbers and a widespread recognition that 2016 was an anti-establishment year. The Democratic Party put on blinders to ignore the grave vulnerabilities of its candidate and the sour mood of the electorate.

In a larger sense, the Democratic Party ignored its own reputation as a home for internationalists, elitists and interventionists. Indeed, Clinton chose to cater to the neocons who are very influential in Official Washington but carry little weight in Middle America. Then, she made things worse by insulting many white blue-collar Americans as "deplorables."

Yet, instead of conducting a thorough autopsy of their demise – sinking into minority status in Congress and across the country – the Democrats apparently think they can whistle past their political graveyard by blaming their defeat on Putin and by building a movement based on attacking Trump's erratic and offensive behavior, very similar to the failed strategy that Clinton employed last fall.

Not only does this negative strategy threaten again to backfire but – by feeding into a new and dangerous Cold War – it risks tying the Democrats to conflict and militarism and letting the Trump Republicans position themselves as the alternatives to endless and escalating wars.

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

Trump Lets Saudis Off His 'Muslim Ban'

Exclusive: By leaving Saudi Arabia and other key terrorism sponsors off his "Muslim ban," President Trump shows the same cowardice and dishonesty that infected the Bush and Obama administrations, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

President Trump's ban against letting people from seven mostly Muslim countries enter the United States looks to many like a thinly concealed bias against a religion, but it also is a troubling sign that Trump doesn't have the nerve to challenge the false terrorism narrative demanded by Israel and Saudi Arabia.

The Israeli-Saudi narrative, which is repeated endlessly inside Official Washington, is that Iran is the principal sponsor of terrorism when that dubious honor clearly falls to Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other Sunni-led Muslim states, including Pakistan, nations that did not make Trump's list.

The evidence of who is funding and supporting most of the world's terrorism is overwhelming. All major terrorist groups that have bedeviled the United States and the West over the past couple of decades – from Al Qaeda to the Taliban to Islamic State – can trace their roots back to Sunni-led countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Qatar.

Privately, this reality has been recognized by senior U.S. officials, including former Vice President Joe Biden, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Trump's National Security Advisor Michael Flynn. But that knowledge has failed to change U.S. policy, which caters to the oil-rich Saudis and the politically powerful Israelis.

For instance, in August 2012, the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency – then headed by General Flynn – warned that Salafists, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Al Qaeda were "the major forces driving the insurgency" against the largely secular government in Syria.

Flynn's DIA advised President Obama that rebels were trying to establish a "Salafist principality in eastern Syria," and that "western countries, the gulf states, and Turkey are supporting these efforts" to counter the supposed Shiite threat to the region.

Hillary Clinton also was aware of this reality, as the threat from the head-chopping Islamic State – also known as ISIL or ISIS – grew worse in summer 2014. In September 2014, the former Secretary of State wrote in an email that Saudi

Arabia and Qatar were “providing clandestine financial and logistic support to ISIL and other radical Sunni groups.”

Later in 2014, Vice President Joe Biden made the same point in a talk at Harvard’s Kennedy School: “Our allies in the region were our largest problem in Syria ... the Saudis, the emirates, etc. what were they doing? They were so determined to take down Assad and essentially have a proxy Sunni-Shia war, what did they do? They poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of thousands of tons of military weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad, except the people who were being supplied were Al Nusra and Al Qaeda and the extremist elements of jihadis coming from other parts of the world.” [Quote starts at 53:25.]

Known But Unknown

So the truth was known at senior levels of the Obama administration – and now via National Security Advisor Flynn at the top of the Trump administration – but the Israelis and the Saudis don’t want that reality to shape U.S. foreign policy. In other words, this truth about the real source of terrorism was known but unknown.

Instead, Israel demands that Washington share its hatred of the Lebanese militant group, Hezbollah, a Shiite force that organized in the 1980s to drive the invading Israeli army out of southern Lebanon. Because Hezbollah dealt a rare defeat to the Israeli Defense Force, Israel puts it at the top of “terrorist” organizations. And, Hezbollah is supported by Iran.

Saudi Arabia, too, hates Iran because the Sunni-fundamentalist Saudi monarchy considers Shia Islam heretical, a sectarian conflict that dates back to the Seventh Century. So, the Saudi government has viewed Sunni jihadists as the tip of the spear against these Shiite rivals.

Israeli and Saudi officials have even made clear that they would prefer Al Qaeda or Islamic State to prevail in the Syrian war rather than have the largely secular government of President Bashar al-Assad survive because they see his regime as part of a “Shiite crescent” reaching from Tehran through Damascus to the Hezbollah neighborhoods of Beirut.

In September 2013, Israel’s Ambassador to the United States Michael Oren, a close adviser to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, told the Jerusalem Post that Israel favored the Sunni extremists over Assad.

“The greatest danger to Israel is by the strategic arc that extends from Tehran, to Damascus to Beirut. And we saw the Assad regime as the keystone in that arc,” Oren said in the interview. “We always wanted Bashar Assad to go, we always

preferred the bad guys who weren't backed by Iran to the bad guys who were backed by Iran." He said this was the case even if the "bad guys" were affiliated with Al Qaeda.

And, in June 2014, speaking as a former ambassador at an Aspen Institute conference, Oren expanded on his position, saying Israel would even prefer a victory by the brutal Islamic State over continuation of the Iranian-backed Assad in Syria. "From Israel's perspective, if there's got to be an evil that's got to prevail, let the Sunni evil prevail," Oren said.

[For more on this topic, see Consortiumnews.com's "Israel, Saudi Arabia and Terrorism."]

The West's Worries

However, when Americans and Europeans worry about terrorism, they are talking about Al Qaeda and Islamic State, terror groups led by Sunni extremists. Those are the groups that have been responsible for bloody attacks on the United States and Western Europe.

The absurdity of Trump's immigration ban is underscored by the fact that it would not have kept out the 15 Saudi hijackers dispatched by Al Qaeda to carry out the 9/11 attacks. They came from the home country of Al Qaeda's Saudi founder Osama bin Laden.

Neither would Trump's ban have stopped Muhamed Atta, one of the 9/11 ringleaders who was from Egypt, another country ignored by Trump, which also happens to be the original home of Ayman al-Zawahiri, Al Qaeda's current leader.

So, what Trump's initial foray into the complex issue of terrorism has revealed is that he is unwilling to take on the real nexus of terrorism, just as Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama shied away from a clash with Israel, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf sheikdoms.

In the first week of Donald Trump's presidency, the regional interests of Israel and Saudi Arabia have continued to dictate how Official Washington addresses terrorism.

Trump's seven-nation list includes Iran, Syria and Sudan as state sponsors of terrorism and Iraq, Yemen, Somalia and Libya as countries where there has been terrorist activity. But the governments of Iran and Syria arguably have become two of the leading fighters against the terrorist groups of most concern to the U.S. and European populations.

Iran is aiding both Syria and Iraq in their conflicts with Al Qaeda and Islamic

State. Inside Syria, the Syrian army has borne the brunt of that fighting against terror groups funded and armed by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, and – yes – at least indirectly, the United States. Yet while none of the Al Qaeda/Islamic State benefactors made Trump's list, Iran and Syria did.

In other words, not only is Trump's ban a blunderbuss blast at thousands of innocent Muslims who have no intention of hurting the United States but it doesn't even take aim at the most dangerous targets which represent a genuine terrorist threat.

Trump's ban is really a twisted case of "political correctness" purporting to reject "political correctness." While Trump claims to recognize that it is dangerously naïve to let in Muslims when Islamic terrorism has remained a threat to Americans, Trump has left off his list the most likely sources of terrorists because – to do otherwise – would have negative political consequences in Official Washington.

By going after Iran and Syria, in particular, Trump appears to be currying favor with neoconservatives and liberal hawks in Congress and across Official Washington. Perhaps, he is simply hesitating while the Senate considers confirmation of his choice for Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson. The Senate also could reject other of his foreign policy nominees.

But that is exactly the kind of compromising that undermined any attempts by President Obama to engineer a real change from the "war of terror" strategy of George W. Bush. Obama was so afraid of going against the Israelis and the Saudis that he only altered U.S. policy on the margins and let himself get dragged into Israeli-Saudi-favored "regime change" adventures in Syria and Yemen.

Dashed or Delayed Hopes

When Trump initially rebuffed the neocons and liberal hawks who dominate Official Washington's foreign establishment, there was hope that he might at least try to hold Saudi Arabia accountable as the chief sponsor of terrorism, rather than to continue the Israeli-Saudi-imposed narrative.

But to do so carried political risks beyond offending the politically potent Israelis who have forged a quiet alliance with the wealthy Saudis. Trump would also have to recognize the important role of Republican icon Ronald Reagan in creating the terrorist threat.

After all, the origins of the modern jihadist movement trace back to the \$1 billion-a-year collaboration between the Reagan administration and the Saudi monarchy to support the Afghan mujahedeen in their war against a secular government in Kabul backed by the Soviet Union.

The extravagant arming of these Afghan fundamentalists, who were bolstered by international jihadists led by Osama bin Laden, dealt a harsh blow to the Soviet forces and ultimately led to the collapse of the secular regime in Kabul, but the victory also paved the way for the rise of the Taliban and Al Qaeda, blowback that hit the United States on 9/11.

The U.S. reaction to that shock never directly addressed how the problem had originated and who the underlying culprits were. Though George W. Bush's administration did begin by invading Afghanistan, the neoconservatives around him quickly turned the U.S. retaliation against longstanding Israeli targets, such as Iraq's Saddam Hussein and Syria's Assad dynasty though they had nothing to do with 9/11.

The fiction that these largely secular governments were responsible for Islamic terrorism – and the mislabeling of Shia-ruled Iran as the chief sponsor of such terrorism – have remained the myths confusing the American people and thus justifying continued U.S. support for the Israeli-Saudi war against the “Shiite crescent.”

Trump, who is heavily criticized for his inability to distinguish fact from fantasy, could have displayed a brave commitment to truth-telling if he had fashioned his counter-terrorism policy to actually address the real sponsors of terrorism. Instead, he chose to continue the lies that the Israelis and Saudis insist that Official Washington tell.

In doing so, Trump is not only offending much of the world and alienating countries that are at the forefront of the fight against the worst terrorist threats, but he is continuing to shield the key regimes that have perpetuated the scourge of terrorism.

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](#)).

Donald Trump and His ‘Magic Mirror’

Exclusive: President Trump's vain tirades about crowd size and voter fraud make him look like Snow White's evil queen gazing into her mirror, but he could turn that around by telling some important truths, says Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

By insisting that he is the legitimate winner of the U.S. popular vote and the man who drew the largest inaugural crowd ever, President Trump is behaving like the evil queen in "Snow White" gazing into a "magic mirror" and refusing to accept that he isn't the "fairest of them all."

To protect his giant but fragile ego, Trump concocts fantasies about three million to five million illegal votes – enough to cover his actual deficit of 2.8 million – and he disputes the obvious fact that his inaugural turnout was far less than Barack Obama's.

Having attended both Obama's inaugural in 2009 and Trump's in 2017, I can assure you that Obama's crowd was much bigger. While my son Jeff and I had to squeeze into and out of packed Metro stations on Jan. 20, 2009, we had no trouble getting on a train on Jan. 20, 2017.

Even at the outskirts of Trump's inauguration, protesters far outnumbered celebrants. One vendor selling Trump-inaugural tee shirts remarked that he had been sitting there for four hours and had only sold five shirts.

Of course, none of that is too surprising since Obama was the first African-American president and Washington D.C. and its surrounding suburbs have large black populations as well as being heavily Democratic districts. In other words, it was easier for many Obama supporters to get to his inaugural than it was for Trump's backers to travel longer distances to get to his.

As for the crowds on the Mall, Trump's turnout was further depressed by the fact that large numbers of protesters, especially north of the inaugural parade route, clogged the security checkpoints. Some protesters even locked arms to slow the entry process.

So there were logical reasons – not reflective of Trump's overall popularity – explaining why his numbers were a lot lower than Obama's. But rather than accept this minor slight – as well as the fact that he lost the national popular vote by a significant margin – Trump has behaved like Snow White's vain queen who can't accept the inevitability of her fading beauty and the unwelcome news that someone younger has supplanted her as "the fairest" in the land.

Trump could have scored valuable political points by demonstrating some uncharacteristic grace, acknowledging that as the popular vote loser whose crowds fell short of Obama's record turnout, he recognizes his responsibility to be the president of all the people and to respect dissenting opinions.

Instead, he marred his first week in the White House by pushing easily debunked

claims that he was the victim of conspiracies to disparage his inaugural turnout and deny him a popular-vote victory.

More Dangerous Lies

While Trump's refusal to accept unpleasant realities raises fresh concerns about his fitness for office – since his presidency will surely face some painful reversals and rejecting reality is a dangerous way to respond – he is certainly not the first president to lie to the American people.

One difference between Trump's lies and many other lies, however, is that Trump's are both more personal and more obvious. Only his most benighted followers will continue to contest his popular vote loss and the comparatively small size of his inaugural crowds. Most government lies are both harder to detect and more sinister in their consequences.

Think, for example, of President George W. Bush's falsehoods about Iraq's WMDs and Saddam Hussein's alleged collaboration with Al Qaeda. That deceptive propaganda led to the deaths of more than 4,500 U.S. soldiers and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, not to mention a price tag of more than \$1 trillion and the spreading of chaos across the Middle East and into Europe.

President Obama also found deception a useful tool for herding the American people behind his administration's foreign interventions. For instance, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and other senior officials lied about Muammar Gaddafi engaging in "genocide" against the people of eastern Libya when that was clearly not true. But they wanted to justify another "regime change" project, so the truth was readily sacrificed in the name of the "Clinton Doctrine" and her idea of "smart power."

Similarly, in trying to justify direct U.S. military intervention in Syria, Secretary of State John Kerry repeatedly claimed "we know" that Bashar al-Assad's military was responsible for a sarin gas attack outside Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013. Kerry made the false claim of certainty to justify a "retaliatory" assault.

Although Obama ultimately decided not to bomb Syria's army, he also asserted no doubt about Assad's guilt. Obama declared in a formal address to the United Nations General Assembly on Sept. 24, 2013, that "It's an insult to human reason and to the legitimacy of this institution to suggest that anyone other than the regime carried out this attack."

Yet, we now know that Obama's own intelligence analysts were among those who questioned whether Assad's military was responsible. I was hearing in real time from intelligence sources that a number of U.S. analysts believed that the

attack might well have been a provocation by Syrian rebels to draw the U.S. military into the conflict on their side, a suspicion later confirmed by investigative journalist Seymour Hersh.

No Slam Dunk

And, we learned last year from The Atlantic's long interview with Obama about his foreign policies that he was told by Director of National Intelligence James Clapper that there was no "slam dunk" evidence implicating the Syrian government in the sarin attack.

However, instead of informing the American people about these doubts, Secretary Kerry and President Obama insisted that there were no doubts. In other words, they lied – and those lies helped justify continued U.S. arms shipments to "moderate" rebels, who were largely under the command of Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate which ultimately got possession of many of those sophisticated weapons.

To this day, the false sarin certainty remains part of Official Washington's conventional wisdom with CNN's Jake Tapper citing the "Assad gassed his own people" claim on Wednesday in challenging Rep. Tulsi Gabbard, D-Hawaii, about her decision to meet with the Syrian president during a recent fact-finding trip to the war-ravaged country.

Similarly, the Obama administration pushed propaganda themes to justify another "regime change" project in Ukraine, on Russia's border. Obama's State Department fed dubious and false claims to credulous mainstream reporters, including accusations that elected President Viktor Yanukovich was responsible for the bloodshed that preceded the putsch that ousted him on Feb. 22, 2014.

Obama and his team also concealed evidence about who was behind the shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over eastern Ukraine on July 17, 2014. Though I was told that some U.S. intelligence analysts had determined that a rogue element of the Ukrainian military had fired the fateful missile, Obama withheld the intelligence community's findings while the guilt was pinned on Russia.

Early last year when the father of the one U.S. citizen killed among the 298 dead on the flight was begging the U.S. government to open its files, a well-placed intelligence source told me that the request was given serious consideration but was rejected because the truth would "destroy the narrative," which had made Russian President Vladimir Putin the villain and thus was a key factor in justifying the New Cold War.

By withholding the U.S. intelligence evidence, Obama gave the MH-17 murderers more than two years to get away and cover their tracks – and allowed the

disreputable Ukrainian intelligence service, the SBU, to take control of the supposedly “Dutch-led” investigation and thus steer the conclusions in support of the anti-Russian propaganda narrative. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“Troubling Gaps in the New MH-17 Report”](#) and [“The Official and Implausible MH-17 Scenario.”](#)]

Double Standards

Obama’s secretive approach toward those pivotal events was in marked contrast to his eagerness to have his intelligence agencies brief reporters [on allegations that Putin](#) had helped Trump’s campaign and had blackmailed him over evidence of supposedly salacious behavior with Moscow prostitutes.

Even though Obama’s intelligence officials [presented no evidence](#) to support those accusations, the charges undermined Trump’s legitimacy as many Democrats echoed Hillary Clinton in calling Trump Putin’s “puppet.”

The contrast between Obama’s eagerness to release secret allegations to disparage Trump and Obama’s refusal to give the public substantive information for judging issues of war or peace reflects the elitism that came to infect Obama’s administration.

Information – or disinformation – was valued for guiding the American people in desired directions. Facts didn’t have an intrinsic value as a way to empower the public to understand the world and to make informed judgments. Instead, “information war” was viewed as a means to weaken and defeat “enemies,” part of “smart power.”

To cite another children’s fable, Obama’s administration went down the rabbit hole in its foreign policy where reality and logic no longer prevailed. But pretty much the entire Washington establishment was there, too, Republicans, Democrats and the mainstream media, so there was a self-reinforcing quality to the madness.

President Trump clearly doesn’t have the mainstream media on his side nor much of the establishment, so he cannot expect the kind of nodding acquiescence that greeted false claims by George W. Bush and Barack Obama – or, for that matter, presidents dating back generations.

But Trump does not help himself by destroying his own credibility by making easily debunked claims about crowd sizes and voter fraud, what one of his aides called “alternative facts.”

Still, Trump could reverse his image as a self-absorbed con man by standing up for real government transparency and showing genuine trust in the American

people. He could start by declassifying evidence on the Syrian sarin case, the Ukrainian coup, the MH-17 shoot-down and other turning-point moments in recent history. He could show bipartisanship, too, by revealing some historic secrets about Republican administrations as they also sought to manipulate the American people.

Trump could arm Americans with real facts and show genuine respect to the citizens as the nation's true sovereigns, the "We the People" of the U.S. Constitution's opening words, not lambs for herding to the next war-of-choice slaughterhouse.

If he could stop gazing into that mirror, Trump could transform himself from being just one more villain feeding fantasies to the American people into a real-world hero by telling important truths. But he has gotten off to a very rocky start by telling some very petty lies.

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

Trump's Ego-Driven Lies

U.S. government lying is surely not a new thing – recall the Iraq War deceptions – but Donald Trump has started off his presidency with clearly false claims that make the problem worse, says ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

We are less than a week into the Trump presidency, and it is apparent that one of the more disturbing practices of Mr. Trump's campaign he intends to continue while in office.

The practice involves the President's disdain for truth, but it is not just a matter of the volume of lies and how he has built his political career on falsehood, as disturbing as that is. Rather it is the more specific technique of unrelentingly repeating a lie so often and with such apparent conviction, while ignoring all contrary evidence and refutations, that through sheer repetition many people are led to believe it to be true.

The technique has been demonstrated by authoritarian regimes elsewhere. Many

results of modern opinion polling suggest that now, in the post-truth era, there is even greater potential for making the technique work than for dictatorships of the past. Even a fact-checking free press cannot stop it; the fact-checking gets shoved aside amid the repetition.

The early subjects of post-inaugural use of the big lie have been ones closest to the bruises the new president's ego suffered from the nature of last year's election and Mr. Trump's status as the least popular incoming president since such polls began to be taken. These subjects have included the size of inaugural crowds and audiences and the President's baseless accusation that widespread voter fraud accounted for much of the popular vote that went against him. As the administration is forced to make real public policy, there is good reason to expect that the same techniques being applied now to ego-driven questions will also be applied to substantive policy matters to bolster public support for them.

There is no limit to the range of policy questions on which such efforts may be made, but consider the chief implications for foreign relations of the United States.

The first consequence is a loss of trust among foreign governments and populations, who see how frequent and shameless is the lying and thereby become less inclined to believe the U.S. government even when it is telling the truth.

Gideon Rachman addresses this effect in the *Financial Times*, asking, "When an international confrontation looms, the US has traditionally looked to its allies for support – at the UN or even on the battlefield. But how will America be able to rally support, in the Trump era, if its allies no longer believe what the US president and his aides have to say?"

A lesser ability to muster international support in pursuit of shared interests is one of the specific harms that flow from a loss of foreign trust. Another more general harm is the loss of one of the biggest advantages that the free world, and the United States as leader of the free world, have had over unfree countries – a loss that comes from stooping to use one of the favorite techniques of regimes that rule the unfree.

As Rachman observes, "If the Trump administration now destroys American credibility, it will have handed the Russian and Chinese governments a victory of historic proportions. The cold war was a battle not just about economics or military strength, but also about the truth. The Soviet Union collapsed, in the end, partly because it was too obvious that it was a regime based on lies."

Ill-informed Public

Another consequence of directing the big lie to domestic audiences is that this audience will become that much worse of an ill-informed constituency, incapable of engaging in the kind of well-informed debate that serves as a check against ill-advised foreign policies and can muster solid support for well-advised ones.

The difficulty in generating that kind of well-informed discussion is hard enough amid fake news and post-truth nonchalance about accuracy. Willing and relentless use of lying by those in power makes the difficulty even greater.

The problem is already great regarding domestic issues on which the people have some basis for making direct and independent observations. For example, two-thirds of Trump voters erroneously believe that unemployment increased during Barack Obama's presidency, even though it significantly decreased. The problem will be at least as great on matters of foreign relations on which the public has less basis for direct observation and follows more what their leaders say.

A subtler but potentially significant consequence is that the leaders who propagate a big lie, by being so committed to sustaining the message contained in it, come to believe the lie themselves. And when this happens, foreign policy and its execution become based directly, not just indirectly by way of a duped public, on falsehood.

We saw a bit of this with the more fanatical of the promoters of the Iraq War. One of the most fanatical of them, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz (who, in the words of an anonymous official who worked with him, "has an unfortunate ability to delude himself because he believes so passionately in things"), came to believe that the mythical alliance between the Iraqi regime and Al Qaeda, manufactured as a propaganda point to gain public support for the invasion, actually existed, and even after the invasion he was wastefully directing resources to try to find evidence that it existed.

It is surely no coincidence that in this first week of Donald Trump's presidency, George Orwell's *1984* rose to the top of the Amazon bestseller list. We have not yet heard of any proposed government reorganization to create a Department of Truth. We already have, however, gag orders to keep truth-telling public servants (especially, it appears, those who might have facts related to climate change) from interfering with messages from the top, including any messages that take the form of big lies.

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

The Injustices of Manning's Ordeal

Exclusive: For exposing war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, Pvt. Chelsea Manning suffered nearly seven years in prison, an ordeal President Obama finally is ending but without acting on the crimes she revealed, says Marjorie Cohn.

By Marjorie Cohn

After overseeing the aggressive prosecution and near-seven-year incarceration of Army whistleblower Chelsea Manning, President Obama – in one of his last acts in office – commuted all but four months of her remaining sentence but ignored the fact that he had taken no action on the war crimes that Manning revealed.

At his final news conference, Obama explained his reasons for commuting Manning's record-setting 35-year sentence for leaking classified information to the public. Manning is scheduled to be released on May 17.

"Chelsea Manning has served a tough prison sentence," Obama said. "It has been my view that given she went to trial; that due process was carried out; that she took responsibility for her crime; that the sentence that she received was very disproportionate relative to what other leakers had received; and that she had served a significant amount of time; that it made sense to commute and not pardon her sentence. ... I feel very comfortable that justice has been served."

But there has been no justice for the Iraqis and Afghans whose unjustified deaths and mistreatment were exposed by the then-22-year-old Army private, known at the time as Bradley Manning. An Army intelligence analyst in Iraq, Manning sent hundreds of thousands of classified files, documents and videos, including the "Collateral Murder" video, the "Iraq War Logs," the "Afghan War Logs" and State Department cables, to WikiLeaks. Many of the items that she transmitted contained evidence of war crimes.

In an online chat attributed to Manning, she wrote, "If you had free reign over classified networks... and you saw incredible things, awful things... things that belonged in the public domain, and not on some server stored in a dark room in Washington DC... what would you do?"

Manning went on to say, "God knows what happens now. Hopefully worldwide discussion, debates, and reforms... I want people to see the truth... because without information, you cannot make informed decisions as a public."

Callous Killings

The Collateral Murder video depicts a U.S. Apache attack helicopter killing 12 people, including two Reuters journalists, and a passerby who stopped his van to rescue the wounded. Also wounded were two children in the van. Finally, a U.S. tank drove over one of the bodies, cutting the man in half. These acts constitute three separate war crimes under the Geneva Conventions and the U.S. Army Field Manual.

Manning fulfilled her legal duty to report war crimes. She complied with her duty to obey lawful orders but also her duty to disobey unlawful orders. Enshrined in the U.S. Army Subject Schedule No. 27-1 is "the obligation to report all violations of the law of war."

Manning went to her chain of command and asked them to investigate the Collateral Murder video and other "war porn," but her superiors refused. "I was disturbed by the response to injured children," Manning stated. She was also bothered by the soldiers depicted in the video who "seemed to not value human life by referring to [their targets] as 'dead bastards.'"

The Uniform Code of Military Justice sets forth the duty of a service member to obey lawful orders. But that duty includes the concomitant duty to disobey unlawful orders. An order not to reveal evidence of war crimes would be an unlawful order. Manning had a legal duty to expose the commission of war crimes.

Manning's revelations actually saved lives. After WikiLeaks published her documentation of Iraqi torture centers established by the United States, the Iraqi government refused Obama's request to extend immunity to U.S. soldiers who commit criminal and civil offenses there. As a result, Obama had to withdraw U.S. troops from Iraq.

Although Manning pled guilty to 10 offenses that carried 20 years in prison, military prosecutors insisted on pursuing charges of aiding the enemy and violation of the Espionage Act, that carry life in prison. Manning was not allowed to present evidence that she had been acting in the public interest.

When she entered her plea, Manning stated, "I believed if the public, particularly the American public, could see this it could spark a debate on the military and our foreign policy in general as it applied to Iraq and Afghanistan." She added, "It might cause society to reconsider the need to engage in counter terrorism while ignoring the situation of the people we engaged with every day."

Col. Denise Lind, the presiding judge, found Manning not guilty of the most serious charge – aiding the enemy – because the evidence failed to establish that Manning knew information she provided to WikiLeaks would reach Al Qaeda. A

conviction of aiding the enemy would have sent a chilling message to the media and to whistleblowers that leaked classified information could lead to sentences of life in prison. That would deprive the public of crucial information.

Although that draconian possibility was averted, Manning still was convicted of 20 crimes, including Espionage Act offenses, itself an ominous warning that could deter future whistleblowers from exposing government wrongdoing. Traditionally, the act has been used only against spies and traitors, not whistleblowers. Yet Obama used the Espionage Act to prosecute more whistleblowers than all prior administrations combined.

Judge Lind, who sentenced Manning to 35 years in prison, reduced her sentence by 112 days because of the mistreatment she suffered in custody.

Harsh Treatment

For the first 11 months, Manning was held in solitary confinement and subjected to humiliating forced nudity during inspection. In fact, Juan Mendez, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture, characterized her treatment as cruel, inhuman and degrading. He said, "I conclude that the 11 months under conditions of solitary confinement (regardless of the name given to [her] regime by the prison authorities) constitutes at a minimum cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment in violation of article 16 of the Convention against Torture. If the effects in regards to pain and suffering inflicted on Manning were more severe, they could constitute torture."

Mendez could not conclusively say Manning's treatment amounted to torture because he was denied permission to visit her under acceptable circumstances. Mendez also concluded that, "imposing seriously punitive conditions of detention on someone who has not been found guilty of any crime is a violation of [her] right to physical and psychological integrity as well as of [her] presumption of innocence."

Manning, who began her gender transition following her sentencing, has been denied critical and appropriate treatment related to her gender identity at various points during her imprisonment. Her long sentence and harsh incarceration also drew protests from other human rights advocates.

"Chelsea Manning exposed serious abuses, and as a result her own human rights have been violated by the U.S. government for years," said Margaret Huang, executive director of Amnesty International USA. "President Obama was right to commute her sentence, but it is long overdue. It is unconscionable that she languished in prison for years while those allegedly implicated by the information she revealed still haven't been brought to justice."

“Instead of punishing the messenger, the U.S. government can send a strong signal to the world that it is serious about investigating the human rights violations exposed by the leaks and bringing all those suspected of criminal responsible to justice in fair trials,” said Erika Guevara-Rosas, Americas Director at Amnesty International.

The commutation was the culmination of efforts by the Chelsea Manning Support Network, her legal team, and hundreds of thousands of people who signed petitions demanding her release.

Indeed, Kathleen Gilberd, executive director of the Military Law Task Force of the National Lawyers Guild, stated, “While Chelsea’s freedom is long-overdue, we are gratified that she has been afforded some measure of delayed justice. There is no doubt that the tremendous outpouring of public support and organizing for commuting the sentence contributed to this outcome. Still,” she added, “we remain critical of a government that seems more intent on prosecuting those who expose war crimes than those who commit them.”

(An earlier version of this story incorrectly put Manning’s scheduled release at March 17, instead of May 17.)

Marjorie Cohn is professor emerita at Thomas Jefferson School of Law, former president of the National Lawyers Guild, and on the advisory board of Veterans for Peace. Her books include *Rules of Disengagement: The Politics and Honor of Military Dissent* (with Kathleen Gilberd) and *Drones and Targeted Killing: Legal, Moral, and Geopolitical Issues*. Visit her website at <http://marjoriecohn.com/> and follow her on Twitter @MarjorieCohn
