

America's Unpredictable Imbalance

A shrinking middle class and excessive fear of terrorism have combined to destabilize the American political system, opening avenues for an authoritarian demagogue like Donald Trump and but also for a democratic socialist like Bernie Sanders, writes Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

Converging avenues of fear are eroding the political and social status quo in the democratic West. Healthy democracies strive to maintain an equitable balance of forces within their political, economic and social spheres. Balance is a salve that induces comfort and confidence. Fear and uncertainty, on the other hand, are irritants that can quickly throw things out of balance. It seems that, at present, fear has the upper hand.

The scenarios that are increasing popular fears reflect issues of economics and public safety. The economic policies that have prevailed in the West since the 2008 financial crisis have not been corrective and have allowed for an ever deepening divide between the wealthiest strata of society and everyone else.

In the case of the United States, a Pew Research Center study announced on Dec. 9 that the "middle class" has shrunk to the point that it no longer represents a majority of the American people. "After more than four decades of serving as the nation's economic majority, the American middle class is now matched in number by those in the economic tiers above and below it," the Pew study said, adding that this trend "could signal a tipping point" in which the middle class will shrink even more.

From 1971 to 2015, the study said, "the nation's aggregate household income has substantially shifted from middle-income to upper-income households, driven by the growing size of the upper-income tier and more rapid gains in income at the top. Fully 49% of U.S. aggregate income went to upper-income households in 2014, up from 29% in 1970. The share accruing to middle-income households was 43% in 2014, down substantially from 62% in 1970.

"And middle-income Americans have fallen further behind financially in the new century. In 2014, the median income of these households was 4% less than in 2000. Moreover, because of the housing market crisis and the Great Recession of 2007-09, their median wealth (assets minus debts) fell by 28% from 2001 to 2013."

The exalted "American Dream" is centered around a belief that all citizens can attain middle class or better economic status. The Pew report calls that

possibility into question for most Americans and, as this slowly dawns on the public, the resulting economic fear and anxiety becomes a politically and socially destabilizing factor.

A similar scenario can be found in Europe's Euro Zone nations. Another Pew Research Center report on a poll conducted in this region during summer 2015, and reported by the *New York Times* on Dec. 11, found "extraordinary gloom about the state of their economies."

Simultaneously, a second avenue of fear and anxiety has been created by an ongoing series of terrorist attacks, the latest in Paris, France, and San Bernardino, California. These attacks were carried out by Islamic extremists and the media on both side of the Atlantic have exaggerated the threat they represent. This, in turn, has given rise to a growing Islamophobia.

Indeed, we have gotten to the point where, in the mind of the public, the term "terrorism," now means the violent actions of extremist Muslims. Yet this is a dangerously restrictive definition. For instance, in the United States, similar and much more frequent violence carried on by non-Muslims is often not labeled terrorism.

The truth is that throughout the West the violence carried on by a small number of fanatics identified with the Middle East has become an obsession with a growing number of citizens. According to the *Times* article, 19 percent of adult Americans define "Islamic terrorism" as the "top issue facing the country." Their number is sure to grow. Muslims have become the scapegoats of our age.

The Role Model Demagogue

These two converging fears, over failing economic security and threatened public safety, have created the most unstable socio-political environment since the interwar years of the Twentieth Century. Historically, it is at such times that the political parties of the "center" – the more moderate parties – begin to appear weak and the capacity of their leaders to control and improve conditions becomes suspect.

It is under these conditions that more and more people are attracted to the campaigning of demagogues, warmongers, and authoritarian opportunists. Policy proposals which, in more settled times would never be taken seriously, now begin to appear reasonable to increasing numbers of citizens. And, this is exactly the trend we now see in both the U.S. and Europe.

The role model "leader" here seems to be the American presidential candidate, Donald Trump. Trump is a billionaire real estate tycoon and "reality show" star. For Trump, who has no political experience, all problems have simple and direct

answers which are to be presented to the public, not so much as policy suggestions, as orders.

And, as befits a businessman with an authoritarian personality, Trump has displayed real talent for this sort of behavior. What is Trump's answer to the exaggerated problem of Islamic terrorism? Declaring that we are at war, Trump promises to defeat ISIS "big league" – a non-answer which allows for anything from the invasion of Syria to the use of nuclear weapons.

Trump would ban Muslims from coming into the country (while at the same time deporting millions of immigrants from South and Central America), and set up internment camps for those already here. He would also kill the families of identified Muslim terrorists.

That such policies, if actually implemented, would mire the nation in continuous war in the Middle East, spark a conflict with Russia, and leave constitutional law and protections in shreds, seems not to matter at all to Donald Trump. And, his supporters don't seem to mind such consequences either. According to the *Times* article, Trump currently has the support of "40% of Republican primary voters without a college degree and 26% of those who have a degree."

When it comes to alleviating economic anxieties, Trump simply relies on the fact that he is a rich businessman to suggest that he can deal with such problems. This seems to suffice even though the problems come from the unregulated greed of big business people just like Trump. In times of trouble, image "trumps" reality (pun intended).

Europe, too, has its Trump equivalents ranging from France's Marine Le Pen to Viktor Orban in Hungary. There is the Freedom Party in Austria and the Golden Dawn in Greece. And this is just a short list. All of these people and parties are presenting the kind of quick and direct actions that are much more dangerous and liable to get out of control, running roughshod over laws and constitutions, than the problems they purport to solve.

Cycles of Fear

Fears and anxieties are amorphous emotions which seem to come upon societies in an historically cyclical fashion. In the realm of economics this attests to the allure of power and riches that both individuals and groups, in the form of special interests and other factions, seem unable to resist. Without effective regulation capitalism is unstable and there is always exploitation leading to repeated recessions or worse.

Likewise, in a world of competing powers and ideologies insecurity seems forever just around the corner. This too comes in historical cycles. And, if such

insecurity becomes deep enough and widespread enough, it can threaten finely balanced democratic political systems as citizens forget about constitutional rights, which support peace and stability at home, and go looking for “strong leaders.”

In a country such as the United States, it is the political right that always benefits in such situations. Thus, Republican right-wing “populism” can support an array of warmongering, xenophobic and simple-minded presidential candidates among whom Donald Trump is just the tip of the iceberg.

The same fears and anxieties, mostly of the economic category, have kept afloat only one candidate who can be described as being on the political left, the relatively benign Bernie Sanders. Sen. Sanders’s ability to contest the Democratic presidential nomination is surprising in a country that has vilified the political left for much of its history. However, his success comes out the same present quest for new leaders and new answers.

Though I speak of historical cycles of fear and anxiety I don’t mean to imply that they are inevitable. In principle, human beings can learn from history and improve their lot. Think of history, both personal and societal, as an undertow capable of driving one into potentially dangerous channels. Within these channels lie the demagogues and militarists who would drown us all. We know this is true because it has repeatedly happened before – the product of cycles of converging fears left unchecked.

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Rethinking Donald Trump

Donald Trump’s freewheeling and narcissistic presidential campaign has earned the consensus contempt of the mainstream media and establishment politicians, but that’s partly because he has dared challenge dangerous orthodoxies, like the neocon/liberal-hawk mania for “regime change,” writes Sam Hussein.

By Sam Hussein

The Establishment so wants everyone to unfriend Donald Trump’s supporters on Facebook, there’s even an [app to block them](#). That’ll teach them!

Yes, Trump plays a bully boy as he appeals to populist (good) as well as nativist, xenophobic and racist (bad) sentiments. The bad need to be meaningfully addressed and engaged rather than dismissed by self-styled sophisticates, noses raised. The good should be recognized and encouraged.

Focusing on the negative aspects of his campaign has blinded many people to what's good in it and I don't mean good like "Oh, the Democrat can beat this guy!" I mean good like it's good that some important issues like the militarized role of the U.S. in the world are getting aired.

Trump is appealing to nativist sentiments as Pat Buchanan did in the 1992 campaign but along with Buchanan's "America First" arguments came a distrust of imperial adventures. Similarly, Trump recently said Secretary of State Hillary Clinton "killed hundreds of thousands of people with her stupidity. ... The Middle East is a total disaster under her."

Now, I think that's pretty accurate, though U.S. policy in my view may be more Machiavellian than stupid, but the remark is a breath of fresh air on the national stage. So, at times, Trump is a truth-teller, including when he says politicians sell themselves to rich donors and when he calls out "free-trade" deals for costing American workers their middle-class jobs.

But the mainstream meme about Trump is that he's a total liar. The *New York Times* recently purported to grade the veracity of presidential candidates. By the *Times*' accounting, Trump was off the scales lying. But I never saw anyone fact-check his assertion about former Secretary Clinton's record of bringing bloody chaos to Libya, Syria and other Mideast countries. That's not an argument that establishment media wants to have.

Of course, a few sentences after Trump's comment about Clinton's death toll, he turned to the Sept. 11, 2012 attack on the CIA station in Benghazi, causing Salon to dismiss him as embracing "conspiracies," which is all that many people will hear, not the fuller context.

Shouldn't someone who at times articulates truly inconvenient truths be credited for breaking "politically correct" taboos, such as acknowledging the obvious disasters of U.S. interventionism across the Mideast? Trump speaks such truths, as he did during the Las Vegas debate about U.S. wars:

"We've spent \$4 trillion trying to topple various people that frankly, if they were there and if we could've spent that \$4 trillion in the United States to fix our roads, our bridges, and all of the other problems; our airports and all of the other problems we've had, we would've been a lot better off. I can tell you that right now."

Frankly, that is a stronger critique of military spending than we've heard from Sen. Bernie Sanders of late. But Trump's – or Sen. Rand Paul's – remarks about U.S. policies of "regime change" and bombings are often ignored. It's more convenient to focus on U.S. kindness in letting a few thousand refugees in than to examine how millions of displaced people from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somali and other countries lost their homes as a result of U.S. government policies.

A Long-Ignored Constitution

Some critics say Trump's proposal to temporarily ban Muslim immigrants is unconstitutional (although that argument is debatable as a matter of law regardless of what one thinks of the morality and practicality of his idea).

But there's also the question of how frequently recent presidents have violated the Constitution in recent years with hardly a peep from the mainstream media. News flash: the sitting Democratic president has bombed seven countries without a declaration of war. We've effectively flushed the Constitution down the toilet. Does that justify violating it more? No. But the pretend moral outrage on this score is hollow.

And there's some logic to the nativist Muslim bashing. It's obviously wrong on many levels, but it's understandable given the skewed information the public is given. Since virtually no one on the national stage is seriously and systematically criticizing U.S. policy in the Middle East, such as the multiple U.S. "regime change" invasions and the longstanding U.S. alliances with Saudi Arabia and Israel, it makes sense to say that we've got to change something and that something is separating from Muslims.

Some sophisticates also slammed Trump for acting in the Las Vegas debate like he didn't know what the nuclear triad is (the Cold War-era strategy of delivering nuclear bombs by land-based missiles, strategic bombers and submarine launches).

Well, I have no idea if he knows what the nuclear triad is or if he was just acting that way. But I'm rather glad he didn't adopt the administration's position of saying it's a good idea to spend a trillion dollars to "modernize" the U.S. nuclear arsenal so we can efficiently threaten the planet for another generation.

People may recall that for all the rhetoric from President Barack Obama about ending nuclear weapons, it was President Ronald Reagan, after all his bluster about the Evil Empire and basing intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Europe, who almost rose to the occasion when Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev proposed eliminating nuclear arsenals.

For today's mainstream journalists, it's just easier to go with the flow and hate Trump, as all the major media outlets want us to do. After all, much of our political culture lives off hate. Apparently hate is what gets people to do what you want them to do. So you scare them by building up villainous bogeymen, such as Saddam Hussein, Bashar al-Assad, Vladimir Putin.

People were so encouraged to hate Hussein that many backed the disastrous invasion of Iraq. They were propagandized into hating Assad so much that U.S. policy helped give rise to ISIS. Putin has been transformed into such a comic-book villain that people who should know better talk casually about shooting down Russian planes and seeking "regime change" in Moscow.

Ohio Gov. John Kasich, the supposedly "reasonable" Republican "moderate," says "it's time that we punched the Russians in the nose." Who cares about risking nuclear war? Don't we all just hate Putin?

Now, many Americans Republicans and Democrats alike are demonizing Trump. Whatever he says is put in the most negative context with no expectation of balance. He has become the focus of hate, hate, hate. He's a black-hatted, black-hearted villain. But why can't we just view people for who they are, seeing both the good and bad in them?

Asking Why the Hate

Trump calls for a cutoff of immigration of Muslims "until we can figure out what the hell is going on" – which, given our political culture's seeming propensity of never figuring out much of anything might be forever, but the comment actually raises a serious question: why are people in the Mideast angry at U.S. policy?

Says Trump: "There's tremendous hatred [among Muslims toward the United States]. Where it comes from, I don't know." But Trump – unlike virtually anyone else with a megaphone – is actually raising the issue about why there's so much resentment against the U.S. in the Mideast.

Virtually the only other person on the national stage stating such things is Sen. Rand Paul, R-Kentucky, though his articulations have also been uneven and have been a pale copy of what his father, former Rep. Ron Paul, R-Texas, has said.

Of course, what should be said is: If we don't know "what the hell is going on!" – then maybe we should stop bombing. But that doesn't get processed because the general public lives under the illusion that Barack Obama is a pacifistic patsy. The reality is that Obama has been bombing more countries than any president since World War II by his own count seven Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria,

Yemen, Libya and Somalia.

Half of what Trump says may be borderline deranged and false. But he also says true things – and critically, important things that no one else with any media or political access is saying.

At this week's Las Vegas debate, Trump said: "When you had the World Trade Center go, people were put into planes that were friends, family, girlfriends, and they were put into planes and they were sent back, for the most part, to Saudi Arabia."

Granted, Trump's comment was mangled and imprecise he may have been referring to President George W. Bush's extraordinary decision to let rich Saudis, including bin Laden family members, onto the first civilian planes allowed back into the air after 9/11 so they could avoid intensive FBI questioning and possible hostility from the American people but Trump's remark raises the legitimate question of Saudi Arabia's relation to 9/11.

Yes, Trump says he'll bomb the hell out of Syria, as does virtually every other Republican candidate. (Sen. Ted Cruz wants to see if "sand can glow in the dark," phrasing usually associated with nuclear war.) But Obama's already is bombing Syria and Iraq albeit without much media fanfare. So people think it's not happening and thus believe that Obama's passivity is the problem.

What Americans are right in sensing is that President Obama, former President Bush and the rest of the Establishment are playing endless geopolitical games and keeping them in the dark. As citizens in what is supposed to be a democratic Republic, they're right to be sick of it. Many of the people supporting or sympathizing with Trump seem to sense that he may be the only one ready to tip over the furniture and make a fuss.

Trump, the Anti-Imperialist?

Trump touts his alleged opposition to the Iraq War, although I don't recall him attending any of the anti-war rallies in 2002-03. But he apparently made a few critical remarks in 2003-04. Certainly nothing great or courageous. But it's good that someone with the biggest megaphone is saying the Iraq War was bad.

People who are getting behind Trump thus may be reachable regarding the U.S. government's proclivity toward endless war. And think for a minute about what a Trump-Clinton race would be like, given that she voted for the invasion of Iraq – and then promoted violent "regime change" in Libya and Syria. Trump might end up as the anti-imperialist candidate.

At least, Trump conveys the *impression* that he would act like a normal

nationalist and not a conniving globalist. And much of the U.S. public seems to want that. And, if that's true, it's a good thing. It's also a positive that Trump is energizing some people who had given up on politics.

Trump – apparently alone among Republican presidential candidates – is saying that he will talk to Russian President Putin. Having some sense that the job of a president is to attempt to have reasonable relations with the other major nuclear state is a serious plus in my book. He conveys the image of being a die-hard nationalist, but – unlike most of our recent leaders – not hell-bent on global domination. People who want a better world could use that.

No prominent Democrat has called for a serious reexamination of how the United States conducts its foreign policy. Hillary Clinton wins praise from arch-neocon Robert Kagan for what he calls her “liberal interventionism,” which he correctly assesses as virtually the same as neo-conservatism. [See Consortiumnews.com's “Obama's True Foreign Policy ‘Weakness.’”]

Though Bernie Sanders voted against the Iraq War, he has displayed little interest or sophistication about who's fueling much of the extremist violence in the Middle East. He wants the Saudis to “get their hands dirty” when they have already done so by financing and arming brutal Sunni jihadist forces, including those tied to Al Qaeda and the Islamic State.

Sanders doesn't seem to understand that the Sunni jihadists are, in effect, paramilitary forces that the Saudis have supported since the 1980s when Afghan fundamentalist mujahedeen were funded and armed to overthrow the Soviet-backed secular regime in Kabul. That conflict gave rise to Osama bin Laden, Al Qaeda, the Taliban and the modern jihadist movement.

A Missed Opportunity

During a Democratic debate right after the Paris terror attacks of Nov. 13, Sanders had a historic opportunity to address these issues in a serious way. He could have pointed out the contradiction between U.S. alliances with nations such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar and the “war on terror.” He could have explained the fallacy of seeking “regime change” against secular governments as with Iraq, Libya and Syria when that only invites chaos, bloodshed and extremism.

Sanders could have stressed how perpetual war not only is doomed to failure as a strategy against terrorism but is incompatible with the investments that he hopes to make in education, health care, infrastructure, the environment and other domestic priorities. He could have called for a thorough reappraisal of these misguided policies and energized the Democratic base.

But Sanders refused to engage in a thoughtful way on foreign policy, reverting

back to his preferred topic: income inequality. Now he's complaining about a lack of media coverage. Yes, the mainstream media is unfair toward progressive candidates, but you don't do any good by refusing to engage in what is arguably the great, defining debate of our time.

The only significant candidate on the national stage who has seriously challenged the interventionist impulse was Rep. Ron Paul, who was demonized in 2008 in ways similar to what's being done to Trump now. It's true that the comparison is imprecise: Trump has provided few specifics on how he would approach the world differently from either President Obama or his Republican rivals. Many of his comments have been elliptical about his skills as a negotiator rather than detailed about policies and he has sounded bellicose when talking about the Islamic State.

If he got into office, Trump might be little different from other recent presidents after all the State Department and Pentagon are staffed with bureaucrats who have risen through the ranks by toeing the establishment lines of neoconservatism and liberal interventionism. But Trump, as a world-wide deal-maker, might be more pragmatic than ideological.

In terms of economics, Trump is alone in the Republican field in defending a progressive tax and he has praised Social Security. Tom Ferguson has noted: "lower income voters seem to like him about twice as much as the upper income voters who like him in the Republican poll." Trump has "even dumped on some issues that are virtually sacred to the Republicans, notably the carried interest tax deduction for the super rich."

Trump has been blunt about the corruption in American politics. Writes Lee Fang: "Donald Trump Says He Can Buy Politicians, None of His Rivals Disagree."

Is There Good in Trump?

So, can progressives pause for a moment and note that it may be a good thing that many discouraged voters fed up with politics as usual are finding someone who speaks to both their fears and their hopes, albeit in ways that are often confused and even offensive.

It's important to stress: I have no idea what Trump actually believes. Backing him for president is probably akin to guessing what's behind a door on "The Price is Right." His political philosophy if that's the right word is a hodgepodge of conflicting ideas. He could be even more authoritarian than what we've seen so far. But, in some ways, he is a welcome break from the Establishment's ugly orthodoxy.

It's also possible that he's just putting on an act to lure the Republican anti-

establishment wing and would revert to old establishment policies if he were to get into office much like Obama has done especially on foreign policy. After all, Trump says, “I was a member of the Establishment seven months ago.”

By the way, I have no personal love for Trump. I lived in one of his buildings when I was growing up in Queens. His flamboyance as my dad and I were scraping by in a one-bedroom apartment sickened me. I remember seeing the luxurious Trump Tower in Manhattan as a teen with my father. My dad joked that he'd own one square inch for the monthly rent checks he wrote to Trump for years.

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Twisting the Facts on Iran Nukes

Part of the credibility crisis afflicting the world's officialdom is the tendency to issue reports that start with the politically desired conclusion and then twist words and facts accordingly, a problem apparent in a U.N. report on Iran's alleged nuclear program, as Gareth Porter explains.

By Gareth Porter

Many government reports The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) assessment has cleared the way for the board of governors to end the Agency's extraordinary investigation into accusations of Iran's past nuclear weapons work. But a closer examination of the document reveals much more about the political role that the Agency has played in managing the Iran file.

Contrary to the supposed neutral and technical role that Director General Yukiya Amano has constantly invoked and the news media has long accepted without question, the Agency has actually been serving as prosecutor for the United States in making a case that Iran has had a nuclear weapons program.

The first signs of such an IAEA role appeared in 2008 after the George W. Bush administration insisted that the Agency make a mysterious collection of intelligence documents on a purported Iranian nuclear weapons research program the centerpiece of its Iran inquiry.

The Agency's partisan role was fully developed, however, only after Amano took charge in late 2009. Amano got U.S. political support for the top position in 2009 because he had enthusiastically supported the Bush administration's

pressure on Mohammed ElBaradei on those documents when Amano was Japan's permanent representative to the IAEA in 2008.

Amano delivered the Agency's November 2011 report just when the Obama administration needed additional impetus for its campaign to line up international support for "crippling sanctions" on Iran. He continued to defend that hardline position and accuse Iran of failing to cooperate as the Obama administration sought to maximize the pressure on Iran from 2012 to 2015.

When the Obama administration's interests shifted from pressuring Iran to ensuring that the nuclear agreement with Iran would be completed and fully implemented, Amano's role suddenly shifted as well. In late June, according to Iranian officials involved in the Vienna negotiations, Secretary of State John Kerry reached agreement with both the Iranians and Amano that the "possible military dimensions" (PMD) issue would be resolved through a report by Amano before the end of the year.

Based on that agreement, Amano would write a report that would reach no definitive conclusion about the accusations of nuclear weapons work but nevertheless bring the PMD inquiry to an end. The report was still far from even-handed. It could not be, because Amano had embraced the intelligence documents that the United States and Israel had provided to the IAEA, around which the entire investigation had been organized.

Dodgy Intelligence Documents

Iran had insisted from the beginning that the intelligence documents given to the IAEA were fraudulent, and ElBaradei had repeatedly stated publicly from late 2005 through 2009 that the documents had not been authenticated. ElBaradei observes in his 2011 memoirs that he could never get a straight answer from the Bush administration about how the documents had been acquired.

Different cover stories had been leaked to the media over the years suggesting that either an Iranian scientist involved in the alleged weapons program or a German spy had managed to get the documents out of Iran.

But in 2013, former senior German foreign office official Karsten Voigt revealed to me in an interview that German intelligence had obtained the documents in 2004 from a sometime source whom they knew to be a member of the Mujahideen E-Khalq (MEK). A cult-like Iranian exile terrorist group, MEK had once carried out terror operations for the Saddam Hussein regime but later developed a patron-client relationship with Israeli intelligence.

Quite apart from the unsavory truth about the origins of the documents, the burden of proof in the IAEA inquiry should have been on the United States to

make the case for their authenticity. There is a good reason why U.S. judicial rules of evidence require that “the proponent must produce evidence sufficient to support a finding that the item is what the proponent claims it is.”

But instead Amano has required Iran, in effect, to prove the negative. Since it is logically impossible for Iran to do so, that *de facto* demand has systematically skewed the entire IAEA investigation toward the conclusion that Iran is guilty of the covert activities charged in the intelligence documents.

And the Agency has reinforced that distorted frame in its final assessment by constantly making the point that Iran possesses technology that could have been used for the development of a nuclear weapon. Every time Iran produced evidence that a technology that the IAEA had suggested was being used for the development of nuclear weapons was actually for non-nuclear applications, the Agency cast that evidence in a suspicious light by arguing that it bore some characteristics that are “consistent with” or “relevant to” work on nuclear weapons.

The “final assessment” uses that same tactic to frame not only Iranian development of various technologies but its organizations, facilities and research activities as inherently suspicious regardless of evidence provided by Iran that they were for other purposes.

Another tactic the IAEA had used in the past to attack Iran’s credibility is the suggestion that the government actually made a partial confession. In May 2008, the IAEA had claimed in a quarterly report that Iran “did not dispute that some of the information contained in the documents was factually accurate but said the events and activities concerned involved civil or conventional military applications.”

That statement had clearly conveyed the impression that Iran has admitted to details about activities shown in the documents. But in fact Iran had only confirmed information that was already publicly known, such as certain names, organizations and official addresses, as the IAEA itself acknowledged in 2011. Furthermore, Iran had also submitted a 117-page paper in which it had pointed out that “some of the organizations and individuals named in those documents were nonexistent.”

The IAEA resorted to the same kind of deceptive tactic in the final assessment’s discussion of “organizational structure.” It stated, “A significant proportion of the information available to the Agency on the existence of organizational structures was confirmed by Iran during implementation of the Road-map.”

That sentence implied that Iran had acknowledged facts about the organizations that supported the purported intelligence claims of a nuclear weapons research

program. But it actually meant only that Iran confirmed the same kind of publicly available information as it had in 2008.

On the issue of whether an Iranian organization to carry out nuclear-weapons research and development had existed, the final assessment again uses suggestive but ultimately meaningless language: “[B]efore the end of 2003, an organizational structure was in place in Iran suitable for the coordination of a range of activities relevant to the development of a nuclear explosive device.”

Similar language implying accusation without actually stating it directly can be found in most of the assessments in the document. In the section on “procurement activities,” the report refers to “indications of procurements and attempted procurements of items with relevance, inter alia, to the development of a nuclear device.”

That language actually means nothing more than that Iranians had sought to purchase dual-use items, but it preserves the illusion that the procurement is inherently suspicious.

EBW and MIP

The use of “relevance” language was, in fact, the IAEA’s favorite tactic for obscuring the fact that it had no real evidence of nuclear weapons work. On the issue of the purported intelligence documents showing that Iran had developed and experimented with Exploding Bridge-Wire (EBW) technology for the detonation of a nuclear weapon, Iran had gone to great lengths to prove that its work on EBW technology was clearly focused on non-nuclear applications.

It provided detailed information about its development of the technology, including videos of activities it had carried out, to show that for the objective of the work was to develop safer conventional explosives.

The IAEA responded by saying “that the EBW detonators developed by Iran have characteristics relevant to a nuclear device.” By that same logic, of course, a prosecutor could name an individual as a suspect in a crime simply because his behavior showed “characteristics relevant” to that crime.

A similar tactic appears in the assessment of the “initiation of high explosives” issue. The 2011 IAEA report had recorded the intelligence passed on by the Israelis that Iran had done an experiment with a high explosives detonation technology called multipoint initiation (MIP) that the Agency said was “consistent with” a publication by a “foreign expert” who had worked in Iran.

That was a reference to the Ukrainian scientist Vyacheslav Danilenko, but he

was an expert on producing nanodiamonds through explosives, not on nuclear weapons development. And the open-source publication by Danilenko was not about experiments related to nuclear weapons but only about measuring shock waves from explosions using fiber optic cables.

The 2011 report also had referred to "information" from an unnamed member state that Iran had carried out the "large scale high explosives experiments" in question in the "region of Marivan." In its final assessment, the Agency says it now believes that those experiments were carried out in a "location called 'Marivan'," rather than in the "region of Marivan."

But although Iran has offered repeatedly to allow the IAEA to visit Marivan to determine whether such experiments were carried out, the IAEA has refused to carry out such an inspection and has offered no explanation for its refusal.

The Agency relies on its standard evasive language to cover its climb-down from the 2011 assessment. "The Agency assesses that the MPI technology developed by Iran has characteristics relevant to a nuclear device," it said, "as well as to a small number of alternative applications."

That wording, combined with its refusal to make any effort to check on the one specific claim of Iranian experiments at Marivan, makes it clear that the Agency knows very well that it has no real evidence of the alleged experiments but is unwilling to say so straightforwardly.

The Agency did the same thing in regard to the alleged "integration into a missile delivery system." A key set of purported intelligence documents had shown a series of efforts to integrate a "new spherical payload" into the existing payload chamber of the Shahab-3 missile.

The final assessment avoids mention of the technical errors in those studies, which were so significant that Sandia National Laboratories found through computer simulations that not a single one of the proposed redesign efforts would have worked. And it later became apparent that Iran had begun redesigning the entire missile system, including an entirely different reentry vehicle shape from the one shown in the drawings, well before the start date of the purported nuclear weapons work.

But the IAEA was only interested in whether the workshops portrayed in the purported intelligence were in fact workshops used by the Iranian government. Iran allowed the Agency to visit two of the workshops, and the final assessment declares that it has "verified that the workshops are those described in the alleged studies documentation" and that "the workshop's features and capabilities are consistent with those described in the alleged studies

documentation.”

Flawed Computer Modeling

One of the most egregious cover-ups in the assessment is its treatment of the alleged computer modeling of nuclear explosions. The agency recalled that it had “received information from Member States” that Iran had done modeling of “nuclear explosive configurations based on implosion technology.”

Unfortunately for the credibility of that “information,” soon after that 2011 report was published someone leaked a graph of one of the alleged computer modeling efforts attributed to Iran to Associated Press reporter George Jahn. The graph was so similar to one published in a scholarly journal in January 2009 that Scott Kemp, an assistant professor of nuclear science and engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), said he suspected the graph had been “adapted from the open literature.”

Furthermore the information in the graph turned out to be inaccurate by four orders of magnitude. In response to that revelation, a senior IAEA official told Jahn that the Agency knew that the graph was “flawed” as soon as it had obtained it but that IAEA officials “believe it remains important as a clue to Iranian intentions.”

In fact, the official revealed to Jahn that the Agency had come up with a bizarre theory that Iranian scientists deliberately falsified the diagram to sell the idea to government officials of a nuclear explosion far larger than any by the United States or Russia.

That episode surely marks the apogee of the IAEA’s contorted rationalizations of the highly suspect “information” the Agency had been fed by the Israelis. In the final report, the Agency ignores that embarrassing episode and “assesses that Iran conducted computer modeling of a nuclear explosive device prior to 2004 and between 2005 and 2009,” even though it describes the modeling, enigmatically, as “incomplete and fragmentary.”

The assessment further “notes some similarity between the Iranian open source publications and the studies featured in the information from Member States, in terms of textual matches, and certain dimensional and other parameters used.”

Unless the Agency received the “information” from the unidentified states before the dates of the open-source publications, which one would expect to be noted if true, such similarities could be evidence of fraudulent intelligence rather than of Iranian wrongdoing. But the assessment provides no clarification of the issue.

Nuclear Material

On the issue it calls “nuclear material acquisition,” however, the Agency makes a startling retreat from its previous position that has far-reaching implications for the entire collection of intelligence documents. In its 2011 report, the IAEA had presented a one-page flow sheet showing a process for converting “yellow cake” into “green salt” (i.e., uranium that can be enriched) as a scheme to “secure a source of uranium suitable for use in an undisclosed enrichment program.”

But the final assessment explicitly rejects that conclusion, pronouncing the process design in question “technically flawed” and “of low quality in comparison with what was available to Iran as part of its declared nuclear fuel cycle.”

In other words, Iran would have had no rational reason to try to seek an entirely new conversion process and then turn the project over to incompetent engineers. Those were precisely the arguments that Iran had made in 2008 to buttress its case that the documents were fabricated.

The assessment carefully avoids the obvious implication of these new findings, that the anomalies surrounding the “green salt” documents make it very likely that they have were fabricated. To acknowledge that fact would cast doubt on the entire collection. But the surprising backtracking on the “green salt” evidence underlines just how far the IAEA has gone in the past to cover up awkward questions about the intelligence at the center of the case.

Now that the Obama administration has settled on a nuclear agreement with Iran, the IAEA will no longer have to find contorted language to discuss Iran’s past and present nuclear program.

Nevertheless, the Agency remains a highly political actor, and its role in monitoring and reporting on the implementation of the agreement may bring more occasions for official assessments that reflect the political interest of the U.S.-led dominant coalition in the IAEA board of governors rather than the objective reality of the issue under review.

Gareth Porter, an investigative journalist and historian specializing in U.S. “national security” policy and was the recipient of the Gellhorn Prize for journalism in 2012. His latest book, *Manufactured Crisis: The Untold Story of the Iran Nuclear Scare*, was published by Just World Books in 2014. [This story first appeared at LobeLog.]

America's Debt to Bradley Manning

From the Archive: The U.S. mainstream media is again embracing a U.N. report critical of Iran's alleged past work on a nuclear bomb, but leaks from Pvt. Bradley (now Chelsea) Manning exposed Yukiya Amano, the key U.N. official, as a front for U.S. and Israeli interests, as Robert Parry reported in 2011.

By Robert Parry (Originally published Dec. 24, 2011)

One criticism about the value of the information that Pvt. Bradley Manning gave to WikiLeaks is that most of it was known in some form and thus didn't justify the risks to sources who might be identified from the diplomatic and military cables. However, that complaint misses the importance of detailed "ground truth" in assessing issues of war and peace.

For instance, the prospects of war with Iran escalated in November 2011 because of a toughly worded report by the United Nations' International Atomic Energy Agency, which compiled some old and new evidence to argue that Iran continues to make progress toward a nuclear bomb. Immediately, the U.S. news media accepted the IAEA's report as the unquestioned truth and as further repudiation of the 2007 U.S. intelligence estimate that Iran had ceased work on a nuclear weapon in 2003.

One might note the irony in this flip on Iran. In the run-up to war with Iraq, the U.S. media embraced CIA reports of secret Iraqi WMD programs while mocking the IAEA's doubts. Regarding Iran, the CIA and IAEA have traded places, with U.S. intelligence analysts chagrined over swallowing the bogus Iraq-WMD evidence being more skeptical of the Iran-nuke allegations, while the IAEA has taken the role as chief WMD exaggerator.

So, it was useful to examine the WikiLeaks documents regarding the election of the new IAEA leader in 2009 to understand why this flip may have occurred. What those classified State Department cables show is that the IAEA's new director general, Japanese diplomat Yukiya Amano, credited his victory largely to U.S. government support and promptly stuck his hand out for U.S. money.

Further, Amano left little doubt that he would side with the United States in its confrontation with Iran and that he would even meet secretly with Israeli officials regarding their purported evidence on Iran's nuclear program, despite the fact that Israel is arguably the world's preeminent rogue nuclear state and rejects IAEA inspections of its own nuclear sites.

According to U.S. embassy cables from Vienna, Austria, the site of IAEA's

headquarters, American diplomats in 2009 were cheering the prospect that Amano would advance U.S. interests in ways that outgoing IAEA Director General Mohamed ElBaradei wouldn't.

Cable Revelations

In a July 9, 2009, cable, American chargé Geoffrey Pyatt said Amano was thankful for U.S. support of his election. "Amano attributed his election to support from the U.S., Australia and France, and cited U.S. intervention with Argentina as particularly decisive," the cable said.

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

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

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

Pyatt learned, too, that Amano had consulted with Israeli Ambassador Israel Michaeli "immediately after his appointment" and that Michaeli "was fully confident of the priority Amano accords verification issues."

Michaeli added that he discounted some of Amano's public remarks about there being "no evidence of Iran pursuing a nuclear weapons capability" as just words that Amano felt he had to say "to persuade those who did not support him about his 'impartiality.'"

In private, Amano agreed to "consultations" with the head of the Israeli Atomic Energy Commission, Pyatt reported. It is ironic indeed that Amano would have secret contacts with Israeli officials about Iran's alleged nuclear weapons program, which has yet to yield a single bomb, when Israel possesses a large and undeclared nuclear arsenal. (Yes, it is the same Geoffrey Pyatt who was later promoted to Ambassador to Ukraine where he helped orchestrate the putsch that ousted elected President Viktor Yanukovich.)

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

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

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

Today, with some Republican presidential contenders falling over themselves to bond with Israel over its desire to attack Iran, this sort of detail puts the IAEA report into a fuller context that can help American voters judge whether another war is necessary or whether they’re being misled again by hyped allegations.

These cables, which Manning allegedly gave to WikiLeaks, were first spotlighted by the Guardian newspaper in the U.K. in 2010. However, because the full cables were posted on the Internet, I could dig through them to find additional details, such as Amano asking for more U.S. money.

Without this level of “ground truth,” Americans would be at the mercy of the major U.S. news media, which seems as much on board for a war with Iran as it was for war with Iraq. [For more on this topic, see Consortiumnews.com’s “Dāoǰǎ vu Over Iran Nuke Charges” and “Big Media’s Double Standards on Iran.”]

Slaughtering Iraqis

Another example of how the material allegedly leaked by Manning helped educate the American people was the infamous gun-barrel video of U.S. attack helicopters mowing down seemingly defenseless Iraqi men, including two Reuters journalists, as they walked down a Baghdad street.

Not only did a U.S. military helicopter gunship slaughter the men amid macho jokes and chuckling apparently after mistaking a couple of cameras for weapons but the American attackers then blew away several Iraqis who arrived in a van and tried to take one of the wounded newsmen to a hospital. Two children in the van were badly wounded.

"Well, it's their fault for bringing their kids into a battle," one American remarked.

The videotaped incident entitled "Collateral Murder" by Wikileaks occurred on July 12, 2007, in the midst of President George W. Bush's much-heralded troop "surge," which the U.S. news media has widely credited for reducing violence in Iraq and bringing something close to victory for the United States.

But the U.S. press corps rarely mentions that the "surge" represented one of the bloodiest periods of the war. Beyond the horrific and untallied death toll of Iraqis, about 1,000 U.S. soldiers died during Bush's "surge" of an additional 30,000 troops into Iraq.

It's also unclear that the "surge" deserves much if any credit for the gradual decline in Iraqi violence, which had already reached turning points in 2006 before the "surge" with the death of al-Qaeda leader Musab al-Zarqawi, the U.S.-funded Sunni Awakening against al-Qaeda in Iraq, and the de facto ethnic cleansing of Iraqi cities with Sunnis and Shiites moving into separate neighborhoods.

Further putting the sectarian killing on a downward path was the Iran-brokered agreement with militant Shiite leader Moktada al-Sadr to have his militia stand down in exchange for an Iraqi government commitment to insist on a firm timetable for total U.S. military withdrawal, a process that has just been completed.

However, the U.S. news media continues to repeat the conventional wisdom about how U.S. troops protected Iraqis from violence through the "successful surge." The "Collateral Murder" video puts the lie to that smug consensus, showing the "ground truth" of how the "surge" and indeed the entire Iraq War truly operated.

Many Americans may want to put the unpleasant memories of the Iraq War behind them from "shock and awe" and the illegal invasion, to the leveling of Fallujah and the Abu Ghraib atrocities, to the incompetent U.S. occupation, the Haditha murders and the sectarian slaughters but a failure to face the reality honestly will only encourage future war crimes of similar or even greater magnitude.

Already, Republicans such as Newt Gingrich, Rick Perry, Michele Bachmann and Mitt Romney are speaking as casually about going to war with Iran as George W. Bush and Dick Cheney did about war with Iraq.

As Bradley Manning wrote as he struggled over his decision to leak evidence of war crimes and other machinations by the U.S. government, "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.”

(In 2013, Manning was court-martialed and sentenced to 35 years in prison for disclosing this classified information to the public.) But his gift to America may be that he provided the nation the “ground truth” that could give meaning to debates about past and possibly future 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](#)).

A Blind Eye Toward Turkey’s Crimes

Exclusive: The alleged ties between Turkish President Erdogan and Islamist terrorists in Syria is an embarrassment for the Obama administration and the U.S. news media, which would prefer to look the other way rather than face up to the danger created by an out-of-control NATO “ally,” writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Theoretically, it would be a great story for the American press: an autocrat so obsessed with overthrowing the leader of a neighboring country that he authorizes his intelligence services to collaborate with terrorists in staging a lethal sarin attack to be blamed on his enemy and thus trick major powers to launch punishing bombing raids against the enemy’s military.

And, after that scheme failed to achieve the desired intervention, the autocrat continues to have his intelligence services aid terrorists inside the neighboring country by providing weapons and safe transit for truck convoys carrying the terrorists’ oil to market. The story gets juicier because the autocrat’s son allegedly shares in the oil profits.

To make the story even more compelling, an opposition leader braves the wrath of the autocrat by seeking to expose these intelligence schemes, including the cover-up of key evidence. The autocrat’s government then seeks to prosecute the critic for “treason.”

But the problem with this story, as far as the American government and press are concerned, is that the autocratic leader, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, is in charge of Turkey, a NATO ally and his hated neighbor is the much demonized Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Major U.S. news outlets and political leaders

also bought into the sarin deception and simply can't afford to admit that they once again misled the American people on a matter of war.

The Official Story of the sarin attack as presented by Secretary of State John Kerry, Human Rights Watch and other "respectable" sources firmly laid the blame for the Aug. 21, 2013 atrocity killing hundreds of civilians outside Damascus on Assad. That became a powerful "group think" across Official Washington.

Though a few independent media outlets, including Consortiumnews.com, challenged the rush to judgment and noted the lack of evidence regarding Assad's guilt, those doubts were brushed aside. (In an article on Aug. 30, 2013, I described the administration's "Government Assessment" blaming Assad as a "dodgy dossier," which offered not a single piece of verifiable proof.)

However, as with the "certainty" about Iraq's WMD a decade earlier, Every Important Person shared the Assad-did-it "group think." That meant – as far as Official Washington was concerned – that Assad had crossed President Barack Obama's "red line" against using chemical weapons. A massive U.S. retaliatory bombing strike was considered just days away.

But Obama at the last minute veered away from launching those military attacks, with Official Washington concluding that Obama had shown "weakness" by not following through. What was virtually unreported was that U.S. intelligence analysts had doubts about Assad's guilt and suspected a trap being laid by extremists.

Despite those internal questions, the U.S. government and the compliant mainstream media publicly continued to push the Assad-did-it propaganda line. In a formal address to the United Nations General Assembly on Sept. 24, 2013, Obama declared, "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."

Later, a senior State Department official tried to steer me toward the Assad-is-guilty assessment of a British blogger then known as Moses Brown, a pseudonym for Eliot Higgins, who now runs an outfit called Bellingcat which follows an effective business model by reinforcing whatever the U.S. propaganda machine is churning out on a topic, except having greater credibility by posing as a "citizen blogger." [For more on Higgins, see Consortiumnews.com's "'MH-17 Case: 'Old Journalism' vs. 'New'."]

The supposedly conclusive proof against Assad came in a "vector analysis" developed by Human Rights Watch and The New York Times tracing the flight paths of two rockets back to a Syrian military base northwest of Damascus. But that

analysis collapsed when it became clear that only one of the rockets carried sarin and its range was less than one-third the distance between the army base and the point of impact. That meant the rocket carrying the sarin appeared to have originated in rebel territory.

But the “group think” was resistant to all empirical evidence. It was so powerful that even when the Turkish plot was uncovered by legendary investigative reporter Seymour M. Hersh, his usual publication, The New Yorker, refused to print it. Rebuffed in the United States the land of freedom of the press Hersh had to take the story to the London Review of Books to get it out in April 2014. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “Was Turkey Behind Syria Sarin Attack?”]

The Easier Route

It remained easier for The New York Times, The Washington Post and other premier news outlets to simply ignore the compelling tale of possible Turkish complicity in a serious war crime. After all, what would the American people think if after the mainstream media had failed to protect the country against the lies that led to the disastrous Iraq War the same star news sources had done something similar on Syria by failing to ask tough questions?

It’s also now obvious that if Obama had ordered a retaliatory bombing campaign against Assad in 2013, the likely winners would have been the Islamic State and Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front, which would have had the path cleared for their conquest of Damascus, creating a humanitarian catastrophe even worse than the current one.

To confess to such incompetence or dishonesty clearly had a big down-side. So, the “smart” play was to simply let the old Assad-did-it narrative sit there as something that could still be cited obliquely from time to time under the phrase “Assad gassed his own people” and thus continue to justify the slogan: “Assad must go!”

But that imperative not to admit another major mistake means that the major U.S. news media also must ignore the courageous statements from Eren Erdem, a deputy of Turkey’s main opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP), who has publicly accused the Erdogan government of blocking an investigation into Turkey’s role in procuring the sarin allegedly delivered to Al Qaeda-connected terrorists for use inside Syria.

In statements before parliament and to journalists, Erdem cited a derailed indictment that was begun by the General Prosecutor’s Office in the southern Turkish city of Adana, with the criminal case number 2013/120.

Erdem said the prosecutor’s office, using technical surveillance, discovered

that an Al Qaeda jihadist named Hayyam Kasap acquired the sarin.

At the press conference, Erdem said, "Wiretapped phone conversations reveal the process of procuring the gas at specific addresses as well as the process of procuring the rockets that would fire the capsules containing the toxic gas. However, despite such solid evidence there has been no arrest in the case. Thirteen individuals were arrested during the first stage of the investigation but were later released, refuting government claims that it is fighting terrorism."

Erdem said the released operatives were allowed to cross the border into Syria and the criminal investigation was halted.

Another CHP deputy, Ali Ağca, added that the Turkish government misled the public by claiming Russia provided the sarin and that "Assad killed his people with sarin and that requires a U.S. military intervention in Syria."

Erdem's disclosures, which he repeated in a recent interview with RT, the Russian network, prompted the Ankara Prosecutor's Office to open an investigation into Erdem for treason. Erdem defended himself, saying the government's actions regarding the sarin case besmirched Turkey's international reputation. He added that he also has been receiving death threats.

"The paramilitary organization Ottoman Hearths is sharing my address [on Twitter] and plans a raid [on my house]. I am being targeted with death threats because I am patriotically opposed to something that tramples on my country's prestige," Erdem said.

ISIS Oil Smuggling

Meanwhile, President Erdogan faces growing allegations that he tolerated the Islamic State's lucrative smuggling of oil from wells in Syria through border crossings in Turkey. Those oil convoys were bombed only last month when Russian President Vladimir Putin essentially shamed President Obama into taking action against this important source of Islamic State revenues.

Though Obama began his bombing campaign against Islamic State targets in Iraq and Syria in summer 2014, the illicit oil smuggling was spared interdiction for over a year as the U.S. government sought cooperation from Erdogan, who recently acknowledged that the Islamic State and other jihadist groups are using nearly 100 kilometers of Turkey's border to bring in recruits and supplies.

Earlier this month, Obama said he has had "repeated conversations with President Erdogan about the need to close the border between Turkey and Syria," adding that "there's about 98 kilometers that are still used as a transit point for

foreign fighters, ISIL [Islamic State] shipping out fuel for sale that helps finance their terrorist activities.”

Russian officials expressed shock that the Islamic State was allowed to continue operating an industrial-style delivery system involving hundreds of trucks carrying oil into Turkey. Moscow also accused Erdogan’s 34-year-old son, Bilal Erdogan, of profiting off the Islamic State’s oil trade, an allegation that he denied.

The Russians say Bilal Erdogan is one of three partners in the BMZ Group, a Turkish oil and shipping company that has purchased oil from the Islamic State. The Malta Independent reported that BMZ purchased two oil tanker ships from the Malta-based Oil Transportation & Shipping Services Co Ltd, which is owned by Azerbaijani billionaire Mubariz Mansimov.

Another three oil tankers purchased by BMZ were acquired from Palmali Shipping and Transportation Agency, which is also owned by Mansimov and which shares the same Istanbul address with Oil Transportation & Shipping Services, which is owned by Mansimov’s Palmali Group, along with dozens of other companies set up in Malta.

The Russians further assert that Turkey’s shoot-down of a Russian Su-24 bomber along the Syrian-Turkish border on Nov. 24 which led to the murder of the pilot, by Turkish-backed rebels, as he parachuted to the ground and to the death of a Russian marine on a rescue operation was motivated by Erdogan’s fury over the destruction of his son’s Islamic State oil operation.

Erdogan has denied that charge, claiming the shoot-down was simply a case of defending Turkish territory, although, according to the Turkish account, the Russian plane strayed over a slice of Turkish territory for only 17 seconds. The Russians dispute even that, calling the attack a premeditated ambush.

President Obama and the mainstream U.S. press sided with Turkey, displaying almost relish at the deaths of Russians in Syria and also showing no sympathy for the Russian victims of an earlier terrorist bombing of a tourist flight over Sinai in Egypt. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “Obama Ignores Russian Terror Victims.”]

New York Times columnist Thomas L. Friedman expressed the prevailing attitude of Official Washington by ridiculing anyone who had praised Putin’s military intervention in Syria or who thought the Russian president was “crazy like a fox,” Friedman wrote: “Some of us thought he was just crazy.

“Well, two months later, let’s do the math: So far, Putin’s Syrian adventure has resulted in a Russian civilian airliner carrying 224 people being blown up,

apparently by pro-ISIS militants in Sinai. Turkey shot down a Russian bomber after it strayed into Turkish territory. And then Syrian rebels killed one of the pilots as he parachuted to earth and one of the Russian marines sent to rescue him.”

Taking Sides

The smug contempt that the mainstream U.S. media routinely shows toward anything involving Russia or Putin may help explain the cavalier disinterest in NATO member Turkey’s reckless behavior. Though Turkey’s willful shoot-down of a Russian plane that was not threatening Turkey could have precipitated a nuclear showdown between Russia and NATO, criticism of Erdogan was muted at most.

Similarly, neither the Obama administration nor the mainstream media wants to address the overwhelming evidence that Turkey along with other U.S. “allies” such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been aiding and abetting Sunni jihadist groups, including Al Qaeda and Islamic State, for years. Instead, Official Washington plays along with the fiction that Saudi Arabia, Turkey and others are getting serious about combating terrorism.

The contrary reality is occasionally blurted out by a U.S. official or revealed when a U.S. intelligence report gets leaked or declassified. For instance, in 2009, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton noted in a confidential diplomatic memo, disclosed by Wikileaks, that “donors in Saudi Arabia constitute the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide.”

According to a Defense Intelligence Agency report from August 2012, “AQI [Al Qaeda in Iraq, which later morphed into the Islamic State] supported the Syrian opposition from the beginning, both ideologically and through the media. AQI declared its opposition of Assad’s government because it considered it a sectarian regime targeting Sunnis.”

The DIA report added, “The salafist, the Muslim Brotherhood, and AQI are the major forces driving the insurgency in Syria. The West, Gulf countries, and Turkey support the opposition.”

The DIA analysts already understood the risks that AQI presented both to Syria and Iraq. The report included a stark warning about the expansion of AQI, which was changing into the Islamic State. The brutal armed movement was seeing its ranks swelled by the arrival of global jihadists rallying to the black banner of Sunni militancy, intolerant of both Westerners and “heretics” from Shiite and other non-Sunni branches of Islam.

The goal was to establish a “Salafist principality in eastern Syria” where Islamic State’s caliphate is now located, and that this is “exactly what the

supporting powers to the opposition” i.e. the West, Gulf states, and Turkey “want in order to isolate the Syrian regime,” the DIA report said.

In October 2014, Vice President Joe Biden told students at Harvard’s Kennedy School that “the Saudis, the emirates, etc. were so determined to take down Assad and essentially have a proxy Sunni-Shia war [that] 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.”

Despite these occasional bursts of honesty, the U.S. government and the mainstream media have put their goal of having another “regime change” this time in Syria and their contempt for Putin ahead of any meaningful cooperation toward defeating the Islamic State and Al Qaeda.

This ordering of priorities further means there is no practical reason to revisit who was responsible for the Aug. 21, 2013 sarin gas attack. If Assad’s government was innocent and Ergogan’s government shared in the guilt, that would present a problem for NATO, which would have to decide if Turkey had crossed a “red line” and deserved being expelled from the military alliance.

But perhaps even more so, an admission that the U.S. government and the U.S. news media had rushed to another incorrect judgment in the Middle East and that another war policy was driven by propaganda rather than facts could destroy what trust the American people have left in those institutions. On a personal level, it might mean that the pundits and the politicians who were wrong about Iraq’s WMD would have to acknowledge that they had learned nothing from that disaster.

It might even renew calls for some of them the likes of The New York Times’ Friedman and The Washington Post’s editorial page editor Fred Hiatt to finally be held accountable for consistently misinforming and misleading the American people.

So, at least for now – from a perspective of self-interest – it makes more sense for the Obama administration and major news outlets to ignore the developing story of a NATO ally’s ties to terrorism, including an alleged connection to a grave war crime, the sarin attack outside Damascus.

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](#)).

Closing the Wrong Visa Loopholes

After the San Bernardino terror attack, Congress rushed to address security gaps in visa-free travel but addressed the wrong ones, leaving out visitors from “allied” countries such Saudi Arabia which have actually produced terrorists who attacked the U.S., note Georgianne Nienaber and Coleen Rowley.

By Georgianne Nienaber and Coleen Rowley

Only a few crickets chirped after our [2014 warning](#) of gaps in the Visa Waiver Program (VWP). Our [second post](#), however, came out at the same time the President and Congress had suddenly clicked into gear to tighten the program, obviously in reaction to the terrorist attacks in Paris and San Bernardino.

Very likely their new-found concern is also due to officials having discovered the worrisome answer to our all-important question asking how many of the dozens of citizens from waiver participating countries, who now, in hindsight, have been identified as participants in recent terrorist incidents, were NOT ever listed on the key “terrorist watch lists.” Thus making them eligible to easily enter the U.S.

It’s been revealed that at least one of the Paris attackers would not have been flagged if he had sought to enter the U.S. through the VWP. Nor was San Bernardino shooter Malik who entered the U.S. on a [“fiancÃ© visa”](#) reportedly on any of key databases. How many more are like that? We’ll only know if investigative reporters pry such embarrassing facts out of Homeland Security officials. It’s good the President and Congress finally started worrying about visa travel but unfortunately Congress is still in denial about the real problems. We could not find any discussion of the deeper, root problem with the Terrorist Identities Datamart Environment (TIDE) watch list, that even though it lists over 1.1 million persons, it is still somewhat under-inclusive (as well as very over-inclusive, with wrong names and other [“hay” piled onto the stack](#)).

Intelligence analysts cannot be faulted given the difficulty, if not impossibility, of the task they were given to make sense of the post 9/11 (once secret and illegal) programs to “collect it all.” “All” is the operative word, being mostly non-relevant information.

Nor, not surprisingly, could we find any politician lamenting his or her terrible mistakes in having okayed the various post 9/11 wars and bombing campaigns to re-make the Mideast, what some warned would be like “hitting a hornets’ nest.” These blunders have only succeeded in vastly increasing the number of terrorist incidents as well as the level of hatred in the world.

(State Department records showing terror attacks skyrocketing 6,500 percent since 2002.)

Instead, in its mad rush to push something out to look as if they were quickly remedying the problems, the House skipped normal debate that comes from holding committee meetings, passing its bizarre "Trump-lite" blanket discriminatory provisions in H.R. 158, the Visa Waiver Program Improvement Act of 2015, that would bar citizens of participating countries with Syrian, Iraqi, Sudanese or Iranian ancestry from participating in the waiver program even if they have never set foot in any of these countries.

A backlash naturally erupted from civil liberties and minority rights groups. For instance, according to the ACLU's reading of the bill, a person who was born and raised in France but whose father is a Syrian citizen would be forced to get a visa before visiting the United States, even if that person has a French passport and has never been to Syria.

In a press release Tuesday, NIAC Action, a group that lobbies on behalf of Iranian Americans, raised well-founded objections to the bill, saying that in the long run it threatens to harm Americans of Iranian descent.

"Given that the Visa Waiver Program is reciprocal, participating countries can respond by blocking Iranian-American travelers from traveling without a visa," the group said. "Since Iran considers any children whose fathers are Iranian nationals to also be Iranian nationals, a wide swath of the Iranian diaspora may be targeted by this legislation. This is a dangerous, slippery slope." Even worse, in their hurry, is the congresspersons' choice of the four specific countries to designate for "blanket" exclusion: Iraq (which was supposed to be a democratic paradise by now), Syria, Sudan and (most bizarrely) Iran, whose nationals have not ever launched a terrorist attack inside the U.S.

Yet, countries like Saudi Arabia (well known as the main country of origin for Al Qaeda, ISIS and the "fountainhead" of Wahhabi terrorism), Pakistan, Yemen, Qatar, Kuwait, UAE, Egypt, Jordan, Libya, Nigeria, Chechnya and other nations and regions from where terrorist perpetrators have actually come are not designated. This truly makes zero sense, making us wonder if congresspersons have any clue as to the nature of the threat from ISIS and Al Qaeda terrorism.

Certainly it's fair to ask if the congresspersons who voted for or support these "reforms", demonstrating their apparent lack of concern about travelers/immigrants with ties to Saudi Arabia (like Malik), have read the "28 pages" from the Joint Intelligence Committee Inquiry's Report, reportedly documenting Saudi Arabia's support for Al Qaeda, Osama bin Laden and the 9/11 terrorists. (Although the U.S. government has kept the 28 pages classified and

blacked out to the general public, congresspersons are allowed to read them inside a secure facility if they comply with strict security protocol.)

Over 30 congresspersons did warn after H.R. 158 was passed, in a Dec. 11 letter to Senate Majority and Minority Leaders, of “unintended consequences” in disqualifying such populations in a blanket way. These congresspersons wisely recommended that provisions that discriminate based on dual citizenship based solely on ancestry should be eliminated; that exceptions should be made for those who spent time in Iraq, Syria and other designated countries to provide medical or humanitarian aid or as journalists or researchers; and that a “sunset provision” be enacted to require changes to the VWP be reauthorized after a specified period of time.

At the same time, these congresspersons approved of common sense requirements for all VWP travelers to possess an unexpired, fraud resistant electronic passport; new requirements for Interpol screening of travelers and reporting on theft of passports.

On the other hand, some congresspersons and senators (including Sen. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minnesota) who back tightening visa waivers are working at cross-purposes by simultaneously calling for a “no fly zone” in Syria. The proposed “no fly zone” would help retain the already porous border where passports are not always needed to cross.

This, along with jihadists’ use of false passports, makes it impossible to ascertain if a VWP applicant has recently crossed from Turkey into Syria or Iraq to fight with ISIS or any of the Al Qaeda affiliated groups. The porous borders have long been a problem but such a “no fly zone” would presumably guarantee that the Syria-Turkey border stays porous. Senators calling for a “no fly zone” ought to be asked how would self-reporting of an applicant’s suspicious travel to Syria or Iraq, effectively keep out a hard core “terrorist”? The bottom line is that the proposed VWP reforms will undoubtedly curtail tourism, business and scholar-related travel (and hurt U.S. economic interests as well), but will do almost nothing to address the real weaknesses of the surveillance-watch-listing process used to cross-check visa and visa waiver applicants.

“Top Secret America’s” post 9/11 massive data collection fails to live up to its billing but has unfortunately lulled Americans into thinking it could keep them safe, no matter how many unjustified, stupid wars the U.S. launched, no matter how much terrorism and hatred it ratcheted up. The sad reality which our country’s leaders need to realize is that freedom of travel and endless war don’t mix well.

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regional and international publications. She is a member of the Society of Professional Journalists and Independent Reporters and Editors. In May 2002, Coleen Rowley, the co-writer of this article and former FBI Agent and Minneapolis Division Legal Counsel, brought some of the pre-9/11 security lapses to light and testified to the Senate Judiciary Committee about the endemic problems facing the FBI and the intelligence community.

Cornering Russia, Risking World War III

Official Washington is awash with tough talk about Russia and the need to punish President Putin for his role in Ukraine and Syria. But this bravado ignores Russia's genuine national interests, its "red lines," and the risk that "tough-guy-ism" can lead to nuclear war, as Alastair Crooke explains.

By Alastair Crooke

We all know the narrative in which we (the West) are seized. It is the narrative of the Cold War: America versus the "Evil Empire." And, as Professor Ira Chernus has written, since we are "human" and somehow they (the USSR or, now, ISIS) plainly are not, we must be their polar opposite in every way.

"If they are absolute evil, we must be the absolute opposite. It's the old apocalyptic tale: God's people versus Satan's. It ensures that we never have to admit to any meaningful connection with the enemy." It is the basis to America's and Europe's claim to exceptionalism and leadership.

And "buried in the assumption that the enemy is not in any sense human like us, is [an] *absolution* for whatever hand we may have had in sparking or contributing to evil's rise and spread. How could we have fertilized the soil of absolute evil or bear any responsibility for its successes? It's a basic postulate of wars against evil: God's people must be innocent," (and that the evil cannot be mediated, for how can one mediate with evil).

Westerners may generally think ourselves to be rationalist and (mostly) secular, but Christian modes of conceptualizing the world still permeate contemporary foreign policy.

It is this Cold War narrative of the Reagan era, with its correlates that America simply stared down the Soviet Empire through military and as importantly – financial "pressures," whilst making no concessions to the enemy.

What is sometimes forgotten, is how the Bush neo-cons gave their "spin" to this

narrative for the Middle East by casting Arab national secularists and Ba'athists as the offspring of "Satan": David Wurmser was advocating in 1996, "expediting the chaotic collapse" of secular-Arab nationalism in general, and Baathism in particular. He concurred with King Hussein of Jordan that "the phenomenon of Baathism" was, from the very beginning, "an agent of foreign, namely Soviet policy."

Moreover, apart from being agents of socialism, these states opposed Israel, too. So, on the principle that if these were the enemy, then my enemy's enemy (the kings, Emirs and monarchs of the Middle East) became the Bush neo-cons friends. And they remain such today however much their interests now diverge from those of the U.S.

The problem, as Professor Steve Cohen, the foremost Russia scholar in the U.S., laments, is that it is this narrative which has precluded America from ever concluding any real ability to find a mutually acceptable *modus vivendi* with Russia which it sorely needs, if it is ever seriously to tackle the phenomenon of Wahhabist jihadism (or resolve the Syrian conflict).

What is more, the "Cold War narrative" simply does not reflect history, but rather the narrative *effaces history*: It loses for us the ability to really understand the demonized "calous tyrant" be it (Russian) President Vladimir Putin or (Ba'athist) President Bashar al-Assad – because we simply ignore the actual history of how that state came to be what it is, and, our part in it becoming what it is.

Indeed the state, or its leaders, often are not what we think they are – at all. Cohen explains: "The chance for a durable Washington-Moscow strategic partnership was lost in the 1990 after the Soviet Union ended. Actually it began to be lost earlier, because it was [President Ronald] Reagan and [Soviet leader Mikhail] Gorbachev who gave us the opportunity for a strategic partnership between 1985-89.

"And it certainly ended under the Clinton Administration, and it didn't end in Moscow. It ended in Washington, it was squandered and lost in Washington. And it was lost so badly that today, and for at least the last several years (and I would argue since the Georgian war in 2008), we have literally been in a new Cold War with Russia.

"Many people in politics and in the media don't want to call it this, because if they admit, 'Yes, we are in a Cold War,' they would have to explain what they were doing during the past 20 years. So they instead say, 'No, it is not a Cold War.'

“Here is my next point. This new Cold War has all of the potential to be even more dangerous than the preceding 40-year Cold War, for several reasons. First of all, think about it. The epicentre of the earlier Cold War was in Berlin, not close to Russia. There was a vast buffer zone between Russia and the West in Eastern Europe.

“Today, the epicentre is in Ukraine, literally on Russia’s borders. It was the Ukrainian conflict that set this off, and politically Ukraine remains a ticking time bomb. Today’s confrontation is not only on Russia’s borders, but it’s in the heart of Russian-Ukrainian ‘Slavic civilization.’ This is a civil war as profound in some ways as was America’s Civil War.”

Cohen continued: “My next point: and still worse – You will remember that after the Cuban Missile Crisis, Washington and Moscow developed certain rules-of-mutual conduct. They saw how dangerously close they had come to a nuclear war, so they adopted “No-Nos,’ whether they were encoded in treaties or in unofficial understandings. Each side knew where the other’s red line was. Both sides tripped over them on occasion but immediately pulled back because there was a mutual understanding that there were red lines.

“TODAY THERE ARE NO RED LINES. One of the things that Putin and his predecessor President Medvedev keep saying to Washington is: You are crossing our Red Lines! And Washington said, and continues to say, ‘You don’t have any red lines. We have red lines and we can have all the bases we want around your borders, but you can’t have bases in Canada or Mexico. Your red lines don’t exist.’ This clearly illustrates that today there are no mutual rules of conduct.

“Another important point: Today there is absolutely no organized anti-Cold War or Pro-Detente political force or movement in the United States at all not in our political parties, not in the White House, not in the State Department, not in the mainstream media, not in the universities or the think tanks. None of this exists today.

“My next point is a question: Who is responsible for this new Cold War? I don’t ask this question because I want to point a finger at anyone. The position of the current American political media establishment is that this new Cold War is all Putin’s fault all of it, everything. We in America didn’t do anything wrong. At every stage, we were virtuous and wise and Putin was aggressive and a bad man. And therefore, what’s to rethink? Putin has to do all of the rethinking, not us.”

These two narratives, the Cold War narrative, and the neocons’ subsequent “spin” on it: i.e. Bill Kristol’s formulation (in 2002) that precisely because of its

Cold War “victory,” America could, and must, become the “benevolent global hegemon,” guaranteeing and sustaining the new American-authored global order an “omelette that cannot be made without breaking eggs” – converge and conflate in Syria, in the persons of President Assad and President Putin.

President Obama is no neocon, but he is constrained by the global hegemon legacy, which he must either sustain, or be labeled as the arch facilitator of America’s decline. And the President is also surrounded by R2P (“responsibility-to-protect”) proselytizers, such as Samantha Power, who seem to have convinced the President that “the tyrant” Assad’s ouster would puncture and collapse the Wahhabist jihadist balloon, allowing “moderate” jihadists such as Ahrar al-Sham to finish off the deflated fragments of the punctured ISIS balloon.

In practice, President Assad’s imposed ouster precisely will empower ISIS, rather than implode it, and the consequences will ripple across the Middle East and beyond. President Obama privately may understand the nature and dangers of the Wahhabist cultural revolution, but seems to adhere to the conviction that everything will change if only President Assad steps down. The Gulf States said the same about Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in Iraq. He has gone (for now), but what changed? ISIS got stronger.

Of course if we think of ISIS as evil, for evil’s sake, bent on mindless, whimsical slaughter, “what a foolish task it obviously [would be] to think about the enemy’s actual motives. After all, to do so would be to treat them as humans, with human purposes arising out of history. It would smack of sympathy for the devil. Of course,” Professor Chernus continues, “this means that, whatever we might think of their actions, we generally ignore a wealth of evidence that the Islamic State’s fighters couldn’t be more human or have more comprehensible motivations.”

Indeed, ISIS and the other Caliphate forces have very clear human motivations and clearly articulated political objectives, and none of these is in any way consistent with the type of Syrian State that America says it wants for Syria. This precisely reflects the danger of becoming hostage to a certain narrative, rather than being willing to examine the prevailing conceptual framework more critically.

America lies far away from Syria and the Middle East, and as Professor Stephen Cohen notes, “unfortunately, today’s reports seem to indicate that the White House and State Department are thinking primarily how to counter Russia’s actions in Syria. They are worried, it was reported, that Russia is diminishing America’s leadership in the world.”

It is a meme of perpetual national *insecurity*, of perpetual fears about America's standing and of challenges to its standing, Professor Chernus suggests.

But Europe is not "far away"; it lies on Syria's doorstep. It is also neighbor to Russia. And in this connection, it is worth pondering Professor Cohen's last point: Washington's disinclination to permit Russia any enhancement to its standing in Europe, or in the non-West, through its initiative strategically to defeat Wahhabist jihadism in Syria, is not only to play with fire in the Middle East. It is playing with a fire of even greater danger: to do both at the same time seems extraordinarily reckless.

Cohen again: "The false idea [has taken root] that the nuclear threat ended with the Soviet Union: In fact, the threat became more diverse and difficult. This is something the political elite forgot. It was another disservice of the Clinton Administration (and to a certain extent the first President Bush in his re-election campaign) saying that the nuclear dangers of the preceding Cold War era no longer existed after 1991. The reality is that the threat grew, whether by inattention or accident, and is now more dangerous than ever."

As Europe becomes accomplice in raising the various pressures on Russia in Syria – economically through sanctions and other financial measures, in Ukraine and Crimea, and in beckoning Montenegro, Georgia and the Baltic towards NATO – we should perhaps contemplate the paradox that Russia's determination to try to avoid war is leading to war.

Russia's call to co-operate with Western states against the scourge of ISIS; its low-key and carefully crafted responses to such provocations as the ambush of its SU-24 bomber in Syria; and President Putin's calm rhetoric, are all being used by Washington and London to paint Russia as a "paper tiger," whom no one needs fear.

In short, Russia is being offered only the binary choice: to acquiesce to the "benevolent" hegemon, or to prepare for war.

Alastair Crooke is a British diplomat who was a senior figure in British intelligence and in European Union diplomacy. He is the founder and director of the Conflicts Forum, which advocates for engagement between political Islam and the West. [This article also appeared at the Conflicts Forum's Web site and is republished with permission.]

The Courage from Whistle-blowing

Exclusive: Courage, like cowardice, can grow when an action by one person influences decisions by others, either toward bravery or fear. Thus, the gutsy whistle-blowing by some NSA officials inspired Edward Snowden to expose mass data collection on all Americans, recalls ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

When Edward Snowden in early June 2013 began to reveal classified data showing criminal collect-it-all surveillance programs operated by the U.S. government's National Security Agency, former NSA professionals became freer to spell out the liberties taken with the Bill of Rights, as well as the feckless, counterproductive nature of bulk electronic data collection.

On Jan. 7, 2014, four senior retired specialists with a cumulative total of 144 years of work with NSA William Binney, Thomas Drake, Edward Loomis, and Kirk Wiebe prepared a Memorandum for the President providing a comprehensive account of the problems at NSA, together with suggestions as to how they might be best addressed.

The purpose was to inform President Obama as fully as possible, as he prepared to take action in light of Snowden's revelations.

On Jan. 23, 2015 in Berlin, Binney was honored with the annual Sam Adams Award for Integrity in Intelligence. Ed Snowden was live-streamed-in for the occasion, and said, "Without Bill Binney there would be no Ed Snowden." (Binney had been among the first to speak out publicly about NSA abuses; apparently that emboldened Snowden to do what he did.)

Snowden had already said when he fled to Hong Kong in June 2013 that he had learned an extremely important lesson from the four years of government persecution/prosecution of Tom Drake; namely, that he, Ed Snowden, had to leave the country in order to fulfill his mission and to have some reasonable chance to avoid spending the rest of his life behind bars. (Eventually, all the felony charges against Drake were dismissed.)

An important take-away lesson from Binney's and Drake's boldness and tenacity is that one never knows what impetus courageous truth-tellers can give to other, potential whistleblowers like Ed Snowden.

In 1998, Bill Binney, with some 35 years under his belt as a senior NSA mathematician and cryptologist took on a staggering problem for NSA: how to deal with the vast amount of data available on the world wide web without burying

intelligence analysts under a haystack of data.

From Binney's long experience, it seemed clear that selecting information by using metadata relationships was the smart way to go. As he puts it, "Smart selection is smart collection."

This approach was totally different from the word/phrase dictionary-select type approach in general use even today. Binney's technique was to use metadata and some additional rules to define relationships. This enabled discriminate selection of data from the tens of terabytes twisting in the ether. The approach focused the collected data around known targets, plus some potential developmental targets, and yielded much more manageable content for analysts to deal with.

Missing the Needles

Experience had long since shown that collecting everything in bulk, and using word/phrase type queries, end up burying analysts in data and making them dysfunctional. In some of the internal NSA memos released by Snowden, NSA analysts complain of the kind of analysis paralysis that makes it extremely difficult for them to find and address the real threats.

As Snowden has quipped, "The problem with mass surveillance is when you collect everything, you understand nothing."

The net result is that people die first. Only then do detectives and law enforcement go wading into their vast data, focus on possible perpetrators of the crime and often find related information. This is, of course, exactly the reverse of how the security services should proceed assuming the main priority is to thwart terrorist or other attacks. And yet the U.S. government proceeds willy-nilly with its SOS (Stasi-On-Steroids) approach.

In sum, success can come only from a focused, disciplined selection of data off the fiber lines, yielding usable metadata, as Binney and his NSA colleagues demonstrated. Indeed, there was quite enough electronic intelligence collected by THINTHREAD, the collection system Binney and his team created, *before 9/11* to have thwarted the attacks, as NSA senior executive Thomas Drake learned, to his horror, *after* the fact.

"Smart selection" techniques can also protect individual privacy, as Binney and his colleagues likewise showed. More to the point, this approach can provide a rich but manageable data environment for analysts to use toward one of the most important intelligence objectives predicting intentions and capabilities.

This way, one is not reduced to watching attack after attack and then wiping up

the blood and searching data bases for clues to the perpetrators primarily the job of law enforcement.

Problems With Honesty

Sadly, recent history has shown that the directors of U.S. intelligence services lie, and that directors of the NSA lie blatantly and suffer *zero* consequences. On March 12, 2013 (less than two months *before* the Snowden revelations), National Intelligence Director James Clapper lied under oath in denying that NSA was “wittingly” collecting “any type of data at all on millions or hundreds of millions of Americans.”

Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Oregon, had put that question to Clapper that day at a formal, open Senate Intelligence Committee hearing.

Similarly, on June 27, 2013, three weeks *after* the first Snowden revelations started coming, then-NSA Director Keith Alexander lied in telling the same Senate committee that NSA’s bulk telephone surveillance program had thwarted 54 terrorist “plots or events.” On Oct. 2, 2013, Gen. Alexander admitted, in testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee, that the number of terrorist plots thwarted was not 54, but one. (And that particular one cannot bear close scrutiny.)

The failure to demand accountability for these deceptions proves as if further proof were needed that the Senate intelligence “oversight” committees has long since become the Senate intelligence “overlook” committee.

If democracy still means anything, we the people need to devise some kind of replacement for the sleepy “watchdogs” in Congress who have forfeited their responsibility to oversee and verify what the intelligence agencies are doing. Again, Bill Binney has what seem the most sensible and doable suggestions toward that end.

He has called for a properly cleared technical team, *responsible to the courts*, with clearly spelled-out authority to go into any intelligence agency and look directly into and inspect data bases and the tools in use. This would be a giant step toward ensuring that we the people through this intrusive inspection regime could monitor in some rudimentary way what our intelligence agencies are doing.

Binney suggests further that intelligence agencies be required to implement software to monitor their own networks to detect automatically and to report immediately violations of law and regulation.

Ray McGovern works with Tell the Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour inner-city Washington. He is co-founder of Veteran Intelligence

Professionals for Sanity (VIPS), and is indebted to VIPS member Bill Binney for much of the substance of this article, which came from McGovern's prepared text for remarks at a conference on Thursday in Moscow, marking the 10th anniversary of RT's founding.

Putting the ISIS 'Crisis' in Context

The hysteria over Islamic State terrorism is driving talk of a new U.S.-led ground war in the Middle East this time an invasion of Syria under the guise of a "safe zone" but such rash actions would only make matters worse, writes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Emotional and ill-focused reaction to the latest mass shooting in the United States, coupled with misguided but unfortunately well-entrenched ways of thinking about terrorism and counterterrorism, along with a political campaign featuring jingoistic appeals, is increasing the pressure on the U.S. administration to embark on costly and counterproductive new endeavors in the Middle East.

A dominant theme in public discourse is that the so-called Islamic State (also known as ISIS, ISIL or Daesh) is behind what has already become highly destructive terrorism in the West and therefore the United States needs to hasten to destroy the group in its stronghold in Syria and Iraq, and this means increased use of military force.

Republican presidential candidates have been leading the charge with heavy use of "war" vocabulary, which is the lexicon of choice to convey toughness and to appeal to public fears even when specific meanings and implications of such terminology do not get spelled out.

"Islamic terrorism wants to destroy our way of life," Jeb Bush declared. "They have declared war on us, and we need to declare war on them." Chris Christie intoned, "Our nation is under siege. What I believe we're facing is the next world war." Ted Cruz proclaimed, "This nation needs a wartime president. ... Our enemies are at war with us."

This approach disregards what the very incidents that have aroused the fears to which these candidates are appealing tell us about the sources of international terrorism in the West and what determines its extent and severity. It disregards the true nature of any connection between strongholds of extremist groups in the

Middle East and terrorism carried out on other continents.

And the approach disregards recent and glaring lessons about the application of outside, especially U.S., military force, to Middle Eastern conflicts.

With the caveat that any criminal investigation must be given time to run its course before we start drawing firm conclusions about any violent incident, what we know so far about the two events that have given the biggest boosts to the current alarm simply does not support the image of ISIS decision-makers unleashing and managing a terrorist campaign against the West, however much they might like to do so.

In a pattern that became familiar when “linked to Al-Qaeda” was the phrase most likely to send people into a dither after an incident, now “linked to ISIS” has that effect, with both the people who feel the alarm and the politicians who exploit it not stopping to consider exactly what the link means, or whether it means anything at all in terms of the nature of the future terrorist threat in the West and the variables that affect it.

The investigation into the Paris attacks last month is now more than three weeks old, and based on what has been made public, the attacks still appear to be the work of a Belgium-based radical gang comprising citizens of European Union countries.

What evidently has not turned up, and given the current policy direction of the Hollande government, surely we would have been told about it if it had turned up, is any evidence of someone in Raqqa or elsewhere in ISIS-land ordering or directing the operation. Nor does there appear to have been any imparting from ISIS of any attack-relevant skills, with little such skill being apparent in the first place.

As for the shootings in San Bernardino, the only connection to ISIS of any sort that we have been told about so far is that the female half of the shooting team expressed identification with the group in a post on Facebook. Evidently she made the post with a phone on the day of the shooting.

These circumstances are similar to other incidents over the past few years of terrorism in the United States by individuals with comparable radical Islamist inclinations, such as Nidal Hasan, who perpetrated a mass shooting at Fort Hood in 2009, and Faisal Shahzad, who made a clumsy attempt at setting off a car bomb in Times Square in 2010.

In each case there was some contact with a foreign group: Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula with Hasan, and the Pakistani Taliban in the case of Shahzad. In each case the radicalism was there in the individual before the contact. In

each case it was the individual in the United States who sought the contact rather than the other way around. And, despite reported training that Shahzad received, the distinction between people dying and people living was not determined by any attack-relevant skills that came from abroad.

The most that one can say so far about ISIS and the attacks in the West to which it has been "linked" is that it served in some way as an inspiration. Or more accurately, it served as the sort of larger cause on behalf of which even people who are driven by more parochial grievances and inward demons like to be associated as they carry out their violent acts.

That observation leaves a big gap in any analysis that tries to show that even the inspirational existence of ISIS and its mini-state in the Middle East makes a difference in terrorist attacks like the one in San Bernardino occurring or not occurring. If the name of ISIS were not invoked as the larger cause, it could easily have been some other name that was.

In fact, other names *have* been invoked by many modern-day radical Sunni Islamists, although ISIS has become over the last two years the preferred brand name for people of that ilk, largely displacing Al-Qaeda in that role. A U.S. official confirmed to the press over the weekend that the male half of the San Bernardino shooting duo had attempted (it is not clear when) to reach out both to the Somalia-based Al-Shabab and to Jabhat Al-Nusra, the Al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria.

ISIS and its enclave certainly constitute a significant security problem in the Middle East and specifically for Syria and Iraq. But that is a problem distinct from, and should not be conflated with, the countering of terrorist threats in the United States. It would be a big mistake to let a surge of fear about such threats, let alone opportunistic political exploitation of such fear, drive the making of policy on Syria and Iraq.

Any use of military force in that theater ought to be guided instead by lessons from recent experience that are almost too obvious to need restating. One of those lessons is that the toppling or ouster of an undesirable regime or quasi-regime does not necessarily end a security problem but merely marks the start of a new phase of a war.

Another is that as long as there is not the will and the consensus among local populations to form a new and stable alternative political order, the resulting disorder only works to the advantage of extremist groups. ISIS was born under a different name in the disorder in Iraq that followed the U.S. toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime.

One of the few places where ISIS appears to have established a satellite presence where it has more of an organizational and not just inspirational connection is in the chaos of Libya since Muammar Gaddafi's regime was toppled with the aid of Western military force.

Another set of lessons concerns how almost any use of U.S. military force in the Middle East starts with two strikes against it in terms of the suspicions and resentments of local populations. Such sentiments were reflected in the negative public reaction by the Abadi government in Iraq to the very modest additional deployment of U.S. special operations forces that was recently announced.

The suspicions and resentments are part of the reason why, as President Barack Obama correctly noted in his televised address on Sunday, larger deployments of U.S. forces would only play into the hands of ISIS.

The ISIS pseudo-state contains the seeds of its own destruction. It has neither the economic base, nor the appeal of a better way of life, nor sufficient external support to keep going indefinitely. Dealing with it should not be viewed as a race to crush it before the next terrorist attack in the West, because crushing it will not prevent that attack.

The most effective Western policies will stop any more expansion, and it already has stopped, of the ISIS enclave, push it back in places where it is possible to push back, and exert the other kinds of pressures that will help the seeds of destruction to sprout. A picture of a group that is retrenching more than it is advancing will do much to sour the ISIS brand as a lodestar for potential recruits and as a cover for terrorists in the West.

As Stephen Biddle and Jacob Shapiro have commented, "In practical terms, what's possible against the Islamic State is some form of containment or suppression. And that's essentially what the administration's current policy amounts to."

The "war" language has become so *de rigueur* that President Obama felt obliged to use some of it in his Sunday evening address about terrorism. So far, however, he has wisely avoided most of the very costly and counterproductive ways in which vocabulary and metaphor can slide into military policy, as "war" talk so easily does.

He also, just as wisely, has avoided the conflation of attacking an extremist enclave in dusty parts of the Middle East with protecting the American people against terrorism.

Paul R. Pillar, in his 28 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, rose to be one of the agency's top analysts. He is now a visiting professor at Georgetown University for security studies. (This article first appeared as a blog post at

Cruz Threatens to Nuke ISIS Targets

Exclusive: Republican presidential campaign rhetoric is red-hot regarding Islamic terrorism, with Sen. Cruz suggesting the use of nuclear weapons to see “if sand can glow in the dark,” a threat even more troubling than Donald Trump’s call to temporarily bar Muslims from entering the U.S., writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

As Republican presidential candidates lined up to one-up each other about how they would fight Islamic terrorism, many mainstream pundits questioned the hysteria and took particular aim at billionaire Donald Trump for seeking a moratorium on admitting Muslims to the United States, but Trump’s proposal was far from the most outrageous.

Getting much less attention was a statement by Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas, who is considered by many a more likely GOP nominee than Trump. Cruz suggested that the United States should nuke the territory in Iraq and Syria controlled by Islamic State militants.

“I don’t know if sand can glow in the dark, but we’re going to find out,” Cruz told a Tea Party rally in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. In reference to Cruz’s comment, a New York Times editorial added, “whatever that means.” But the phrase “glow in the dark” popularly refers to the aftermath of a nuclear bomb detonation.

In other words, Cruz was making it clear to his audience that he would be prepared to drop a nuclear bomb on Islamic State targets. While the bombastic senator from Texas was probably engaging in hyperbole as he also vowed to “carpet bomb them into oblivion” the notion of a major candidate for President cavalierly suggesting a nuclear strike would normally be viewed as disqualifying, except perhaps in this election cycle.

While Cruz drew little attention for his “glow in the dark” remark, Trump came under intense criticism for his proposal to block the admission of Muslims into the United States until the nation’s leaders can “figure out what is going on” in the aftermath of the Dec. 2 terror attack by a Muslim husband-and-wife team in San Bernardino, California.

Across mainstream politics and media, Trump’s idea was decried as both “unprecedented” from a top candidate for President and a likely violation of the

U.S. Constitution which respects freedom of religion and requires equal protection under the law.

Other Republican candidates, even the more “moderate” ones, also talked tough about Muslims in what shaped up as a heated competition to outdo one another in appealing to the angry and frightened right-wing “base” of the GOP.

Former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush argued that the threat from Muslims was unique: “The idea that somehow there are radical elements in every religion is ridiculous. There are no radical Christians that are organizing to destroy Western civilization. There are no radical Buddhists that are doing this. This is radical Islamic terrorism.”

Bush’s comment failed to recognize that the institution of Christianity has been at the center of “Western civilization” since the latter days of the Roman Empire and that “Christian” nations have routinely plundered other civilizations all over the planet, including across the Islamic world both in Asia and Africa. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “Why Many Muslims Hate the West” and “Muslim Memories of West’s Imperialism.”]

Though inspired by a pacifist, Christianity has established a record as the most bloodthirsty religion in history, with its adherents conducting massacres and genocides in North America, South America, Asia, Africa, Europe and Australia every continent except Antarctica, which is largely uninhabited by humans. In many cases, European Christians justified the repression and extermination of non-Christians as the will of God, deeming indigenous people to be “heathens.”

The violence by Western nations against Muslims also is not something confined to history books and the distant past. In 2003, U.S. President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair led an unprovoked invasion of Iraq which killed hundreds of thousands of people and destroyed much of Iraq’s national infrastructure.

In other words, in the view of many Middle Easterners, the West continues to wage war against their civilization. However, none of that reality is reflected in the current U.S. political and media debate, even when a major Republican candidate raises the prospect of dropping the Bomb.

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). You also can order Robert Parry’s trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America’s Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, click

here.
