

The Agony of 'Regime Change' Refugees

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

By Andrew Spannaus

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

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

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

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

Italy at Forefront

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

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

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

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

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

The Larger Issue

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

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

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

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

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

'Regime Change' Chaos

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Cataclysmic Risks of North Korean Crisis

The schoolyard taunts between President Trump and North Korean leaders have quieted for now. But the underlying risks of a nuclear showdown remain, as Korea expert Tim Shorrock explained to Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

Many Asia experts are concerned that the war of words between President Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un could turn Trump’s warning of “fire and fury, the likes of which the world has never seen” into a catastrophic reality.

I spoke on August 10 with long-time Korea expert Tim Shorrock, a Washington-based journalist who spent a good deal of his youth in South Korea and has been writing about the Koreas for nearly 40 years. Shorrock has recently returned from a two-month stay in South Korea where he had an opportunity to interview the new president, Moon Jae-in.

Dennis Bernstein: Why don't you begin by giving us a sense of what is going on in the South now. Are people afraid of a World War III?

Tim Shorrock: For most South Koreans, this is a confrontation between the U.S. and North Korea. The concern is that Donald Trump will follow up on the threat he made the other day and do something crazy. Of course, there is the fear that it could spill over into South Korea, but there is not any panic going on there.

DB: The new government in South Korea is more inclined to have negotiations with the North. But the United States has not even appointed an ambassador to the South. The situation seems very confusing and dangerous.

TS: The danger is miscalculation. You have Trump basically driving nuclear war with North Korea and you have North Korea saying that they will soon decide whether to send missiles toward Guam. It is a situation where someone could mistake an insignificant launch for something very significant. Or they could misinterpret something happening on the border and things could escalate out of control.

A lot of people in Congress were very concerned about Trump's remarks. That was true around the world, as well. Moon Jae-in won the election based on his policy of wanting to engage again with North Korea. The last two presidents had rejected engagement and the situation had become very tense because of their hard-line policies.

Moon has not gotten much of a response yet from the North. He has proposed military-to-military talks but the North has not yet responded. Now with the latest missile test by the North, Moon has reversed himself on deployment of THAAD and has actually called for its expansion. However, he said today that the door is still open to dialogue.

DB: What is the history of negotiations between the North and the South?

TS: Moon Jae-in ran on what he called the "Sunshine Policy." This policy was started by Kim Dae-jung, who was the president from the late 1990's to the early 2000's. He ran on a campaign to break down the barriers between the North and the South through cultural and economic outreach and political engagement. He had a summit in the 1990's with Kim Jong-il and there was another summit with Kim Dae-jung's successor, Noh Moo-hyun, in 2007. They made declarations about moving toward peace, demilitarizing the situation and reducing or eliminating nuclear weapons on the peninsula. During the Sunshine years, many South Koreans traveled to North Korea, and vice versa.

So there was actually a lot of contact until about 2007, the first time it had happened for 45 years or so. And many South Koreans began to see the North less

as an enemy. The enmity has been broken down between the South and the North.

Now, this hasn't improved relations between North Korea and America. Because of the death of this one American visitor who was imprisoned in North Korea and came back in a coma and died a few days later [Otto Warmbier], the US Congress moved to bar any travel from the US to North Korea. This is the first ban on Americans traveling to other countries in decades.

DB: You had a chance recently to interview the new president, Moon Jae-in. What did you learn from that experience?

TS: I met him two days before his election. He came up through the democratic movement. He was a labor rights and human rights lawyer for many years. He was very active in the opposition to the military dictator Park Chung-hee in the 1970's. He was jailed twice for his anti-government activities. He was chief of staff under progressive president Noh Moo-hyun and was present when Noh met with Kim Jung-il in 2007.

I asked him about the Sunshine Policy and whether he thought there might be opposition from the US. He was already getting criticism from analysts in Washington and some politicians that his policies were soft on North Korea. His response was that if he could do something to reduce the tensions, especially between North Korea and the United States, that should be welcomed by the US.

I asked him about the 1980 massive uprising in Gwangju against martial law and the massacre that followed. The uprising was put down brutally by the South Korean military with help from the Americans. This is still a source of friction between South Koreans and the United States. While he said that the Americans could have done a lot more than they did at the time, he didn't think it was necessary that the United States apologize now, when the country has moved on and is now a democracy.

Right now, Moon is treading a very fine line: He is trying to reach out to North Korea but he is under a lot of pressure from the United States to adopt a more military-first stance. Many South Koreans have been criticizing him for agreeing to extend the deployment of the missile system that the US installed last year.

DB: If the United States tried to pull off a first strike, what might that look like?

TS: It would be a catastrophe. North Korea is fully capable of launching a counterattack. With its conventional weapons it could wipe out Seoul. It could reach Japan. There would be untold numbers of casualties. South Korea does not want the US to launch a unilateral war without taking into consideration the huge casualties that would result in South Korea and without consulting the

South Koreans. It would rupture the alliance between the United States and South Korea. I think a lot of what Trump has been saying is pure bluster. It is very dangerous bluster and can only escalate the situation.

DB: Many people feel that this THAAD missile system is not in place to protect South Korea but is part of an offensive program known as the Pacific Pivot to control China and the region.

TS: The Chinese claim that the radar component of the system is very strong and can penetrate China very easily. Many in South Korea believe that the missiles are there to protect US bases. But even proponents of THAAD concede that, while it is capable of shooting a few missiles down, in the case of a large-scale war, it wouldn't make much of a difference.

It is actually more of a psychological weapon than something that can prevent an attack or a war. As you said, it is part of a broader system that is in place. Over the past few years there has been a huge military build-up in the region and particularly in Korea. This is a major confrontation and for most South Koreans the only way out is to have engagement.

DB: The American people have no knowledge of the violent history of US involvement in Korea which makes the North Koreans incredibly nervous and reluctant to give up what they see as a bargaining chip with nuclear weapons.

TS: During the Korean War, the United States completely obliterated the North. Eventually there were literally no targets left. Three million people, most of them civilians, were killed by US planes. It was a complete scorched earth policy. Trump's rhetoric reminds people of what happened in the Korean War.

The North Koreans have a very real fear of the United States launching its military on them again. The American people have so little knowledge of this history. All they hear in the news are numbers: How far can the North Korean missiles go, how many people would be killed in a war? Nobody is talking about how we got into this situation and how we can get out.

Again and again, US officials and the US media will say that North Korea refuses to negotiate on their nuclear weapons. What they leave out is that North Korea, in every one of their statements, has said that, until the United States drops its hostile policy, they will not negotiate.

What would it mean to end our hostile policy? That is what happened under Clinton in the late 1990's. The agreement was to end their nuclear program. At that time they didn't have any nuclear weapons. That program was frozen for twelve years until the agreement was ripped up in 2003 by the Bush administration. After that they built a bomb and exploded it in 2006.

Most importantly, the United States has never ended its hostile policy. That is the only way this is going to be resolved. As recently as 2015, the North Koreans offered to put another moratorium on weapons development if the United States would sign a peace agreement. Obama rejected that. Even more recently the North Koreans, together with the Chinese and the Russians, proposed that North Korea freeze their nuclear missile programs in exchange for a drawback of the US/South Korean military exercises. That has also been rejected so far by the United States.

DB: Do you see it as a problem that the Trump administration doesn't seem very interested in diplomacy? They seem to want to solve matters with B1 bombers.

TS: Interestingly, Trump has had some negotiations with the North Korean government. Soon after he took office in January, the US ambassador to North Korea met with the North Korean foreign minister and that is when we reached an agreement to free some of the Americans in prison in North Korea. But those talks were aimed toward opening the door to broader negotiations.

Less than a week ago, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said at his first press conference that he would welcome direct talks with North Korea if they would put a moratorium on their missile tests. A couple days later, Trump makes this statement about nuclear war. I believe there is a split in the administration about this. There are definitely forces within the administration who are pushing for military action.

DB: The Trump administration has taken to blaming the Chinese, saying they haven't done enough to rein in North Korea. My understanding is that the Chinese are pretty upset about THAAD and in general about the role the US has been playing in its attempt to surround China with this military ring. What role could China be playing here?

TS: The predominant line right now in Washington is to outsource policy to China, to have China put the screws on North Korea. That's just not going to happen. They have a long relationship. After all, one million Chinese soldiers died in the Korean War trying to defend North Korea. China certainly does not want to have a situation in a unified Korea where suddenly they have US forces right on the border of the Yellow River. Neither is China going to put pressure on North Korea until it collapses.

China has been quite accommodating to US demands for sanctions. The Chinese and the Russians both voted at the UN for a vast expansion of sanctions which will affect one-third of North Korea's exports. But after the vote, both the Chinese and the Russian ambassadors made it very clear that they want the United States to negotiate with the North. They see sanctions as only one part of a larger

strategy. They came up with a proposal they are calling “freeze for freeze,” which would freeze North Korea’s development of nuclear weapons if the US freezes its military exercises.

Actually, I think the Chinese are playing an important role right now. Just today [August 10], they put out a statement warning Trump that his language is not helping. North Korea has always taken an independent course. They had a lot of disputes with the Soviet Union and they have had a lot of disputes with China. It has its own policies and doesn’t like to be pushed around by bigger powers.

This is a conflict between North Korea and the United States. The North Korean foreign minister just said that the only country they are going to use nuclear weapons against, if they have to, is the United States. What American officials and media would like us to think is that the United States is just an innocent bystander in Korea: “For some strange reason we cannot understand, the North Koreans just hate us so.”

Without understanding the history and the role of the United States in Korea, a lot of Americans are going along with this. We have had military forces in Korea since 1945. There are no Chinese troops, no Russian troops in North Korea.

DB: We hear a lot about poverty in the North, about hunger. I imagine that their heavy military build-up takes a toll on their own people.

TS: Absolutely. It has a huge military far out of proportion with their size and population. Of course, all this military spending deprives the civilian population of support. That was one of the factors that brought them to negotiate in the first place. In the late 1990’s there was a severe crisis when they experienced famine and floods and they lost their access to low-cost oil from the former Soviet Union. At that time, thousands and thousands of people did die from starvation.

It is still a very poor country but, even under the stiff sanctions, in the last few years North Korea’s economy has grown substantially. People who go there note that there is lots of new construction and economic activity. But I am sure that achieving peace with the outside world would certainly do a lot to improve its economy, to be able to divert resources away from military spending.

It is important to remember that, until the late 1970’s, North Korea’s industrial indices were actually higher than those in the South. They were doing well, especially by third-world standards. It is true that today the South Korean economy is miles ahead of the North. But a backward country could not be developing nuclear weapons. I believe that with years of peace and interchange

with other countries, North Korea would be much better off. That should be the goal of everybody.

DB: What do you think will be the impact of these latest sanctions?

TS: Cutting one-third of exports and blocking remittances from workers abroad is surely going to hurt the people there. Any time you have sanctions it is the ordinary people who suffer. We saw this in Iraq. There could be some very tough years ahead for North Korea.

DB: Maybe we can come back to the geopolitical angle. Many critics of US foreign policy in the region feel that this is not about North Korea or South Korea, it is about the United States drawing a ring around China in order to control the resources, the trade routes. This is about the uppity North getting in the way of US interests in controlling the region.

TS: Certainly that conflict is there and the United States has moved very aggressively against China in many ways. But this particular conflict goes way back to the early days of the Cold War. The Korean War was one of the first hot battles of the Cold War. This is part of the legacy of the US intervention after World War II, of the choices the US made as to who would govern South Korea, consciously using those who had collaborated with the Japanese occupation.

I don't see the question of Korea as a side issue from the broader picture. It is very important to find some solution to the Korean standoff. By this point, the US and Vietnam are almost military allies. The United States has been able to get past the war in Vietnam. It is about time we were able to do the same with Korea.

Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of [Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom](#). You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.

Taking Nuclear War Seriously

With remarkably little public debate, the U.S. government has raised the risk of a nuclear conflagration with face-offs against Russia and now North Korea, an existential issue that Dennis J Bernstein discusses with journalist John Pilger.

Dennis J Bernstein

Emmy-Award winning filmmaker John Pilger's latest film, *The Coming War on China*,

deals directly with the new projection of U.S. power into Asia, as well as the toll U.S. aggression has already taken on the people of the region.

Pilger started his career as a war correspondent in Vietnam and has been a strong critic of U.S. aggression in Asia ever since as he twice won Britain's Journalist of the Year Award. I spoke to Pilger on August 8 about the dangers from the current face-off between the U.S. and North Korea.

Dennis Bernstein: John Pilger, your new piece is called "On the Beach 2017: The Beckoning of Nuclear War." Could you give a little context to that title?

John Pilger: I read Nevil Shute's novel *On the Beach* for the first time recently. It came out in 1959 and is about the aftermath of nuclear war. Actually, it isn't about war as such. It is about a great silence. At the front of the book, Shute quotes T.S. Eliot, who wrote "When it happens it will be not with a bang but with a whimper." The novel is about the last US warship to survive, a submarine. The rest have all gone. The northern hemisphere is completely radioactive. The submarine heads south to Australia but is being followed by this closing blind of radioactivity. It is about a community in Australia that attempts to come to grips with the fact that the radioactivity is coming and will be there by September and that will be the end.

It is an astonishingly moving book, and I happened to read it just as the US Congress nearly unanimously voted in favor of sanctions against Russia—in effect, for an economic war with Russia. These sanctions are so provocative, so unjustified, so wrongheaded. There is a cynical side to them because they are really directed against Europe, against Germany, which is dependent upon Russian natural gas.

But these sanctions really are a declaration of war on the second biggest nuclear power in the world. In Shute's novel, the characters are unsure of how the war started, they think it was a mistake or accident and that the US, Russia and China were involved. Everyone is very unclear about what ended life on the planet.

The prospect of nuclear war is still a great abstraction. It is beyond most people's imagination. But our imagination had better catch up pretty soon, when we see outrageous provocation such as this from the US Congress. These sanctions include the end of the Intermediate Range Nuclear Weapons Treaty signed by Reagan and Gorbachev, which marked the end of the Cold War. Bush II knocked out most of the treaties with Russia. This was a very important one and there you find it, buried in the sanctions. It is gone.

DB: Trump was clearly not in favor of these sanctions. While many want to

believe that the reason he wouldn't support these sanctions is because of his business ties with Russia, these business connections seem like our last hope for detente.

JP: This requires some thinking on the part of people. I am sorry if this sounds patronizing but people have just got to give up some of their beloved assumptions. The obsession with Trump is understandable.

Trump is an odious human being, we know that. But there is only one thing he has really been consistent about and that is not wanting a war with Russia. He almost parallels Ronald Reagan in that. In the end, Reagan didn't want to have war with Russia. This legislation absolutely ends the prospects for peace.

DB: We now have Washington pundits telling us that we have to think about a first strike against North Korea before they strike us.

JP: Once you have a first strike, that's it. This THAAD system in South Korea is so dangerous because it invites the Chinese to strike it so that it doesn't happen to them when they try to respond. There is a kind of sleepwalking element to all of this. I am not an alarmist person but I am very alert to something like this.

In my film *The Coming War on China*, we have the testimony of a member of a US Air Force missile crew based on Okinawa during the time of the Cuban missile crisis. He and his crew were given orders to fire their nuclear-tipped missiles. Fortunately, a very acute junior officer refused to follow the order, but that is how close it got in 1962. There have been other incidents since. Now we are pretty well back to something like that. Perhaps not on a day-to-day basis but on a more insidious basis.

DB: You write in your latest piece ("On the Beach 2017: The Beckoning of Nuclear War"): "They have encircled Russia and China with missiles and a nuclear arsenal. They have used neo-Nazis to install an unstable, aggressive regime on Russia's borderland [Ukraine], through which Hitler invaded Russia and caused the death of some 27 million people. Their goal is to dismember the modern Russian Federation." How do you see this moving forward?

JP: This was illustrated quite clearly during the immediate post-Soviet years, when we were subverting and seeking to control Russia. The effect on Russia was dramatic. The fabric of the old Soviet Union was torn up, in a way similar to how the Chicago Boys went into Chile. It makes the whole question of the Russians interfering in the US election so absurd. It was quite clear during that period that the aim was to divide and control Russia. That is always the aim of imperial states.

Vladimir Putin has incurred the wrath of our “betters” in the West basically because he made Russia independent again. That has been his great crime, actually. That is the test for countries that become enemies. The reason we are getting so much media coverage of Venezuela is that they are independent. I make this general point to explain why I think that the goal here is to divide. But we are talking about Russia here, not Venezuela. We are talking about the second most lethal nuclear power on earth. China was cut up into many pieces during what they still refer to as “the century of humiliation.” The Chinese have no intention of allowing this to be repeated.

DB: One of the most chilling parts of your piece is when you quote the admiral commanding the US Pacific fleet who said that, if required, he would nuke China.

JP: Two-thirds of US naval forces are now in the Pacific as part of the so-called Asian Pivot that President Obama initiated. He was speaking in Australia, where US forces had just completed a huge military exercise. One of the features of this exercise was to rehearse blocking the Malacca Strait and the South China Sea, through which most of China’s trade passes. The fact that this senior admiral would say such a thing publically at this very tense moment in time is pretty breathtaking.

The lie that Hiroshima was nuked in order to end the war was demonstrated by the dropping of the second bomb on Nagasaki. The bombings were both experimental and they were a very clear warning to the Soviet Union not to enter Japan at the end of the war. They were the first terrible shots of the Cold War.

DB: They were obviously testing these new weapons. One was plutonium and the other uranium. There is still a battle over the incredible amount of footage that was taken by the US to document the effects of these two bombs. These were clearly testing grounds.

JP: Interestingly, most of the actual footage taken by the US itself was not released until 1968. But a great deal of the archive footage of Hiroshima and especially Nagasaki has never been released.

People in power seem to have a kind of weird fascination with nuclear weapons, partly because of their apocalyptic nature. Sometimes when you hear a higher-up in the military open his mouth the way the admiral did the other day, you realize that these people do exist.

DB: What makes me really nervous is that Obama oversaw the largest weapons build-up ever and they are always looking for a war to test these weapons out.

JP: Yes, and Obama was awarded the Nobel Prize in part because he said that he was committed to getting rid of nuclear weapons. In fact, the Obama

administration has committed the United States to spending about a trillion dollars over the next ten years developing nuclear weapons.

DB: Any final comments, John?

JP: To progressives, I would just say, politics isn't a game. It isn't just about oneself, it is about all of us. Whatever issues you think are important, to yourself or your group in isolation, in the end we have to think beyond that. We have to think in a communal way. These sanctions that Congress has pushed through without any opposition in the streets! All those people were out protesting Trump's inauguration. Where were they when Congress was pushing through this lethal legislation?

Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.

A Ukraine Link to North Korea's Missiles?

Exclusive: By orchestrating the 2014 "regime change" in Ukraine, U.S. neocons may have indirectly contributed to a desperate Ukrainian factory selling advanced rocket engines to North Korea and endangering America, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

U.S. intelligence analysts reportedly have traced North Korea's leap forward in creating an intercontinental ballistic missile capable of striking U.S. territory to a decaying Ukrainian rocket-engine factory whose alleged role could lift the cover off other suppressed mysteries related to the U.S.-backed coup in Kiev.

Because the 2014 coup – overthrowing elected President Viktor Yanukovich – was partly orchestrated by the U.S. government's influential neoconservatives and warmly embraced by the West's mainstream media, many of the ugly features of the Kiev regime have been downplayed or ignored, including the fact that corrupt oligarch Igor Kolomoisky was put in charge of the area where the implicated factory was located.

As the region's governor, the thuggish Kolomoisky founded armed militias of

Ukrainian extremists, including neo-Nazis, who spearheaded the violence against ethnic Russians in eastern provinces, which had voted heavily for Yanukovich and tried to resist his violent overthrow.

Kolomoisky, who has triple citizenship from Ukraine, Cyprus and Israel, was eventually ousted as governor of Dnipropetrovsk (now called Dnipro) on March 25, 2015, after a showdown with Ukraine's current President Petro Poroshenko over control of the state-owned energy company, but by then Kolomoisky's team had put its corrupt mark on the region.

At the time of the Kolomoisky-Poroshenko showdown, Valentyn Nalyvaychenko, chief of the State Security Service, accused Dnipropetrovsk officials of financing armed gangs and threatening investigators, Bloomberg News reported, while noting that Ukraine had sunk to 142nd place out of 175 countries in Transparency International's Corruptions Perception Index, the worst in Europe.

Even earlier in Kolomoisky's brutal reign, Dnipropetrovsk had become the center for the violent intrigue that has plagued Ukraine for the past several years, including the dispatch of neo-Nazi militias to kill ethnic Russians who then turned to Russia for support.

Tolerating Nazis

Yet, protected by the waves of anti-Russian propaganda sweeping across the West, Kolomoisky's crowd saw few reasons for restraint. So, among the Kolomoisky-backed militias was the Azov battalion whose members marched with Swastikas and other Nazi insignias.

Ironically, the same Western media which heartily has condemned neo-Nazi and white-nationalist violence in Charlottesville, Virginia, adopted a much more tolerant attitude toward Ukraine's neo-Nazism even as those militants murdered scores of ethnic Russians in Odessa in May 2014 and attacked ethnic Russian communities in the east where thousands more died.

When it came to Ukraine, The New York Times and other mainstream outlets were so dedicated to their anti-Russian propaganda that they veered between minimizing the significance of the neo-Nazi militias and treating them as bulwarks of Western civilization.

For instance, on Feb. 11, 2015, the Times published a long article by Rick Lyman that presented the situation in the port city of Mariupol as if the advance by ethnic Russian rebels amounted to the arrival of barbarians at the gate while the inhabitants were being bravely defended by the forces of civilization. But then the article cited the key role in that defense played by the Azov battalion.

Though the article provided much color and detail and quoted an Azov leader prominently, it left out the fact that the Azov battalion was composed of neo-Nazis.

This inconvenient truth that neo-Nazis were central to Ukraine's "self-defense forces" would have disrupted the desired propaganda message about "Russian aggression." After all, wouldn't many Americans and Europeans understand why Russia, which suffered some 27 million dead in World War II, might be sensitive to neo-Nazis killing ethnic Russians on Russia's border?

So, in Lyman's article, the Times ignored Azov's well-known neo-Nazism and referred to it simply as a "volunteer unit."

In other cases, the Times casually brushed past the key role of fascist militants. In July 2015, the Times published a curiously upbeat story about the good news that Islamic militants had joined with far-right and neo-Nazi battalions to kill ethnic Russian rebels.

The article by Andrew E. Kramer reported that there were three Islamic battalions "deployed to the hottest zones," such as around Mariupol. One of the battalions was headed by a former Chechen warlord who went by the name "Muslim," Kramer wrote, adding:

"The Chechen commands the Sheikh Mansur group, named for an 18th-century Chechen resistance figure. It is subordinate to the nationalist Right Sector, a Ukrainian militia. Right Sector formed during last year's street protests in Kiev from a half-dozen fringe Ukrainian nationalist groups like White Hammer and the Trident of Stepan Bandera.

"Another, the Azov group, is openly neo-Nazi, using the 'Wolf's Hook' symbol associated with the [Nazi] SS. Without addressing the issue of the Nazi symbol, the Chechen said he got along well with the nationalists because, like him, they loved their homeland and hated the Russians."

Rockets for North Korea

The Times encountered another discomfiting reality on Monday when correspondents William J. Broad and David E. Sanger described U.S. intelligence assessments pointing to North Korea's likely source of its new and more powerful rocket engines as a Ukrainian factory in Dnipro.

Of course, the Times bent over backward to suggest that the blame might still fall on Russia even though Dnipro is a stronghold of some of Ukraine's most militantly anti-Russian politicians and although U.S. intelligence analysts have centered their suspicions on a Ukrainian-government-owned factory there, known

as Yuzhmash.

So, it would seem clear that corrupt Ukrainian officials, possibly in cahoots with financially pressed executives or employees of Yuzhmash, are the likeliest suspects in the smuggling of these rocket engines to North Korea.

Even the Times couldn't dodge that reality, saying: "Government investigators and experts have focused their inquiries on a missile factory in Dnipro, Ukraine." But the Times added that Dnipro is "on the edge of the territory where Russia is fighting a low-level war to break off part of Ukraine" – to suggest that the Russians somehow might have snuck into the factory, stolen the engines and smuggled them to North Korea.

But the Times also cited the view of missile expert Michael Elleman, who addressed North Korea's sudden access to more powerful engines in [a study](#) issued this week by the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

"It's likely that these engines came from Ukraine – probably illicitly," Elleman said in an interview with the Times. "The big question is how many they have and whether the Ukrainians are helping them now. I'm very worried."

Yet, always looking for a chance to shift the blame to Russia, the Times quickly inserted that "Mr. Elleman was unable to rule out the possibility that a large Russian missile enterprise, Energomash, which has strong ties to the Ukrainian complex, had a role in the transfer of the RD-250 engine technology to North Korea."

Of course by that standard – "unable to rule out the possibility" – almost anyone could be put under suspicion. One source familiar with the U.S. intelligence assessments said there is even suspicion that some operatives in Israel played a role in transferring the rocket engines to North Korea. The source cited Israel's historic arms-trade with North Korea dating back to Israel's covert arms pipeline to Iran during the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s.

Israel, a rogue nuclear-weapons state itself, also has a history of collaborating with other "pariah" states on nuclear proliferation, including apartheid South Africa which joined Israel in nuclear tests before the democratic election of Nelson Mandela.

Kolomoisky cultivated close ties between Israel and Dnipro by helping to construct one of the largest Jewish centers in the world in the Ukrainian city, which has fallen on hard times since the 2014 coup shattered economic ties with Russia and left the Yuzhmash factory with little work.

Yet, while the Ukraine crisis may have reduced living standards for average

Ukrainians, it was an important catalyst in the creation of the New Cold War between Washington and Moscow, which offers lucrative opportunities for U.S. military contractors and their many think-tank apologists despite increasing the risk of nuclear war for the rest of us.

In particular, U.S. neoconservatives have viewed heightened tensions between the West and Russia as valuable both in driving up military spending and laying the groundwork for a possible “regime change” in Moscow. The neocons have wanted to retaliate against Russian President Vladimir Putin’s role in frustrating neocon (and Israeli-Saudi) desires to overthrow Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and to bomb Iran, which Israel and Saudi Arabia now view as their principal regional adversary.

The neocon/Israeli-Saudi interests have produced many strange bedfellows with weapons flowing to Al Qaeda’s affiliate in Syria, and – because of Putin’s assistance to Syria and Iran – the tolerance of neo-Nazis and Islamic militants in Ukraine.

The MH-17 Case

Kolomoisky’s operation in Dnipro also has come under suspicion for a possible role in the shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 on July 17, 2014. According to a source briefed by U.S. intelligence analysts, Dnipro was the center of a plot to use a powerful anti-aircraft missile to shoot down Putin’s official plane on a return flight from South America, but instead – after Putin’s plane took a more northerly route – the missile brought down MH-17, killing all 298 people aboard.

For reasons that have still not been explained, the Obama administration suppressed U.S. intelligence reports on the MH-17 tragedy and instead joined in pinning the shoot-down on ethnic Russian rebels and, by implication, Putin and his government.

In the West, the MH-17 shoot-down became a cause celebre, generating a powerful propaganda campaign to demonize Putin and Russia – and push Europe into joining sanctions against Moscow. Few people dared question Russia alleged guilt even though the Russia-did-it arguments were full of holes. [See here and here.]

Now this North Korean case forces the issue of Ukraine’s reckless behavior to the fore again: Did an inept or corrupt Ukrainian bureaucracy participate in or tolerate a scheme to sell powerful rocket engines to North Korea and enable a nuclear threat to U.S. territory?

In response to the reports of possible Ukrainian collusion in North Korea’s missile program, Oleksandr Turchynov, secretary of the Ukrainian national

security and defense council, issued [a bizarre denial](#) suggesting that The New York Times and U.S. intelligence agencies were pawns of Russia.

“This information [about North Korea possibly obtaining rocket engines from Ukraine] is not based on any grounds, provocative by its content, and most likely provoked by Russian secret services to cover their own crimes,” Turchynov said.

Press reports about Turchynov’s statement left out two salient facts: that as the interim President following the February 2014 coup, Turchynov ordered Right Sektor militants to begin the bloody siege of rebel-held Sloviansk, a key escalation in the conflict, and that Turchynov was the one who appointed Kolomoisky to be the ruler of Dnipropetrovsk.

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](#)).

Hillary Clinton Promised Wars, Too

Exclusive: President Trump has shattered the hope of many peace-oriented Americans that he would pull back from U.S. foreign interventions, but Hillary Clinton might have pursued even more wars, notes James W. Carden.

By James W. Carden

The alliance between neoconservatives and the Democratic foreign policy establishment, which is largely made up of former Obama administration officials and former Clinton campaign surrogates, has been [much noted of late](#), particularly since the formation of the German Marshall Fund’s “Alliance for Democracy Project” which brings together high-profile members of both groups in an effort to fight what is loosely (and often inaccurately) defined as Russian “disinformation.”

Those who applaud the new alignment are quick to point out that Donald J. Trump who, by virtue of his volatile temperament and his alarming ignorance and inexperience, is a menace to his country and the planet. And at this stage in Mr. Trump’s presidency, that would seem unarguable.

And yet, Clinton partisans charge that those who withheld their support from

Clinton not only bear responsibility for Trump, but also had no right to do so since it was, according to them, obvious that Clinton would have been, among other things, a more responsible steward of U.S. foreign policy than Trump.

And so, given the extreme bitterness that Hillary Clinton's loss has engendered among a number of prominent members of the liberal commentariat, it might be worth looking at what her campaign promised with regard to foreign policy to see if the above criticism holds water.

The argument here isn't that Trump isn't awful (which is something I've never argued); it's that he's proven to be every bit as bad as some of us reasonably expected Clinton would have been; and if one takes the time to consult the Clinton campaign's own briefing papers and fact sheets, one will find that on issue after issue, Clinton invariably took hawkish positions that reflected the fact that Clinton was (and remains) a saber-rattler *par excellence* – very much on par with the current occupant of the White House.

When North Korea conducted a nuclear test in September 2016, she released a statement, if not quite promising “fire and fury,” that did declare: “North Korea's decision to conduct another nuclear test is outrageous and unacceptable. ... This constitutes a direct threat to the United States, and we cannot and will never accept this.”

No Regrets on ‘Regime Change’

Beyond that, Clinton remained a firm believer in regime-change strategies. On Syria, the Clinton campaign “proposed instituting a coalition no-fly zone in the air coupled with safe zones on the ground to protect Syrian civilians and create leverage for a diplomatic resolution that includes Assad's departure.” She supported the “deployment of special operating forces to Syria” and “strongly urged President Obama to arm moderate rebels in support of the eventual removal of the brutal Assad regime.”

Clinton also favored escalation in other hot spots. On Iran, the Clinton campaign outlined “a plan to counter Iran's other malicious behavior” which included pledges to “deepen America's unshakeable commitment to Israel's security”; “expand our military presence in the region”; “increase security cooperation in areas like intelligence sharing, military backing and missile defense with our Gulf allies, to ensure they can defend themselves against Iranian aggression”; and “build a coalition to counter Iran's proxies.”

When we also factor in Clinton's support for the NATO's illegal airstrikes on Kosovo (1999), her vote to authorize the second Iraq War (2003), her enthusiastic support for sending more troops to fight and die in Afghanistan

(2009), and her disastrous embrace of regime change in Libya (2011) and Syria (2012), how can anyone be sure that her administration's foreign policy would have been much of an improvement over what we now have?

Indeed, those who threw their support behind Clinton's vision of American world leadership, like those associated with the "Alliance for Democracy," really, with the notable exception of Trump's abandonment of the Paris Climate Accord, have little to complain about.

Trump has done much as Clinton would have done by, among other things: slapping sanctions on Russia, Iran and North Korea; pledging unlimited support to Israel; reassuring "our allies" in the Persian Gulf and eastern Europe; condemning Russia's actions in eastern Ukraine; expanding military operations in eastern Syria; and lobbing none-to-veiled threats at the left-wing government in Venezuela.

So while it's easy and almost certainly emotionally satisfying to the legions of Clinton supporters to tell themselves (and their readers) that *of course* Hillary would have been a better steward of U.S. foreign policy than Trump, that assertion remains both unprovable and, given her record, highly questionable.

James W. Carden served as an adviser on Russia policy at the US State Department. Currently a contributing writer at The Nation magazine, his work has appeared in the Los Angeles Times, Quartz, The American Conservative and The National Interest.

Trump's Soft-Shoe on Racist Violence

On Monday, President Trump did a second take on his remarks about the white-nationalist-sparked violence in Charlottesville, but his tepid first take offered a troubling look into his soul, says Michael Winship.

By Michael Winship

Enough. We have a president who is emotionally challenged and empathy-free, who on Saturday read from a prepared statement of concern and condemnation, incapable of speaking genuinely from the heart, apparently because he knows that those who speak racist hate and commit acts of deadly violence are a portion of his "base."

Witness Ku Kluxer David Duke declaring in Charlottesville, Virginia, before

Saturday's violence, "We are determined to take our country back. We are going to fulfill the promises of Donald Trump. That's what we believed in, that's why we voted for Donald Trump. Because he said he's going to take our country back."

It's true that you can't always choose those who want to march in support of you, although Trump's refusal to condemn his backing from white supremacists is appalling. Nor can it be denied that on the extreme left there are a few, like so many on the extreme right, who see violence as a means to an end. But Trump not only has failed to speak out against white nationalists, he allows them to work in his White House and mutter seditious nonsense into his all-too-susceptible ears.

As he spoke on Saturday afternoon he was unable to out-and-out condemn the neo-Nazis in Charlottesville without diluting his censure, saying there was "hatred, bigotry and violence" but adding "on many sides, on many sides." And then he tweeted, "Condolences to the family of the young woman killed today, and best regards to all of those injured, in Charlottesville, Virginia. So sad!"

Best regards? So sad? So lame. A woman died, a paralegal named Heather Heyer, and others were wounded at the hand of what appears to be a racist murderer using a car as a deadly weapon. This is a national tragedy, Mr. President. It is domestic terrorism and your reaction must be one of outrage, not left-handed sympathy.

On Saturday, Trump said, "It's been going on for a long time in our country. Not Donald Trump. Not Barack Obama. It's been going on for a long, long time." He's right about the long, long time part but as Richard Cohen, president of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) wrote on Saturday:

"[F]rom the day he came down the escalator in the tower that bears his name, Trump consciously poured fuel on the fire. He ran a racist, xenophobic campaign that energized the radical right... Trump calls for the country to unite. But he is still ducking responsibility for his role in dividing it."

Domestic Terrorism

Many Republican senators denounced Saturday's fascist extremists more strongly and explicitly than the President, including Colorado's Cory Gardner, who tweeted, "Mr. President – we must call evil by its name. These were white supremacists and this was domestic terrorism."

But in the not-so-distant past, out of fear of alienating some conservative voters, Republicans have condemned groups like the SPLC for calling out the growing threat of the extreme right and white supremacy, just as those Republicans so vehemently attacked a 2009 report from the Department of Homeland

Security on rightwing domestic terrorism that it was withdrawn from circulation. That analysis found that every year, with the exception of 2001 and the 9/11 attacks, right-wing extremism was responsible for more violence in the United States than radical Islamic terrorism.

The report's findings were backed up by an FBI analysis last year that hate crimes were up and by a 2015 survey conducted with the Police Executive Research Forum. Two of those involved, Charles Kurzman of the University of North Carolina and David Schanzer of Duke University, wrote in *The New York Times*, "The main terrorist threat in the United States is not from violent Muslim extremists, but from right-wing extremists..."

"An officer from a large metropolitan area said that 'militias, neo-Nazis and sovereign citizens' are the biggest threat we face in regard to extremism," they wrote. "One officer explained that he ranked the right-wing threat higher because 'it is an emerging threat that we don't have as good of a grip on, even with our intelligence unit, as we do with the Al Shabab/Al Qaeda issue, which we have been dealing with for some time.'"

President Trump, you reap what you sow and boilerplate statements of sorrow ring hollow. Presidents are supposed to bring us together. Your predecessors, Republicans and Democrats, have done so with grace. But this President says he loves all Americans while working to deprive them of their freedoms. And keeps within his circle of advisors those for whom hate is an asset and not a dagger to the heart of democracy.

Fire Sebastian Gorka, the bogus security advisor who earlier this week told *Breitbart News Daily* that white supremacists are not a problem. Fire Stephen Miller, who seems to think the Statue of Liberty is more a symbol of exclusion than welcome. And fire Steve Bannon and his off-the-wall, destructive theories of white nationalism.

Their dismissals would be a start. But on Saturday, we saw into your soul, Donald Trump. And there was nothing there.

Michael Winship is the Emmy Award-winning senior writer of *Moyers & Company* and *BillMoyers.com*. Follow him on Twitter: @MichaelWinship. [This story first appeared at <http://billmoyers.com/story/charlottesville-goddam/>]

The Thankless Task of 'Saving' Trump

President Trump appears lost in the swamp of his own shallow mind, pulling down

the “adults” around him more than they can lift him up, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

By Paul R. Pillar

Optimism has repeatedly been expressed, especially after any qualified and respected person has been appointed to a senior position in the current administration, that the “adults in the room” will check the excesses and compensate for the deficiencies of a blatantly unqualified president.

Hope placed on the four-star shoulders of John Kelly as he assumed duties of White House chief of staff is a recent example. Such optimism has proven to be largely unfounded.

Repeatedly the excesses of Donald Trump have escaped any attempt to check them. Trump’s fire-and-brimstone threats against North Korea, which surprised his foreign policy advisers, are the latest example. Trump’s emulation of Kim Jong-un’s scary rhetoric played into the hands of Kim’s regime, whose propaganda emphasizes threats from the United States, and escalated tensions to the point of shaking global stock markets. The rhetoric was the sort of thing Trump turns to when he evidently does not have any better ideas for addressing a problem.

Even when the adults do seem to have had some restraining influence on their boss, the effect is likely to be limited and temporary. Last month Trump’s advisers got him grudgingly to recognize reality and to certify that Iran is complying with the agreement that restricts its nuclear program. But since then, Trump has repeatedly asserted that Iran is not in compliance.

In other words, Trump is disseminating another of his lies. We know it is a lie because with the highly intrusive monitoring provisions of the agreement, international inspectors get to see first-hand whether Iran is complying.

Clean-up by his subordinates after Trump’s rhetorical excesses has become a common pattern. This past week we had the remarkable case of the U.S. Secretary of State seeing it necessary to urge his fellow citizens to get a good night’s sleep despite the inflammatory rhetoric of their own President about North Korea.

But clean-up duty can only accomplish so much. Where the damage extends beyond rhetoric to actions, such as withdrawal from the global climate change agreement, it cannot do much of anything.

The reasons the adults do not have any greater influence in preventing or limiting the damage Trump inflicts are centered primarily on the qualities of

Donald Trump himself. An insecure narcissist who has used demagoguery to get where he is today is not a good subject for guidance and restraint by subordinates. Trump's lack of self-control, and resistance to anything that looks like control by others, manifests itself especially in how much his presidency is defined by after-hours tweets.

Never Wrong

The absolute refusal to admit in public that he is ever wrong is probably mirrored in how Trump interacts with advisers in private. His narrow and self-referential notion of loyalty, which is hard to distinguish from sycophancy, implies an unwillingness to listen to contrary opinions from subordinates and an inclination to remove subordinates who persist in offering such opinions.

Some additional explanations for the adults' failure to rein in Trump pertain not just to characteristics of the President but to the thinking of the adults themselves. Awareness of how insecure is the job of any senior official in this administration who dares to differ with the President can lead to punches being pulled. This is not necessarily a selfish and cowardly clinging to a job. With such officials being aware of how much additional damage might be done by this President, it can be unselfish and patriotic to put up with the stresses and compromises necessary to work for him, in the interest of trying to inject prudence into this administration from the inside.

This may be the thinking of the national security adviser, H.R. McMaster, who has had a previously stellar reputation soiled by episodes of sycophancy. This process began soon after McMaster took the job, when he was trotted out to the White House driveway to try to justify to reporters Trump's disclosure of third-party classified information to the Russian ambassador and foreign minister.

Retired Army officer John Nagl, who knows McMaster well, sees what McMaster is doing in such terms. Nagl said, "The administration is clearly in free fall, and McMaster is exactly the man the nation needs to have ... to hold all the pieces together." Nagl added that "his friends and I believe" that it is worth McMaster giving up some of his "well-earned reputation for integrity."

Such reasoning is valid, and even high-level resignations are not apt to have as much impact on policy as is often alleged by observers criticizing such officials for not resigning. But in the meantime other damage is done. Tenuously situated subordinates have to pick their battles, and on the subjects on which they do not choose to fight, much bad policy and nonsense can ensue.

A Bad Mix

Maintaining standing and influence with the President can lead to subordinates

publicly voicing notions that make adoption of bad policy all the more likely. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, although he reportedly was one of those who urged Trump in July to certify Iran's compliance with the nuclear agreement, has been saying publicly some of the very falsehoods that Trump would use in trashing the agreement.

Sometimes some of the adults, although useful restraints on the President on most matters, share his predilections and prejudices on others. This is true of Secretary of Defense James Mattis, particularly on anything having to do with Iran, against which he is waging almost a personal vendetta.

On some issues, adults may not see things the same way as Trump but there is a sort of malevolent convergence in which the President and his advisers go along with the same unproductive policy for different reasons.

This may be true of policy toward Afghanistan. Trump, who once averred that the United States "should have kept the oil" from Iraq, is now interested in getting U.S. hands on Afghanistan's mineral resources. It is unlikely that most of the adults share that kind of crude mercantilist view, and they probably see the major downside of the United States presenting its overseas military operations as intended to grab other people's mineral wealth. But the same adults, including Mattis and McMaster, favor continuation of the U.S. military expedition in Afghanistan to achieve something that can be called "victory" and to pursue the obsolete notion that Afghanistan is a unique key in determining terrorist threats in the West. Thus America's longest war continues, with Trump craving minerals and his generals wanting to continue the effort for other reasons.

Trump, in imitating Kim Jong-un's incendiary rhetoric, is still a long way from duplicating the ruthless North Korean dictatorship, in which even family members get executed when they fall out of favor. But there is some further resemblance in the difficulty in speaking truth to power, and in the likelihood that such speaking will make a difference. Even if surrounded by able hands, much policy will still reflect the whims and weaknesses of the man at the top.

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How Obama, Trump Had Their Wings Clipped

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

By Andrew Spannaus

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

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

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

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

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

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

Obama's Iran Initiative

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

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

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

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

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

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

Challenging the Establishment

In addition to working behind the scenes to assure Senators' votes, Obama also made his case for the Iran deal publicly. His most effective intervention came in August 2015 when speaking at American University in Washington, D.C. He put the choice in stark terms, rather than attempting to woo lawmakers with a soft approach: a vote against the Iran deal was a vote for war in the future. And he drew a clear parallel with the decision to invade Iraq in 2002, that in hindsight many Congressmen have been forced to admit was wrong, and avoidable.

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

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

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

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

The attempt to move away from the policies of "regime change," drawing down

support for extremist groups linked to Al Qaeda and ISIS while seeking different alliances, would ultimately be too little, and too late.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Trump's Shallow Thinking on 'Terrorism'

Israel typically makes its enemies America's enemies – think Lebanon's Hezbollah and Iran – and few U.S. politicians dare step out of line. But hypocritical talk about "terrorism" has consequences, says ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Last month, President Trump made a joint appearance at the White House with a visiting head of government, during which Trump spoke of the visitor's country being "on the front lines in the fight against" an organization that is part of that same country's governing coalition. The visitor was Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri and the organization was Hezbollah. Members of Hezbollah are ministers in Hariri's cabinet. Hezbollah has the fourth largest bloc of seats among the two dozen parties that are represented in Lebanon's parliament.

Trump's comment could be dismissed as an unsurprising gaffe from someone whose ignorance of the outside world is well known (and whose disorganized White House might have contributed to lousy staff work in preparing the President's notes for the appearance with Hariri). Even if Trump had been better informed about current Lebanese politics, he might not have backed off from his comment. The United States does not have governing coalitions in the same sense as countries with parliamentary systems, but the nearest equivalent might arise with any glimmers of bipartisan cooperation on, say, health care.

Imagine that a foreign visitor came to the White House and praised the United States for being "on the front line in the fight against Democrats." Although most observers would consider this to be a ridiculous and outrageously inappropriate remark, Trump might accept it smilingly as a personal compliment.

Where terrorism is involved, however, a simplistic approach often prevails that is broadly held and goes far beyond Trump. The problem arises in failing to recognize that terrorism is not some fixed set of people, groups, or states. It instead is a tactic that has been used by many different people and organizations in the pursuit of varying objectives. Yet the fixed-group attitude persists and frequently is visible in policy discussion and media coverage.

The official U.S. list of foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs) is treated as

if it were a master roster of organizations that we should never countenance, even though it was created 20 years ago only as a legal necessity to add precision to legislation that criminalized material support to terrorism.

If the United States supposedly were never to do any business with anyone who had used terrorism, it would somehow have to explain away the extensive business it has done with leaders who had been up to their eyeballs in terrorism, including Gerry Adams, Menachem Begin, and Yitzhak Shamir. The same is true not only of individual leaders but also some groups, such as the African National Congress.

We decide which of the users of terrorism we will countenance and which ones we won't according to criteria other than terrorism itself. Only we don't admit that we're doing that, so as to preserve the fiction of being steadfastly opposed to terrorism wherever it arises. And this inconsistency doesn't even take account of the U.S. acceptance of other applications of political violence that, although they do not meet the formal definition of terrorism because they involve overt use of force by a state, are just as deadly to many innocent civilians (such as the force that Saudi Arabia uses in Yemen, or that Israel regularly uses in the West Bank).

Differences Among Groups

The simplistic view of terrorism fails to distinguish among the vastly different interests and objectives of groups that have used terrorism and that may appear on the FTO list. This failure was prominent in Trump's comment at his press conference with Hariri, in which the President listed as the groups that Lebanon supposedly was on the front lines against as "ISIS, Al Qaeda, and Hezbollah".

There is no comparison between the first two of those and the third. ISIS and Al Qaeda are transnational terrorist organizations that seek to overturn governing structures in the Muslim world and to impose an extreme form of rule throughout that world. Hezbollah, by contrast, is focused mainly on sectarian politics and the distribution of power in Lebanon and its environs. Hezbollah's participation in a governing coalition with other parties in an existing nation-state is far beyond the realm of anything possible with ISIS or Al Qaeda.

Hamas is another group that undeniably has used terrorism but otherwise has very little in common with the likes of ISIS and Al Qaeda. Like Hezbollah, it is focused primarily on more parochial political objectives – in Hamas's case, on self-determination and political power in Palestine. It has demonstrated its ability and willingness to use peaceful means to pursue those objectives by winning a free and fair election among Palestinians.

The simplistic view tends to disregard the circumstances leading to the use of terrorism and to the emergence of groups that have used the tactic. Hezbollah was born in the early 1980s in the midst of a civil war in Lebanon. A major cause of both the war and the birth of the group was strong sentiment among Lebanon's growing Shia population that it was underprivileged and unfairly underrepresented in Lebanese politics.

A more immediate circumstance underlying the emergence of Hezbollah was Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982. The invasion was intended to chase the Palestine Liberation Organization to the ends of the earth – or at least to Tunisia, to which it decamped. A salient episode in the Israeli military expedition was the Sabra and Shatila massacre, in which Israel's army aided its Phalangist militia allies in the slaughter of hundreds and probably thousands of civilians, including Palestinian refugees and Lebanese Shia – Hezbollah's constituency. Any reference to Hezbollah's hostility toward Israel needs to recall these events for a full understanding.

Hezbollah terrorism against U.S. interests consisted of opposition to a foreign military presence. This was the case with the anti-U.S. terrorism in Lebanon in the 1980s (following a U.S. military intervention there, which came after the Israeli intervention), as well as with the one later attack against U.S. forces in which Hezbollah played a role: the bombing of Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia in 1996.

These events are consistent with Robert Pape's research finding that suicide bombings are motivated by opposition to the presence of foreign military forces. It is not consistent with any notion that Hezbollah is determined to kill Westerners or to attack U.S. interests in perpetuity.

Policy Implications

Failure to take into account the actual motivations, methods, objectives, and standing of a group such as Hezbollah leads to poor policy on problems that involve such groups. It leads to lack of awareness of how others perceive such groups and thus to what is or is not feasible as a U.S. policy objective.

These patterns are reflected in much of what is said in the United States about Hezbollah's most important ally, Iran. "Number one state sponsor of terrorism" is part of the litany of labels that routinely are affixed to Iran in American discourse. But consult the State Department's official justification for continuing to designate Iran as a state sponsor, and the gruel one sees is thinner than the discourse would suggest.

Most important, it is hard to see feasible changes from any Iranian regime that

really did not want to be a state sponsor of terrorism. Much of what is in the U.S. official statement reflects history, which cannot be changed. Much of it involves Iran's support, along with Russia, for the incumbent regime in Syria against a rebellion in which terrorist groups have played prominent roles. And much of it involves nonstate groups with which Iran does business, and especially its most important nonstate ally, Lebanese Hezbollah.

Whether we like it or not, Hezbollah is a well-established political actor in Lebanon, with its participation in Hariri's government being part of that position. Most other political actors in Lebanon, even the group's rivals, consider Hezbollah to be a legitimate and established actor that is here to stay, as do many other political actors elsewhere in the region. There is no way any Iranian regime would abandon its relationship with the group, which Iran sees as a major defender of Shia interests, let alone to try to justify to its Iranian constituents such a move as necessary to fight terrorism.

There cannot be, nor should there be, any forgiving or forgetting what Hezbollah did to Americans in the 1980s. The bombing of the Marine Corps barracks in Beirut in 1983 was, until 9/11, the deadliest terrorist attack ever against U.S. citizens. But not forgetting and not forgiving does not imply adopting the simplistic approach toward any group that is on our terrorist list. [Editor's Note: The designation of the Marine barracks bombing as "terrorism" is itself questionable because the Reagan administration had militarily intervened in Lebanon by having the USS New Jersey shell targets on land and because the Marines were not civilians. The classic definition of "terrorism" is a willful attack on civilians to achieve a political goal.]

The current arrangements in Lebanon are probably the least bad way to keep that country from succumbing to full-scale civil war of the sort that afflicted it in the past and that afflicts Syria today. Prime Minister Hariri put it this way: "My job and my task as prime minister of Lebanon is to shield Lebanon from any instability like in Syria or Iraq or any other country that surrounds us. . . . The political positions between us and Hezbollah are very well known. They don't agree on my policies, and I don't agree on their policies. But when it comes for the sake of the country, for the economy, how to handle those 1.5 million refugees, how to handle the stability, how to handle the governing our country, we have to have some kind of understanding, otherwise we would be like Syria. So, for the sake of the stability of Lebanon, we agree on certain things."

Not seeing Lebanon fall into renewed civil war is in U.S. interests, so the arrangement Hariri describes is probably in U.S. interests as well. Many who find Hezbollah reprehensible are not aware that the United States provides financial assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces, which in turn has operational

coordination with Hezbollah on some armed operations. Even some informed observers in quarters whose opposition to Hezbollah is unquestioned and usually don't want to have anything to do with any ally of Iran see benefit in continuing that assistance.

These complexities are beyond the comprehension of Donald Trump. But what is at stake is not just the avoidance of gauche presidential statements but also the designing of prudent policy toward troublesome groups in troublesome regions, without making the mistake of treating all such groups as the same.

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Russia-gate's Fataally Flawed Logic

Exclusive: By pushing the Russia-gate "scandal" and neutering President Trump's ability to conduct diplomacy, Democrats and Congress have encouraged his war-making side on North Korea, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

There was always a logical flaw in pushing Russia-gate as an excuse for Hillary Clinton's defeat – besides the fact that it was based on a dubious "assessment" by a small team of "hand-picked" U.S. intelligence analysts. The flaw was that it poked the thin-skinned Donald Trump over one of his few inclinations toward diplomacy.

We're now seeing the results play out in a very dangerous way in Trump's bluster about North Korea, which was included in an aggressive economic sanctions bill – along with Russia and Iran – that Congress passed nearly unanimously, without a single Democratic no vote.

Democrats and Official Washington's dominant neocons celebrated the bill as a vote of no-confidence in Trump's presidency but it only constrained him in possible peacemaking, not war-making.

The legislation, which Trump signed under protest, escalated tensions with those three countries while limiting Trump's power over lifting sanctions. After

signing the bill into law, Trump denounced the bill as “seriously flawed – particularly because it encroaches on the executive branch’s authority to negotiate.”

As his “signing statements” made clear, Trump felt belittled by the congressional action. His response has been to ratchet up bellicose rhetoric about North Korea, bluster appearing to be his natural default position when under pressure.

Remember, in April, as the Russia-gate hysteria mounted, Trump changed the subject, briefly, by rushing to judgment on an alleged chemical-weapons incident in Khan Sheikhoun, Syria, and firing off 59 Tomahawk missiles at a Syrian military base.

He immediately won acclaim from Official Washington, although Hillary Clinton and other hawks argued that he should have gone further with a much larger U.S. invasion of Syria, i.e., establishing a “no-fly zone” even if that risked nuclear war with Russia.

What Trump learned from that experience is that even when he is going off half-cocked, he is rewarded for taking the military option. (More careful analysis of the Khan Sheikhoun evidence later raised serious doubts that the Syrian military was responsible.)

Schoolyard Taunts

So, we now have President Trump in a bizarre exchange of schoolyard taunts with the leadership of North Korea, with Trump’s “fire and fury like the world has never seen” rhetoric possibly plunging the United States into a confrontation that could have devastating consequences for the Korean peninsula, Japan and indeed the whole world.

Given the fact that the world has already seen the U.S. nuclear destruction of two Japanese cities at the end of World War II, Trump’s loose phrasing seems to suggest that the United States is prepared to use nuclear weapons against North Korea (although he may be referring to “just” carpet-bombing with conventional ordnance).

If nuclear weapons are brought into play, it is hard to fathom what the long-term consequences might be. It’s unlikely that Trump – not known for his deep thinking – has even contemplated that future.

However, even a “limited” war with conventional weapons and confined to the Korean peninsula could kill hundreds of thousands of people and severely shake the world’s economy. If North Korea manages to deliver retaliatory damage on

Japan, a human catastrophe and a financial panic could follow.

Many thoughtful people are now expressing alarm at Trump's erratic behavior, but many of those same people cheered the promotion of Russia-gate as a way to corner Trump politically. They didn't seem to care that the "scandal" was built on a foundation of flimsy or phony evidence and that a key argument – that "all 17 U.S. intelligence agencies" concurred in the Russian-hacking conclusion – was false.

Once that fake "consensus" claim disappeared – after President Obama's intelligence chiefs acknowledged that the Jan. 6 "assessment" was the work of "hand-picked" analysts from only three agencies – there should have been a stepping back from the Russia-gate groupthink. There should have been demands for a reassessment of the underlying assumptions.

However, by then, too many Important People, including editors and executives at major news organizations, had accepted Russia's guilt as flat fact, meaning that their reputations were at risk. To protect their estimable careers, all doubts about Russia's guilt had to be crushed and the conventional wisdom enforced.

That self-serving defensiveness became the backdrop to the Russia-Iran-North Korean sanctions bill. Not only could no rethinking be allowed on Russia-gate but Trump's resistance to the groupthink had to be broken by neutering him along with his presidential powers to conduct diplomacy.

Still eager to please the Democratic #Resistance which sees Russia-gate as the pathway to Trump's impeachment, Democrats – from neocons like Sen. Ben Cardin to anti-interventionists such as Rep. Tulsi Gabbard – joined in the stampede for the sanctions bill.

In their rush, the Democrats even endangered Obama's signature diplomatic accomplishment, the international agreement blocking an Iranian nuclear weapon. Obama had promised Iran sanctions relief, not more sanctions. Now, the prospects for the accord's collapse are increased and the neocon dream to bomb-bomb-bomb Iran revived.

And, by tossing North Korea into the mix, the Democrats left Trump few options other than to unleash his warmongering side and plunge the world toward a potential cataclysm.

So, this is what the Russia-gate opportunism has wrought. The logical flaw in Russia-gate may turn out to be a fatal one.

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](#)).
