

# What DeVos Might Do to Public Schools

Donald Trump is stocking his administration with fellow rich people including “school voucher” advocate Betsy DeVos as Education Secretary, a choice that makes many public school defenders nervous, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

With only days to go before Donald Trump is sworn in as President and with his Cabinet choices now undergoing confirmation, a major area of concern is what impact billionaire Betsy DeVos will have as Education Secretary. She is an outspoken supporter of school vouchers and thus seen by many educators as a threat to public schools.

I spoke to Dr. Kevin Kumashiro about DeVos and her commitment to dismantling the public education system in favor of school vouchers and so-called “school choice.”

Dr. Kumashiro is the Dean of the University of San Francisco, School of Education, and author of *Bad Teacher: How Blaming Teachers Distorts the Bigger Picture*. He recently said about DeVos’s qualifications for the job: “De Vos has not taught or worked in public schools, or been a parent of public school children or earned experience or expertise as a leader, scholar or teacher in the public school system”.

Dennis Bernstein: So, that’s a bit stark, Dr. Kumashiro. Can you say something about what [Betsy DeVos’s] qualifications are and what her educational background is that would qualify, or justify, her appointment as a Secretary of Education?

Dr. Kevin Kumashiro: I think a lot of people are surprised by her choice by Trump as the next nominee for the Secretary of Education. And I think he’s turning to someone who has worked for many years in the education field, not in working within public schools, but as an advocate or even a board member of organizations that are pushing for certain kinds of school reforms, and school policy changes.

So, she, for example, has led a lot of efforts to charterize school districts, school systems in Michigan. She has pushed for changes in policies that would actually take away accountability and oversight for charter schools. She has pushed for voucher programs.

And I think what’s clear is that this charterizing and privatizing of public school has been a centerpiece of her agenda. And, we should, therefore, not be surprised that it would be the policy that she would bring, nation-wide, if she

were to become the next Secretary of Education.

And let me just throw in one other point, which is Trump, while he was campaigning, was actually calling to deregulate and privatize public schools. And a specific pledge he made was to divert \$20 billion, which is nearly 30% of the federal education budget, to expand school choice. So, in that sense, she is very much in alignment with the kind of changes that Trump has been calling for. And what we would, therefore, expect to see if she is confirmed as the next secretary.

DB: And ... when you say charterize, what do you mean?

KK: Well, what I mean by charterizing a school system is to open the doors for the formation of many charter schools that can replace the neighborhood public school. So, it's moving a school system from a neighborhood school model to a charter school model.

And charterizing is not just swinging the doors open by making this an option. Charterizing a school system also means putting in the supports and the systemic changes necessary to support those kinds of changes.

So, diverting of public funds, the streamlining of approval processes, and the removal of regulations and oversight over charter schools. All of these things are levers that can fuel the charterization, in other words, fuel the movement to... the proliferation of, charter schools in any school system. And this is exactly the kind of thing that DeVos has been championing, and, therefore, what we should expect what would be spreading, nationally.

And I think why this is of so much concern to many of us is because charter schools, as a lever for change, is not proven by the mountains of research that we have. There's no compelling body of research that says that moving a school system into a charter system is actually going to make things better.

There's lots of people who want to say, "There's great charter schools out there." And I agree, there are great charter schools out there. Just as there are bad ones. Just like we can say there are great neighborhood public schools. And there are ones that are struggling.

The question isn't, "Are there some charter schools that are great?" The question is, "If you charterize a system, is that going to make things better? If you fuel ... the deregulation, the privatization, the lack of oversight, the different kind of standards for the different kinds of school, does that, actually, fuel improvement?"

And the reality is that, even though there are some great performing charter

schools, overall we are not seeing school systems improve by gains in achievement, gains in attainment, anything like that. There is not a systemic improvement that we see with the movement towards charter schools and expanded school choice.

And this is why we should be concerned. If we're going to put a massive amount of resources and attention into a school reform initiative there should be the research that backs up that kind of a change. And with charter schools and school choice, there isn't that compelling body of research.

DB: And [Devos] is a billionaire heir ... a supporter of voucher schools. Where has she rolled up her sleeves, what can we say in terms of marking her own history of events, sort of a strong support, in a general sense, for these charter schools? And we often hear that the schools are failing, the people who are being let down the most are the poor people, are the people of color. What's her experience at this level?

KK: It's such a great question, I hope many more people ask, which is, what's the bigger picture of the advocacy and leadership [that] Betsy DeVos has demonstrated over the past years and decades?

So, let me point to just a few things. [...]

One, is what she's perhaps most known for, is being a top leader of the Michigan Republican Party. She is the former chair of the Michigan Republican Party. She is a top donor nationally to the Republican Party. But she's also the board chair of the National Philanthropy Roundtable... The group that brings together what we might argue is the wealthiest 1%, or 0.1%, in the nation.

The Philanthropy Roundtable formed four decades ago, really to advance the interests of the corporate elite, in response to the gains of the Civil Rights Movement. And so, in both of these instances – leadership in the Republican Party, leadership in the Philanthropy Roundtable – her work has focused on...privatization, on moving forward a corporate agenda in the public sphere, and that includes in education.

Some of the education groups that we can then look at... she's a board member of Jeb Bush's Foundation for Excellence in Education. She's a board member of... or she actually chaired the American Federation for Children. ... And, actually, if you go to her web site... She lists the different organizations that she is on.

When I've written about Betsy DeVos and some of our larger concerns, some of the things that I try to argue is that the Secretary of Education is the top leader nationally for public education. A system that should be serving all of America's children and youth.

We need a leader who will advocate for the success, the dignity, the human rights of every single child, particularly those from struggling groups. And so, we need to then look at the organizations that she is connected to, that she is leading, that she is funding, to see where do they stand on policies related to struggling communities?

For example, one of the organizations that she has funded, and served on the board for, the Acton Institute, has actually called for the loosening of child labor laws. She and her husband have funded and led successful efforts to ban same-sex marriage in Michigan, and elsewhere. She has called for the diverting of public tax dollars to expand Christian Fundamentalist education.

And then, of course, I mentioned the American Federation for Children, this is a group that works very closely with the American Legislative Exchange Council [ALEC] which not only funnels kind of dark money into campaigns but also creates model state legislation that advances corporate interests, and was formed specifically to roll back gains of the Civil Rights Movement.

In all of these instances that I just mentioned, these are very concrete examples of the types of initiatives that she has been deeply involved in, either through her funding or through her leadership, that really speaks against the kinds of leadership we need at a national level regarding issues of our diverse student populations, and issues of inequity, that plague our struggling communities. So this, to me, is the bigger picture of what we should be looking for, why we should be skeptical, and why we should be acting to raise these questions in the confirmation process.

DB: Now ... you mentioned that she's from Michigan. The Michigan Public School System is in disarray. I'm wondering... has she taken an interest in that system? What has she done to try and mitigate the suffering that has come out of ... really essentially a lack of funding, particularly in poor communities? Has she used her multi-billion dollar background to step in in any way, to improve things in her own state?

KK: You know, she has been very involved in her home state. She is credited with leading the charge to promote school choice and charter schools, and to deregulate charter schools, which means to lift a lot of policies and laws that are all about oversight, accountability, assessment and so on, of the charter schools and how they're performing.

So ... here is the test case, right?... It's sort of like Arne Duncan [Secretary of Education 2009 – 2015] and Chicago. We actually have a test case that we should have been paying more attention to in the confirmation process. We could have seen exactly what was happening, where it was failing, in the Chicago school

system before Arne Duncan took his policies nationally, the same with Betsy DeVos. We should look at what is happening in Michigan.

So, what is happening? As we see the spread of charter schools, the spread of school choice and the deregulation of charter schools, what we're actually seeing is Michigan schools are struggling more.

There's a lot of [examples]... if any of your listeners can Google what's happening with Michigan schools and the influence of Betsy DeVos to see that, again, in contrast to all the rhetoric around how school choice will close the achievement gap, will raise standards, will diversify our neighborhood schools, will increase parental involvement, because parents have to be involved in choosing which schools their kids go to.

In all of these ways, where is the evidence that it's actually leading to improvement? What we're actually seeing is that the achievement gap, as in many other urban areas, is continuing to widen. This is happening nationally, but particularly in places like Michigan.

And, what we're also seeing, is that against the backdrop of calling for increased ... privatization and competition, is the call to basically dis-invest publicly in public schools. In other words, for many states and for many school systems, the rationale that so-called reformers often use to actually put less funding in education, is to say, "No, actually we don't need more money, we just need to more effectively and efficiently use the money we already have." So let's get rid of monopolies, let's get rid of too much investment in the public sector, let's fuel privatization, let's fuel competition, because it's the competition that will make people try harder, and work better.

This is the whole basis for the school choice movement, this is the rhetoric that's being used. It's the rhetoric that's being used with charter schools. It's the rhetoric that's being used with alternative routes for teacher certification. It's all based on the idea that competition and privatization will actually fuel improvements and, therefore, we don't need to increase our investment.

And this is where the research bumps up against the rhetoric, because the research is actually really quite clear, that where we simply deregulate and privatize, and where we simply assume that competition is going to make things better, we see the exact opposite. We see that the struggling schools get even greater disinvestment, and, not surprisingly, see even greater struggle, see even [more] widening and even bigger widening of the gap.

This, I think, is DeVos' legacy in Michigan and I hope that this is what's

talked about when we consider her to be the next Secretary of Education.

DB: Dr. Kumashiro, I'm a former teacher. I spent several years teaching in the South Bronx, and at the worst time. I spent many an hour, many a late night hour, preparing my own textbooks, because there was nothing there to teach the kids.

People such as Betsy DeVos like to blame the teachers, and like to blame the public school system for hiring lazy teachers. We saw that in Chicago with the trying to blame the teachers who took a very noble stand in support of kids in terms of opposing the closure of key schools in the poorest areas of that community. She's a part of that – "blame the teacher." So, the schools are bad. I've seen some pretty terrible schools. I've seen some incredible disrespect of kids, of the parents. So, how do you come to that?

KK: I think recognizing that there are voices in this debate that like to scapegoat teachers is an important starting point. Because when we scapegoat, when we blame teachers for everything we think is going wrong with public education, we actually are individualizing the problem. And we're not looking at the bigger picture.

We're not looking at how education is a system that needs to work collectively. It's sort of like the idea of – it takes a village to raise a child. It absolutely takes a whole system or village working together. And one great teacher ... just is not going to be the magic bullet. Just like firing the bad ones is not going to solve all of our problems either.

Yes, there are teachers that probably shouldn't be teaching. And there are schools that probably need to be completely, you know, revamped. But tackling the individual school or teacher actually misses the much bigger problem.

What we actually need to be thinking about is, "What is the system that needs to be working together in a well oiled, kind of, machine, to be able to really effectively teach our children?"

Within the schools, for example, there's all sorts of things that have to be working together: the teachers, the aides, the health care workers, the counselors, the librarians. And then outside of the school we have: the curriculum producers, we have professions, we have community organizations, we have neighborhood organizations. And all of these things need to be working together in order for a child to learn, and to thrive and to grow.

So, to me, the question ... should not only be, "How do we determine whether or not this individual teacher or this individual school is performing well, and then what should be the punishment, or the reward?" That ... should definitely not

be the main question we should be asking.

What we should be asking is, "What does the research say it takes for the system, or the village, to come together to effectively teach each and every child? And how do we strengthen each element of that system, to be able to work collectively, together?" That, to me, is what a vision for public education needs to start with.

And I'm hopeful that as we gain more awareness of these so-called reforms that tackle only one small piece of the puzzle, I'm hoping that that forces us as a nation to look much more broadly at the bigger picture and to refuse to buy into simplistic stories of the problem.

DB: Education writer Jonathan Kozol wrote two books. His first book was *Death at an Early Age*, which documented the lack of resources and the way in which the public school systems have been left to ruin. And then he wrote a very important book called *Savage Inequality*, in which he really confronted a key problem of public schools, which is the nature of funding.

I remember... I was a substitute for a while in New York City. And you could substitute on the East Side of Manhattan, say at 86th Street, and you walk into a school that has guidance counselors, and a library full of books, and real physical ed teachers. You go up 25 blocks to East Harlem and there's no librarian and gym is the teacher gets a basketball and you throw it out to the gym. Guidance counselors? College bound kids? There was nothing there. So, there is a real problem in the nature of the way we have come to think about schools, and to fund them. Right?

KK: Oh, yeah.... And I so appreciate that you bring up Jonathan Kozol's great work that shows disparities in funding. Absolutely. We, as a nation, should be embarrassed that we've created a school system where those who have resources and privileges have the best education we have to offer, and the masses get a paltry education.

In so many ways, we've created a school system that sorts students, and that reinforces, kind of, their circumstances of birth, whether they come in with privileges or with great disadvantage.

And, this is, I think, why creating a school system that is all about a competition is such a problematic framework for thinking about public education. Because a competition requires that there be winners and losers. And we should be asking ourselves... Why are we creating a system where we're expecting some of our kids to lose and to fall through the cracks?

You know, one of my colleagues likes to remind me that when Thomas Jefferson was

talking about a public school system, his vision was that every child should be able to walk to their neighborhood public school, and get the very best that our nation has to offer.

And I think that's a much more exciting vision for public education than to say, "Let's throw these schools into a competition, and some are going to be great, and therefore some kids are going to get a really great education, but never mind, we're going to give up on the others." No, we need to insist that every school is at its finest.

And that, to me, is what a democratic public school system looks like. It's not one that is dependent on your circumstances of birth. It is not one that sorts kids. It is one that pushes against social inequities. It is one that insists that a strong nation, a strong democracy, is one where every child can benefit from the very best that our nation has to offer. And that, to me, is a vision worth struggling for.

DB: ... Maybe you can expand a little bit... What is at stake if we lose our public education system? What do we lose?

KK: I think this is the moment to ask that question... We know since ... 1979 – that's when the Department of Education was created as a stand alone federal department – and in the decades since, the Republican Party has (and others, not just the Republican Party) has been saying, "Why do we need a federal Department of Education? Why don't we just sort of let everything run on its own, let states control it, or even better yet, privatize the whole system?"

So, why I think it's worth struggling for public education to be a central core investment of the nation is because I really believe that education is where we struggle as a nation to define who we are, and who our next generation will become. It is where we grapple with our own identity, with the promises of our next generation, and with our aspirations for growth.

If we allow the school system to be, really, to be almost like a prize, where those who have the greatest resources can get the best, we're creating a school system that fuels the spread, the maintenance, the growth of inequities, rather than a school system that is all about liberation, freedom, justice, you know, a school system that builds the very core of the democratic values that we claim to hold so dear in this nation. That is what I think is at stake.

That is why this moment is so important. And, yes, one Secretary [of Education] can make a big difference positively or negatively. But I think it's important for us to remember that regardless of who is in a leadership role, there needs to be a movement around that leader, to push them in the right direction.



All the presidents who held office in our nation at a time of great social transformation like Lincoln, like Franklin Roosevelt, like Lyndon Johnson – even, sort of, Ronald Reagan – they were [in power] at times of huge social transformation. And all of those presidents I named, there were very different transformations happening in their time.

But what tied them all together is that ... they were not acting alone. They were at these very powerful social movements that were pushing them, working alongside them, working behind them. And that is what we need to be telling ourselves.

Whether we are supporting the next secretary or challenging and holding them accountable, there needs to be the public pushing for education as a public good. That to me what is at stake. That is the role that we all need to be involved in. I look forward to the challenge.

**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.**

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## Obama Belatedly Says No to Israel

**Exclusive:** If President Obama had confronted Israel over its illegal settlements earlier, he might have really achieved something, but his U.N. abstention as he heads out the door is better than nothing, observes Marjorie Cohn.

By Marjorie Cohn

For the first time in his eight-year presidency, Barack Obama said no to Israel. When the Security Council voted to condemn Israel for building illegal settlements in occupied Palestinian territories, the Obama administration abstained, allowing the resolution to pass.

Resolution 2334 says the settlements have “no legal validity,” calls them “a flagrant violation under international law,” and demands Israel “immediately and completely cease all settlement activities.”

Although 2334 is consistent with prior resolutions of the council, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu threw a tantrum, calling the US abstention a “declaration of war.” In light of Obama’s unwavering enabling of Israel’s illegal policies, Netanyahu was likely shocked that Obama finally said no.

The United States, a permanent member of the council, vetoed a resolution in 2011 that would have condemned the building of Israeli settlements in occupied Palestinian territories. And in 2014, the U.S. opposed a draft resolution demanding Israel's withdrawal from the West Bank within three years.

Since 1967, Israel has transferred more than a half million of its own citizens into Palestinian territories, continuing to build settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

In 2004, the International Court of Justice affirmed that the Palestinian territories are under Israeli occupation and Israel's settlement building violates the Fourth Geneva Convention.

A state occupying territory not its own cannot build settlements on that territory and transfer its own citizens into them. Article 8.2(b)(viii) of the Rome Statute for the International Criminal Court (ICC) defines "the transfer, directly or indirectly, by the Occupying Power of parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies" as a war crime.

Israel took over the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem by military force in 1967 and has held it under military occupation ever since.

Like Security Council Resolution 242, passed in 1967, Resolution 2334 reiterates "the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war." Although Resolution 242 called for "withdrawal of Israel armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict," Israel continues to occupy the Palestinian territories it acquired in the "Six-Day War."

"Over 4.5 million Palestinians live in these occupied territories, but are not citizens of Israel," Jimmy Carter wrote in the *New York Times*. "Most live largely under Israeli military rule, and do not vote in Israel's national elections."

### **Complete Control**

Israel exercises complete control over every aspect of Palestinian life in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza. That includes borders, airspace, ingress and egress of people and goods, and the seashore and waters off the coast of Gaza. The occupation violates fundamental human rights of the Palestinians.

Flavia Pansieri, former U.N. deputy high commissioner for human rights, said last year that human rights violations "fuel and shape the conflict" in the occupied Palestinian territories, adding, "[h]uman rights violations in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, are both cause and consequence of the military occupation and ongoing violence, in a bitter cyclical process with wider

implications for peace and security in the region.”

Building illegal settlements in occupied Palestinian territories is not the only war crime Israeli leaders have committed. In 2014, Israel invaded Gaza and killed more than 2,000 Palestinians, the majority of them civilians. Nearly 10,000 Palestinians were wounded, more than 2,000 of them children. Tens of thousands of Palestinians lost their homes and infrastructure was severely damaged. Numerous schools, U.N. places of refuge, hospitals, ambulances and mosques were intentionally targeted.

Israel used the “Dahiya doctrine” to apply “disproportionate force” and cause “great damage and destruction to civilian property and infrastructure, and suffering to civilians populations,” as defined in the 2009 U.N. Human Rights Council (Goldstone) report. Those acts constitute evidence of war crimes under Article 8 (2)(a) of the Rome Statute.

The ICC can investigate and prosecute these crimes. Yet, in order to prevent such investigation and prosecution, the United States consistently opposed Palestine becoming a party to the Rome Statute. Palestine, which was recognized as a non-member observer State by the U.N. General Assembly, acceded to the Rome Statute in January 2015 and asked the ICC to investigate Israel for building illegal settlements and committing war crimes in Gaza.

In January 2015, Fatou Bensouda, the ICC prosecutor, opened a preliminary investigation into the illegal settlements and Israel’s 2014 bombing of Gaza. Netanyahu is upset because the new Security Council resolution bolsters the case for ICC war crimes prosecution of Israeli leaders.

### **Violating U.S. Law**

The United States’ unwavering support for Israel violates U.S. law. Under the Leahy Law, military units that commit human rights abuses cannot receive U.S. training or weapons, and individuals who commit human rights abuses are denied U.S. visas. The State Department’s annual report has documented Israeli violations. And the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 prohibits assistance to any country “which engages in a consistent pattern of gross violations of internationally recognized human rights.”

Yet, throughout his presidency, Obama has unconditionally supported Israel and shielded it from accountability for the war crimes of building settlements and targeting civilians in Gaza.

In September, Obama promised Israel a record \$38 billion in military assistance over the next 10 years, becoming the strongest financial supporter of Israel ever to occupy the White House. Obama, whom Israeli journalist Gideon Levy

dubbed “the patron of the occupation,” increased the amount of money the U.S. provides Israel each year from \$3.1 to \$3.8 billion.

Netanyahu called the increase in U.S. aid “unprecedented” and “historic,” characterizing it as “the greatest accomplishment since sliced bread,” according to Aaron David Miller, vice president of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. “The bond between the United States and Israel is unbreakable,” Obama declared, as he and Netanyahu shook hands.

The annual \$3.8 billion, more money than the U.S. gives to any other country, will fund the continuing Israeli military occupation of Palestinian lands, now in its fifth decade. Obama, however, is to be commended for finally standing up to Israel, albeit at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour. We cannot expect President-elect Donald Trump to follow suit.

Trump intervened unsuccessfully to prevent Resolution 2334 from coming to the council floor. He stated he will move the U.S. embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, even though, as Resolution 2334 states, East Jerusalem is occupied Palestinian territory. David Friedman, Trump’s incoming ambassador to Israel, is notorious for funding the rightwing orthodox Beit El settlement near the West Bank city of Ramallah.

### **A Voice of Reason**

We can hope Trump will listen to Gen. James Mattis, his nominee for Secretary of Defense. “I paid a military security price every day as a commander of CENTCOM because the Americans were seen as biased in support of Israel,” Mattis said at the Aspen Security Forum in Colorado in 2013.

Mattis criticized Israel for building settlements in the occupied West Bank, saying they “are going to make it impossible to maintain the two-state option.” He added that the settlements might weaken Israel as a Jewish and Democratic state and could lead to Israel becoming an “apartheid” state.

“If I’m in Jerusalem and I put 500 Jewish settlers out here to the east and there’s 10,000 Arab settlers in here, if we draw the border to include them, either it ceases to be a Jewish state or you say the Arabs don’t get to vote – apartheid,” Mattis said.

Meanwhile, Resolution 2334 has propelled the illegality of Israel’s settlements into the public discourse. While Israel has pledged to defy the council and continue building illegal settlements, Jewish Voice for Peace and other human rights organizations have called for “increasing grassroots pressure on Israel, through Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions [BDS] campaigns, until full human rights of Palestinians are realized.”

Indeed, the text of Resolution 2334 implicitly invites countries to engage in BDS by saying they should “distinguish . . . between the territory of the State of Israel and the territories occupied since 1967.”

**Marjorie Cohn is professor emerita at Thomas Jefferson School of Law, former president of the National Lawyers Guild, deputy secretary general of the International Association of Democratic Lawyers, and a member of Jewish Voice for Peace. Her most recent book is ‘Drones and Targeted Killing: Legal, Moral, and Geopolitical Issues.’ Visit her website at <http://marjoriecohn.com/> and follow her on Twitter @MarjorieCohn.**

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## Wall Street’s Win-Win with Trump

**Exclusive:** Most Wall Street bigwigs sided with Hillary Clinton in 2016 but now have adroitly shifted affections to Donald Trump whose populist rhetoric is giving way to another super-rich bonfire of the vanities, explains Mike Lofgren.

By Mike Lofgren

During the 2016 campaign, pundits claimed that Donald Trump’s proposed economic policies would bring the end of the world as we know it. Moody’s Analytics predicted his plans, particularly those involving trade and the budget deficit, could trigger a severe recession. Others asserted that Trump’s election would cause a severe stock market selloff.

The Wall Street Journal wrote that none of the Fortune 100 CEOs endorsed him for president. For a Republican candidate, this was both unprecedented and seemed an unmistakable signal of a lack of confidence by the business community.

That was then and this is now. The stock market has risen after the election, flirting with 20,000. And while the many presentiments of doom have not been disproven by events – after all, Trump has not yet even been inaugurated – the commanding heights of capital are no longer sitting on their hands.

As a glance at the membership of the President-elect’s Strategic and Policy Forum shows, they are flocking to his side, with representatives of financial buccaneering like Steven Schwarzman of the Blackstone Group and Jamie Dimon of JPMorgan Chase, old smokestack firms like GM’s Mary Barra, and towering retail giant Walmart’s Doug McMillon. There is even an ex-governor of the Federal Reserve Board, Bush appointee Kevin Warsh. It appears that Corporate America has abruptly swung to Trump’s side.

Why the change? First, beyond whatever innate skill at making money that they may possess, the typical American corporate executive smells power in the way a pig locks on to a Périgord truffle. It was only a couple of months ago that virtually none of the corporate moguls supported Trump, while they fell all over themselves to back Hillary Clinton. Now, I doubt many of them would take her phone call. Sucking up is so ingrained in American corporate culture that we should hardly be surprised at the about-face.

Second, regardless of their pious rhetoric about fiscal responsibility, business leaders dearly love the deficits created by rate cuts on income, capital gains, and dividends. The tax cuts put money directly into their coffers, and the resulting deficit provides the fiscal stimulus driving consumer spending and corporate profits. Occasionally, a few of them, like Pete Peterson (ironically a co-founder of Schwarzman's Blackstone Group), will launch a rhetorical jihad against the federal deficit, but this effort is mainly a rationale to cut the federal pensions and benefits that they assume the Ninety-Nine Percent are lazily wallowing in rather than working.

That is not the end of Trump's fiscal stimulus. In addition to his \$6.2 trillion in planned tax cuts, he is promising a large infrastructure program as well as hefty increases in Pentagon spending (the one Keynesian measure Republicans have traditionally adored).

### **Good Times for the Rich**

Let the good times roll? *Financial Times* correspondent Edward Luce points out a couple of downsides. First, Trump, the real estate mogul (which means he is instinctively for the lowest interest rates possible) is setting himself up for an extended battle with the Federal Reserve Board just as its chair, Janet Yellen, is beginning to tap the brake on the Fed's previously very loose monetary policy. Second, according to Luce, a potential combination of Trump's stimulative fiscal policy and Yellen's mild tightening will likely be an appreciation of the dollar.



That, in turn, will cause the trade deficit to rise while depressing domestic manufacturing – the diametric opposite of what Trump's populist economic

platform promised, a platform which won him the electoral vote in the Rust Belt, and thus the presidency. Such an outcome would ratchet up the pressure on Trump (who has already said he wanted to do it) for an all-out trade war with China, Mexico and other large exporters. Luce concludes that the markets will react badly.

That analysis is likely correct, but it does not address the more fundamental problem with Trump's economic plans. His trade policy may be unique in distinguishing him from standard Republican Party dogmatists, but huge tax cuts and heavy military expenditures were precisely George W. Bush's fiscal policy, and, as we all remember, that did not end well.

A third policy feature the Bush and Trump administrations have in common is a loathing of financial regulation. Under Chris Cox, George W. Bush's Securities and Exchange Commission chairman, the agency exerted virtually no effort to preempt the marketing of the worthless financial instruments that caused the 2008 asset meltdown. Likewise, Goldman Sachs alumnus Hank Paulson, Bush's Treasury secretary, was asleep at the wheel right up to the crash.

The fact that America's premier corporate raider, Carl Icahn, will advise Trump on financial regulation (and may be appointed SEC chairman), and that his pick for Treasury Secretary, Steve Mnuchin, was a Goldman executive for 16 years, does not inspire confidence that their management of the economy will be any different from that of their predecessors before the 2008 crash.

Mnuchin is only one of several Goldman alumni destined for top positions in the Trump administration. Goldman president Gary Cohn has been tapped to head the National Economic Council. Hedge fund manager and former Goldman executive Anthony Scaramucci is a vocal Trump media surrogate and is widely expected to receive a government position. (Responding to a question by CNN about the alleged demonization of bankers, Scaramucci responded, "I think the cabal against the bankers is over," neatly inverting the fact that the derogatory term "cabal" has normally been associated with bankers, rather than their critics).

The pseudo-populist Stephen Bannon, Trump's chief of strategy, is also a Goldman spawn. It is hardly surprising that Goldman Sachs's stock has risen 30 percent since November. Does anyone seriously think "this time will be different" compared to the Bush debacle?

### **A Deluge of Tax Cuts**

It may *only* be different in terms of how big a disaster Trump's policies will unleash. His tax cuts are potentially three times the magnitude the 10-year cost of Bush's cuts. Because they are heavily targeted at those who are already rich

– 47 percent of the dollar amount will go to the top one percent – it will exacerbate income inequality, which is already at its highest level since the 1920s.

The crumbs for low-income earners will be nullified or worse by regressive labor policies like an assault on the minimum wage and undermining of pensions. (The DeVos family, long-time Republican mega-donors, have declared that public employees in Michigan should have their public pensions revoked; Betsy DeVos, Trump's pick for education secretary, will be pressuring public school systems to "reform" their pension plans).

Subsistence income for the poor and near-poor could be further eroded by a reduction in Medicaid benefits (reportedly already in the works courtesy of Paul Ryan and the Republican Congress). These actions will exacerbate the ongoing trend toward jobs without benefits.

Despite their windfall from Trump's tax policies, the rich will only be able to consume so many filet mignons, Sub-Zero refrigerators, and Patek-Philippe watches before reaching satiation. The rest of their tax cut will go into kiting the equities market to stratospheric levels or building palatial monuments to their own greatness in Glen Cove, Palm Beach and Palo Alto.

Given that the tax cuts and spending increases will be of a much greater magnitude than Bush's own prodigious fiscal mismanagement, the resulting asset and real estate bubble will be a thing to behold.

Aggravating the odds of a financial meltdown will be the unrelenting hostility of Trump's economic team, as well as that of the Republican Congress, towards financial regulation in general and the Dodd-Frank law in particular. While Dodd-Frank is only a halting half step in the right direction, some of its provisions, such as those that required banks to hold greater reserves, are useful in preventing the overleveraging of asset bubbles and, when the assets fall, a bank liquidity crisis. If Trump's policies are enacted this country will have a gargantuan fiscal deficit-driven asset bubble in the making, *and* will have removed the regulatory tools to ameliorate it.

Some flavor of the happy anticipation with which the wealthy are greeting the incoming Trump dispensation may be gathered from this passage in a Bloomberg News piece: "The New York real estate mogul is building a cabinet heavy on wealth and corporate connections, and light on government experience, a mix that hedge fund billionaire Ray Dalio said last week would unleash the 'animal spirits' of capitalism and drive markets even higher."

Translated from the Bloombergese, it suggests the plutocrats are licking their



chops in the expectation of a looting spree that will make the plutocracy of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos look like strict Swiss governmental administration.

### **Eyes Wide Shut**

Why is this foreseeable economic crisis so seldom discussed in the mainstream media compared to the potential of a trade war? There are two parts to the answer: one involving popular sentiment and the other the elite interests of corporate America.

Trump was elected on a platform asserting that America's economic problems were almost exclusively caused by foreign countries such as China or Mexico. As such, it was an analogue to Bush's 2004 campaign whipping up hysteria about sinister foreign terrorists abroad. The media naturally gave the theme extensive coverage as a central tenet of Trump's platform. But it also served to divert the easily distracted attention of his followers away from the 2008 crash, its role in their misery, and who might have been responsible.

It brings to mind the words of Winston Churchill: "The multitudes remained plunged in ignorance of the simplest economic facts, and their leaders, seeking their votes, did not dare to undeceive them."

At the commanding heights of the economy on the other hand, the ideology and the wallets of corporate America (and the professional economists whose chairs they endow) are perfectly aligned *against* protectionism. That was why we heard their objections during the campaign.

But with regard to tax cut-fueled asset accumulation and anti-regulation dogma, their wallets are perfectly aligned *in favor of* Trump's policies, while their traditionally tepid anti-deficit rhetoric masks their true feelings about fiscal irresponsibility – provided that this irresponsibility enriches them personally.

So, was the entire Trump candidacy a clever plan by the upper reaches of American capital to let the good times roll (for them) by concocting a populist vulgarian whose jeremiads against menacing foreign competitors would be a sure way of engaging the xenophobia and gullibility of the Republican base as a deflection from Wall Street's agenda of asset-stripping, privatization, and pension-grabbing?

Probably not. The process of history, like that of evolutionary biology, is largely a self-organizing and self-reinforcing accretion of otherwise random phenomena along pathways of least resistance, rather than minute planning by a Grand Designer. But it really does not matter: Wall Street's pragmatic opportunism on seeing the inevitability of a Trump nomination would cause them to act in much the same fashion regardless.

The big banks in effect had a hedged bet during the campaign: Hillary Clinton, a friend of Wall Street, was successfully denounced as such by an opponent who was an even bigger friend of the Street. It was a no-lose proposition.

The only question remaining is this: in the aftermath of a future blowout that could make the 2008 saturnalia look tame, will Trump's voters correctly identify the source of their economic pain, or will they be effortlessly distracted by some supposedly existential terrorist menace, predatory trading partner, or newly confected domestic Culture Wars bugaboo? Trump's close adviser, Steven Bannon, a veteran both of Wall Street and the right-wing paranoia factory, will doubtless be hard at work on that one.

**Mike Lofgren is a former career congressional staff member who served on the House and Senate budget committees. His latest book is *The Deep State: The Fall of the Constitution and the Rise of a Shadow Government*.**

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## The Democrats' Russia-Did-It Dodge

To avoid facing up to why Hillary Clinton's pro-corporatist candidacy really lost key Rust Belt states, national Democrats are finding it easier to blame Russia, a dangerous and self-defeating game, says Norman Solomon at The Hill.

By Norman Solomon

Two months after the defeat of Hillary Clinton, the most cohesive message from congressional Democrats is: blame Russia. The party leaders have doubled down on an approach that got nowhere during the presidential campaign – trying to tie the Kremlin around Donald Trump's neck.

Still more interested in playing to the press gallery than speaking directly to the economic distress of voters in the Rust Belt and elsewhere who handed the presidency to Trump, top Democrats would much rather scapegoat Vladimir Putin than scrutinize how they've lost touch with working-class voters.

Meanwhile, the emerging incendiary rhetoric against Russia is extremely dangerous. It could lead to a military confrontation between two countries that have thousands of nuclear weapons each.

At the Senate Armed Services Committee hearing last Thursday on foreign cyber threats, ranking member Jack Reed, D-Rhode Island, denounced "Russia's rejection of the post-Cold War international order and aggressive actions against its

neighbors,” and he condemned “a regime with values and interests so antithetical to our own.” It was the kind of oratory that would have made John Foster Dulles or Barry Goldwater proud.

Like so many other senators on the committee, Reed seemed eager for a new Cold War while accusing Russia of digital aggression. “In addition to stealing information from the Democratic National Committee and the Clinton campaign,” he said, “and cherry-picking what information it leaked to the media, the Russian government also created and spread fake news and conspiracies across the vast social media landscape.’’

### **The Russia-Did-It Conspiracy Theory**

The Russian government may have hacked the DNC and Clinton campaign emails, and it may have given those emails to WikiLeaks. But that’s hardly a slam dunk.

Over the weekend, after Friday’s release of a much-ballyhooed report from the office of Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, the report underwent a cogent critique by former Associated Press and Newsweek reporter Robert Parry. Stripping the 25-page DNI report down to its essence, Parry pointed out that it “contained no direct evidence that Russia delivered hacked emails from the Democratic National Committee and Hillary Clinton’s campaign chairman John Podesta to WikiLeaks.”

Parry added: “The DNI report amounted to a compendium of reasons to suspect that Russia was the source of the information – built largely on the argument that Russia had a motive for doing so because of its disdain for Democratic nominee Clinton and the potential for friendlier relations with Republican nominee Trump. But the case, as presented, is one-sided and lacks any actual proof.”

While stenographic accounts of official claims have dominated coverage of the Jan. 6 report, major flaws are coming to light in mainstream media. For instance, a piece that appeared on Saturday in the New York Times, by Scott Shane, reported in its ninth paragraph: “What is missing from the public report is what many Americans most eagerly anticipated: hard evidence to back up the agencies’ claims that the Russian government engineered the election attack.”

The article reported: “Under the circumstances, many in Washington expected the agencies to make a strong public case to erase any uncertainty. Instead, the message from the agencies essentially amounts to ‘trust us.’ There is no discussion of the forensics used to recognize the handiwork of known hacking groups, no mention of intercepted communications between the Kremlin and the hackers, no hint of spies reporting from inside Moscow’s propaganda machinery.”

### **No Doubts**

But Democratic lawmakers aren't interested in doubts or caveats. They believe the Russian hacking issue is a political winner. Whether or not that's true, it's certainly a convenient way to evade the sobering lessons that should have been learned from the last election about the Democratic Party's lack of authenticity in its claims to be fighting for the interests of working people.

At the same time, enthusiasm for banging the drum against Putin is fast becoming a big part of the Democratic Party's public identity in 2017. And – insidiously – that's apt to give the party a long-term political stake in further demonizing the Russian government.

The reality is grim, and potentially catastrophic beyond comprehension. By pushing to further polarize with the Kremlin, congressional Democrats are increasing the chances of a military confrontation with Russia. By teaming up with the likes of Republican senators [John McCain](#) and [Lindsey Graham](#) to exert bipartisan pressure for escalation, Democrats could help stampede the Trump administration in reckless directions.

This approach is already underway. It is worse than irresponsible. It is madness that could lead to a nuclear holocaust.

**Norman Solomon is co-founder of the online activist group [RootsAction.org](#), which has 750,000 members. He is executive director of the Institute for Public Accuracy. [This article originally appeared as a column at The Hill, at <http://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/foreign-policy/313295-democrats-are-playing-with-fire-on-russia> ]**

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## Europe's Mixed Feelings About Trump

**Exclusive:** European governments are nervous about a Trump presidency, but – for economic and other reasons – many on the Continent would welcome a friendlier approach toward Russia, reports Andrew Spannaus.

By Andrew Spannaus

Few in Europe expected Donald Trump to win the U.S. Presidential elections last November. The picture painted by the media and political class was convincing: despite the pent-up anger being expressed through protest candidates, Hillary Clinton was headed towards a decisive victory, as the majority of Americans couldn't stomach someone as outrageous and unconventional as the reality TV star turned politician.

That's not what happened, of course, as Trump earned an Electoral College victory by winning enough votes in key Midwestern states that have suffered from a loss of manufacturing jobs in recent decades. His victory has shaken the Western world to its core, making it clear that business as usual is no longer possible in terms of both economic and foreign policy.

In Europe the signs of the anti-establishment sentiment that dominated the U.S. election campaign have been present for some time. The most obvious example was the Brexit vote in June 2016, in which the population of the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union. But protest movements have actually been on the rise for several years now, driven by the same basic issues as in the United States: a sense of economic and social insecurity – accompanied by a rise in anti-immigrant sentiment – driven by an economic policy that has made life harder for the middle class while enriching those at the top.

The growing anger against the institutions of the European Union, considered the main culprit for the failed economic policies, has made the élites desperate for some sense of stability, to help them weather the storm. As a result, a potential Clinton victory was openly welcomed by most political leaders.

After Trump's victory, there were numerous press reports of worries among European governments regarding the incoming Administration's foreign policy. Trump is understandably seen as unpredictable, but the key point revolves around his attitude towards Russia, the same issue that is currently dominating the institutional fight in the United States right now.

Just after the election The New York Times ran a story entitled "For Europe, Trump's Election is a Terrifying Disaster," suggesting that under the new President, the United States may embrace authoritarianism and no longer defend democracy. It was a theme that other mainstream news outlets also pushed.

On Nov. 17, The Associated Press wrote: "NATO members and other European countries are worried that under Trump, the U.S. will stop trying to police Russia's behavior the way it has under Obama. Most concerning to U.S. allies are Trump's effusive comments about Russian President Vladimir Putin, one of the first world leaders he spoke to after winning the election."

### **Seeing Benefits**

While it is true that former Soviet bloc countries such as Poland and Latvia would prefer to maintain the current hardline position towards Russia, the reality is that the largest E.U. members – France, Italy and Germany – actually stand to benefit from the diplomatic approach promised by President-elect Trump.

This doesn't mean they supported his candidacy, though. First of all, they were

told that he couldn't win; and second, a Trump victory would seem to encourage the anti-establishment movements already on the rise in Europe, which threaten both the E.U.'s status quo and the jobs of key leaders, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Hillary Clinton was seen as representing continuity, and for the many politicians who seek to curry favor with the transatlantic elites, it was best to show their Clinton bona fides in view of the upcoming change in power. For example, Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi – now out of office due to a stinging anti-establishment vote in a referendum on proposed constitutional reforms – repeatedly broke diplomatic protocol and publicly criticized Trump during the election campaign.

However, over the course of 2016 it became clear that Clinton's foreign policy was far more aggressive than Barack Obama's, as the President had actually been seeking collaboration with Russia for several years on issues, such as constraining Iran's nuclear program and negotiating an end to the Syrian conflict, despite heavy opposition from within his own administration.

Indeed Trump's openness towards Vladimir Putin seems even more heretical now because most have chosen to forget that Obama himself had sought close cooperation with Putin on several key issues. For instance, Secretary of State John Kerry's diplomacy last year on Syria almost succeeded in implementing intelligence sharing and joint airstrikes by the two powers, before being effectively thwarted by the Pentagon and other U.S. institutional opposition in September 2016.

Now Obama seems to have forgotten his former position, and decided to fully toe the anti-Russian line, apparently convinced that he must do his part in the campaign to weaken Trump and prevent him from being an effective president, even in areas where their positions are not far apart.

It is possible that Trump will accelerate the timid attempts of his predecessor to abandon the "regime change" policies that have led to numerous disasters in the Middle East, and heightened tensions with Russia. The President-elect seems determined to pursue this path more openly than Obama, who worked slowly towards this goal while seeking to placate his critics with more bellicose language in his public statements.

### **Doubts About the U.S. Hardline**

Although European nations have been heavily involved in recent regime change adventures (the U.K. in Iraq and France in Libya, for example), there is a widespread preference in Western Europe for avoiding further conflict with

Russia. The U.S. position on the events in Ukraine, for example, is often seen as one-sided, and the notion of NATO expansion to Russia's borders seems like an unnecessary and dangerous provocation that can only makes things worse.

Western sanctions against Russia, and Russia's retaliatory sanctions on food imports, have cost European economies over \$100 billion in trade, according to some estimates, hitting the agricultural sector especially hard. In addition, Russia has been concluding more economic agreements with countries such as China, leading to fears of permanent consequences for Europe.

For this reason, France, Italy and Germany have all repeatedly stated their desire to reduce or remove the sanctions altogether. The hope is that an agreement can be reached to defuse tensions in Ukraine, based on support for the Kiev government but broad autonomy for the ethnic Russian areas in eastern Ukraine.

Despite this desire to head off further conflict, European governments are usually careful not to openly break with U.S. policy; they are key members of NATO and have no desire to distance themselves from the leader of the alliance. However, if Donald Trump follows through on his stated goal of working "together with Russia," the countries of Western Europe in particular may welcome the opportunity to advance their own economic interests and avoid finding themselves in the middle of a new Cold War.

**Andrew Spannaus is a freelance journalist and strategic analyst based in Milan, Italy. He is the founder of Transatlantico.info, that provides news, analysis and consulting to Italian institutions and businesses. His book on the U.S. elections *Perchè vince Trump (Why Trump is Winning)* was published in June 2016.**

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## The Left's Challenge in Age of Trump

The impending Trump presidency challenges the American Left to consider how to contest a right-wing agenda and how to create electoral options beyond Democratic Party orthodoxy, as Dennis J Bernstein and Norman Solomon discuss.

By Dennis J Bernstein

Left activists plan to take on President Donald Trump from Day One, with tens of thousands of protesters promising to show up in Washington to protest his inauguration on Jan. 20 and a major women's march scheduled the next day.

But the challenge for the Left goes deeper than protesting Trump and some of his policies. The difficulty also involves how to build a progressive agenda that is not compromised by corporate Democrats at election time. I discussed these questions with Norman Solomon, media activist, author, former delegate for Bernie Sanders Delegate and Rootsaction co-founder.

Dennis Bernstein: Norman Solomon, welcome back. [...] Say a little bit about your background. I want people to know where you're coming from and, if I've got it right, you sort of came in the activists door.

NS: I did, although, that was not my first ambition. That was to be a major league baseball player and a lawyer, but I was born in the early 50's and the first time I thought about going on a picket line was in 1966.

I lived in Maryland, and there were still segregated apartment buildings, in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. And so, I learned about a picket line, went there, and it's maybe not a natural feeling, to be protesting when you've grown up in white bread, middle-America, but I got acclimated.

DB: And, how I met you as an activists in New York State working for the Fellowship of Reconciliation. You were also beginning to write columns. You also wrote books, and got deeply engaged in the anti-nuclear movement, where I believe you were arrested multiple times, in this country, and other countries.

NS: Blockading nuclear weapons trains, as well as other non-violent actions, to try to shut down nuclear power plants, as well.

DB: And, how did you become a media columnist?

NS: Well, journalism became a lot of my interest and then professional ambition as I was getting out of high school, and so writing and reporting came to seem natural, and so did protesting the horrific Vietnam War, in the late 60's and early 70's. In our culture, I think then as now, in the United States there's this tacit, if not prohibition, at least, looking askance at, the concept of activism and journalism being unified.

I remember when Chinese reporters, before Tiananmen Square, in the 80's were protesting against suppression of the press in China, the U.S. journalists would cheer that on, but wouldn't dream of protesting themselves, to affirm the rights of freedom of the press or human rights. And I think that's a juxtaposition that for me has not made sense.

As with so many other people, including you, Dennis Bernstein, I think the reality is that, if you're a journalist, you are fighting to learn and ventilate and expose truth, [then] that goes hand-in-hand with fighting for human rights,



fighting for a society where life is treasured instead of destroyed.

DB: Norman, I want to, sort of, bring you head on with the political struggle now... and before we get into strategy, let me ask you to assess where you think we are now, or what you see as the front-line dangers, given the current situation. We've seen a lot now about where this is going.

NS: Really, on the front-line and the main-line dangers, we're facing the most right-wing administrations out of the federal government, in any of our life times, no matter how old we are. And the consolidation of power, not just that it's a Republican White House coming in and Congress, as well, but how extreme it is.

And this merger of bogus, ultra right-wing populism, with corporatism, with, for the most part, great militarism and support for the military-industrial complex, and political repression, and contempt for basic civil liberties, as well as human rights....That's a toxic mix that requires, I think, whatever we're going to call ourselves, [to be] "in opposition."

And there are a lot of different, favorite terms: liberal, progressive, left-wing, libertarian. The names matter less than taking a firm position, not just in what we say over the dining room table, but what we do, which is most important. And that is activism, organizing, building institutions, strengthening the ones that exist, like the radio station people are listening to, as well as building institutions that are too weak to fight back against this right-wing, corporate, militarist onslaught, which is embodied now in what's coming up as the Trump administration. So we're in very, very deep peril.

Ecologically, we've got a climate denier moving into the White House. We've got, in terms of civil liberties, and human rights and civil rights, a racist moving into the White House, with a racist base that he has cultivated, and he continues to excite an extreme militarism.

So, we have enormous work to do. And I think we need a broad, deep and wide, united popular front, without caving in to the lowest common denominator, which is what is going to come from the top of the Democratic Party, unfortunately.

DB: Alright, I want to tap your media skills now, which are many and strong. You open up your most recent piece... I think it's up at a bunch of places. I grabbed this off of Consortium News. I think it's up at Common Dreams, as well. It's called [The Left's Risk in Blaming Russia](#).

And you open up the piece with this comment from Donna Brazile at the DNC. And she is essentially raging about how the Russians threw the elections, in a sense that's why Hillary Clinton didn't win. And you quote her saying, "By now

Americans know beyond any reasonable doubt that the Russian government orchestrated a series of cyber attacks on political campaigns and organizations, over the past two years and used stolen information to influence the presidential campaign and congressional races.” She goes on to say, “The integrity of our elections is too important for Congress to refuse to take these attacks seriously.” What’s wrong with that statement?

NS: Well, what’s wrong with it is, it implies, or directly states, that the problem with our last election was Russian interference. And, as has been documented at the Intercept and elsewhere, it’s far from clear to whatever extent the interference took place from Russia. But even if we assume that the CIA has a great, credible record of honesty and integrity as a source of information to the public, and that it is “a slam dunk” so to speak— a phrase used to tell us there were WMDs [weapons of mass destruction] in Iraq more than a dozen years ago from the CIA—still, if we give all that [the] benefit of doubt, let’s be real about this, I’m very concerned, so many progressives in their understandable concern, deep concern, horror...

DB: ...fears...

NS: ... that Trump is going to be president, they’re somehow conflating what has occurred with a Russian menace.

And, if we want to move into a new Cold War that could escalate into a military confrontation in Europe, with Russia, and hair trigger the aiming of nuclear weapons in both directions... if we want to excite and push forward a modern version of a McCarthy era, then let’s go ahead and demonize Putin.

Let’s forget that it was the United States that expanded NATO despite the promises coming from the first President Bush, and President Bill Clinton. If we want to just obviate and obscure history, and demonize Putin and the Kremlin, in this time, in late 2016, and going into 2017, then we’re going to have a very dangerous political climate, made worse by progressives.

And we’re getting [an] enormous tendency because people are, understandably, so upset about Trump, that they are combining in their own minds, Putin and Trump. And the fact is that, in my opinion, I think this is a fair thing to say, as horrific as Trump’s positions are – even a broken clock is right twice every 24 hours. And in addition to his stance against the TPP, one of the reasons that so much of the democratic and even some of the Republican Party establishments are so concerned and upset, and angry, and denouncing Trump, is that he has departed from the hostility to Russia.

DB: And one of the victims in this move to blame the Russians, also includes the

independent press.

NS: Oh, absolutely.

DB: This has become a witch hunt, you know, in terms of the blame-game here.

NS: At the [rootsaction.org](http://rootsaction.org) site we've had a petition which challenges the Washington Post's McCarthyite front page story, a couple of weeks back [which], without any sort of real journalism, endorses a 200 web site named list from a shadowy group, whose identity we don't even know, saying that they are flunkies and "useful idiots for the Kremlin." Now, what does this sound like? If you know the history of the McCarthy era, you know this is how it functioned and was a way to suppress dissent.

And yet, we have here one of the purportedly liberal papers, which actually has somewhat of a neo-con foreign policy position on the front page and the editorial page, stoking this kind of McCarthyism. And I think what a lot of groups have not recognized, including for instance MoveOn, is they have stoked this.

DB: They've jumped right on...

NS: ...Right on, "blame Putin." [...] They think they're kind of picking low hanging political fruit. It's a way to bash Trump, and get more strength for the Democrats against them, and delegitimize his election, and so forth. But when you ride that tiger of McCarthyism and militarism, and souping up a new cold war, that is a tiger that not only is going to come back and bite you, but actually quite likely is going to devour you.

If you believe in diplomacy instead of warfare, if you believe in civil liberties instead of suppression, and witch hunting against dissenters, it's time to really, I think...and part of this was propelled by these illusory hopes about the electoral college on the 19th of December...but now it's time to recognize that progressives, rather than joining in the chorus to demonize the Kremlin and Putin, and so forth, we should be organizing against that. And at [rootsaction.org](http://rootsaction.org) we are organizing against it. Some groups definitely are.

What's at stake? What's at stake is whether we're going to have continuous momentum towards military confrontation with a power that has thousands of nuclear weapons pointed at the U.S. and vice versa. What's at stake is the entire political climate in the U.S. vis-a-vis foreign policy, militarism, war and dissent.

What I started to sort of allude to is that Trump has sounded a note of "Let's find common ground with Russia." And when it comes to ending the horrible

slaughter in Syria, for instance, other diplomatic solutions, and avoiding confrontation that could turn military and [be] horrific in Europe, for instance, this is an opportunity to say, "Let's have detente."

And by hitching itself to the star of congressional leadership of the Democratic Party, all too many progressives have assumed that, "Oh, we're going to make Trump look bad, so therefore, we'll cheer lead on when Nancy Pelosi and others say 'Oh, it's the Russians who are causing it all.'" And that's a very dangerous bargain to make.

Another way to put it, Dennis, is that yes, we need a broad, deep, united popular front against Trump, at the same time we need to not have our dependency on the line of the top of the Democratic Party because they're militarists. I mean that's why Harry Reid and Nancy Pelosi and the top of the Democratic Party leaders are so, in part, upset with Trump foreign policy, because they had, as Hillary Clinton did, their hearts set on a confrontation with Russia.

Hillary Clinton, very much more than Obama, was into that mode. She was a de facto neocon in that kind of foreign policy. And a lot of people, like myself, and I was a Bernie Sanders delegate to the National Convention this year, a lot of people who were Bernie supporters haven't realized that by jumping on the band wagon, that is being led by these main line, establishment Democratic Party leaders, we are strengthening the Clinton wing of the party.

Because they would like nothing more than to change the subject about what happened in the last election and just say "It's Russia's fault." It wasn't the Wall Street alliance between Hillary Clinton in the election, and for years before. It wasn't the speeches she gave for hundreds of thousands of dollars. It wasn't the fact that she lacked credibility when she pretended to be some sort of populist. It wasn't the way in which the Democratic National Committee unfairly put its thumb on the scales even while claiming to be neutral, in the primary battle between Bernie and Hillary Clinton. All those other factors, the structural...

DB: The way she supported the coup in Honduras, it wasn't her Libya policy. It had nothing to do with the dangers of a no fly zone [in Syria]...

NS: Absolutely. Her record of talking about super-predators in the 1990s, the institutional racism, the mass incarceration, the record of the Clinton wing of the party – oh, no it's none of that. It's not the structural racism and classism that kept so many people out of the polls and [not] having their votes registered on election day this year.

No, it wasn't that and it wasn't the inability of the Democratic Party, under

Clinton, as the nominee, to speak meaningfully to poor people around the country because she was so obviously a phony entwined with Wall Street, [and was] the author, with her husband, of welfare so-called reform, that was a savage attack on poor women and families of all races. It wasn't that. It was Vladimir Putin.

Well, what does that do? That kind of lying, absolutely gives more power, going forward, to the very corporate forces at the top of the Democratic Party that the Bernie campaign has been fighting.

DB: I want to ask you more about strategy, but I want to ask you another question about the media. Now, the way I see the corporate media, they wanted these two candidates. And they collaborated with the two parties to get these two candidates. And, they knew, if they could give, if you will, Trump to Hillary, they were going to have a bonanza. And they all have admitted now that they have gotten rich on Donald Trump. This corporate media, with the kinds of reporting, the shallow reporting, the misreporting, the refusal to report [meaningfully]... they gave us this moment in history.

NS: The fact is that the CEO of the CBS network said during the primaries that the Donald Trump candidacy might be very bad for America, but it's very good for the profit margin of the networks. And that is, as you say, what happened. Literally, billions of dollars in free air time for Donald Trump during the primaries from cable TV. Without that he would not have seen the light of day, in terms of a strong candidacy.

And, of course, we know, and this comes with the territory, a lot of bias against Bernie Sanders. I think FAIR, the media watch group, counted a dozen anti-Sanders' stories in a 24 hour period, out of the Washington Post. And this is the terrain that we're walking through. And now I think it's very hazardous for people who are among the 54% who voted for candidates other than Donald Trump, very hazardous to trust the mass media.

Doesn't mean that it's always wrong, obviously. But we need to be very wary and suspicious, if you will, of the spin. And that's where I get back to this bandwagon thing about "Oh, our big threat to democracy is the Russian government." Well, this is a way of sort of cleansing ourselves of the very dirty, ugly reality of a serious, severe, debilitating lack of democracy in our own country, that is self-inflicted, and we've got to solve it ourselves.

DB: Alright, what are you going to do, Norman? What's your plan for taking on this, I mean we've got the Supreme Court, you know, coming up here. And that's going to go south, fast.

NS: Yes, well, without being over dramatic, I think this is a question that so

many of us, millions of us, are asking ourselves and each other. What are we going to do, as individuals? I think of something that Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was imprisoned by Hitler, ultimately...

DB: War resister, died in prison, right?

NS: Yes, and he said, in his prison writings, that resistance cannot be accomplished just as an individual, that we need community. Whatever gives us community, personally, interpersonally, and in terms of relationship building and organizations and activism and organizing. We need community more than ever. Like a healthy forest we need a lot of different aspects.

We started out this discussion, you were talking, Dennis, about many different ways and diverse ways that people can respond to our situation. And I think that means that we find ways to fight back that are consistent with our particular abilities, skills, interests, personalities, if you will, and work with others. Because we can't do it on our own. So, existing organizations need to get stronger, and fight back.

Myself, as somebody who works day-to-day for [rootsaction.org](http://rootsaction.org) and the Institute for Public Accuracy... especially at Roots Action we're very much into building coalitions that can fight back to support immigrants' rights, for instance, can support Muslims who are under threat, can oppose the war machinery.

And that means, I think, [being] in the streets, petitions, and strengthening media aspects and also really putting the screws on, in a positive way, if I can say it in that respect, elected officials. Because there are a lot of democrats in the Senate and the House who, just as in the past, they have been GOP-lite, there's a big temptation, if they think it's opportunistic, to become Trump-lite. And we need to make, as constituents...

DB: You can see it already.

NS: Yeah. And absolute clarity needs to come from us. We will not accept that. We might already need to plan primary challenges for any Democrat who in [2018] isn't absolutely resolute to oppose every [one]... of the numerous, massive, pernicious aspects of the Trump program. And that means, for those of us who may not love to do electoral politics, that we come to see it as part of the mix. It's part of the garden that we're cultivating.

Yes, we need to be in the streets, we do activism, we do organizing, non-profit work, we work in houses of worship. I'm in touch with people working at the Rotary Club for Peace. There's thousands of them around the country, everywhere, like water finding and [...] widening the cracks in the wall. We need to do all that.

And I think that needs to include already looking at the electoral arena, because if we're waiting until [2018], that's too late. Wherever you live, scrutinize those who represent you in the state legislature, on county electoral boards, in the U.S. Senate and the U.S. House... and if they're not getting the job done, let them know that you're cultivating some primary challenges if they're democrats or strong challenges otherwise.

Because we have to get that done. It's about power, and I think ultimately power is something that progressives often think is almost a dirty word. And so if we grew up with a concept of power to the people, maybe it can have a different connotation.

No wonder people hate the idea of power. Because it's usually so awful, it's coming from the top. It's so oppressive. It takes lives. It destroys the environment. It pushes for war. It makes the rich richer and the poor poorer. No wonder we hate power. But power can be something else. Power can be a countervailing force that affirms life instead of crushes it. Which is what we deal with in terms of the power structure of our society right now.

**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](http://www.flashpoints.net).**

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## US Report Still Lacks Proof on Russia 'Hack'

**Exclusive:** Despite mainstream media acceptance, the U.S. intelligence community's assessment on alleged Russian "hacking" still lacks hard public evidence, a case of "trust-us" by politicized spy agencies, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Repeating an accusation over and over again is not evidence that the accused is guilty, no matter how much "confidence" the accuser asserts about the conclusion. Nor is it evidence just to suggest that someone has a motive for doing something. Many conspiracy theories are built on the notion of "cui bono" – who benefits – without following up the supposed motive with facts.

But that is essentially what the U.S. intelligence community has done regarding the dangerous accusation that Russian President Vladimir Putin orchestrated a covert information campaign to influence the outcome of the Nov. 8 U.S.

presidential election in favor of Republican Donald Trump.

Just a day after Director of National Intelligence James Clapper vowed to go to the greatest possible lengths to supply the public with the evidence behind the accusations, his office released a 25-page report that contained no direct evidence that Russia delivered hacked emails from the Democratic National Committee and Hillary Clinton's campaign chairman John Podesta to WikiLeaks.

The DNI report amounted to a compendium of reasons to suspect that Russia was the source of the information – built largely on the argument that Russia had a motive for doing so because of its disdain for Democratic nominee Clinton and the potential for friendlier relations with Republican nominee Trump.

But the case, as presented, is one-sided and lacks any actual proof. Further, the continued use of the word “assesses” – as in the U.S. intelligence community “assesses” that Russia is guilty – suggests that the underlying classified information also may be less than conclusive because, in intelligence-world-speak, “assesses” often means “guesses.”

The DNI report admits as much, saying, “Judgments are not intended to imply that we have proof that shows something to be a fact. Assessments are based on collected information, which is often incomplete or fragmentary, as well as logic, argumentation, and precedents.”

But the report's assessment is more than just a reasonable judgment based on a body of incomplete information. It is tendentious in that it only lays out the case for believing in Russia's guilt, not reasons for doubting that guilt.

### **A Risky Bet**

For instance, while it is true that many Russian officials, including President Putin, considered Clinton to be a threat to worsen the already frayed relationship between the two nuclear superpowers, the report ignores the downside for Russia trying to interfere with the U.S. election campaign and then failing to stop Clinton, which looked like the most likely outcome until Election Night.

If Russia had accessed the DNC and Podesta emails and slipped them to WikiLeaks for publication, Putin would have to think that the National Security Agency, with its exceptional ability to track electronic communications around the world, might well have detected the maneuver and would have informed Clinton.

So, on top of Clinton's well-known hawkishness, Putin would have risked handing the expected incoming president a personal reason to take revenge on him and his country. Historically, Russia has been very circumspect in such situations,



usually holding its intelligence collections for internal purposes only, not sharing them with the public.

While it is conceivable that Putin decided to take this extraordinary risk in this case – despite the widely held view that Clinton was a shoo-in to defeat Trump – an objective report would have examined this counter argument for him not doing so.

But the DNI report was not driven by a desire to be evenhanded; it is, in effect, a prosecutor's brief, albeit one that lacks any real evidence that the accused is guilty.

Further undercutting the credibility of the DNI report is that it includes a seven-page appendix, dating from 2012, that is an argumentative attack on RT, the Russian government-backed television network, which is accused of portraying "the US electoral process as undemocratic."

The proof for that accusation includes RT's articles on "voting machine vulnerabilities" although virtually every major U.S. news organizations has run similar stories, including some during the last campaign on the feasibility of Russia hacking into the actual voting process, something that even U.S. intelligence says didn't happen.

The reports adds that further undermining Americans' faith in the U.S. democratic process, "RT broadcast, hosted and advertised third-party candidate debates." Apparently, the DNI's point is that showing Americans that there are choices beyond the two big parties is somehow seditious.

"The RT hosts asserted that the US two-party system does not represent the views of at least one-third of the population and is a 'sham,'" the report said. Yet, polls have shown that large numbers of Americans would prefer more choices than the usual two candidates and, indeed, most Western democracies have multiple parties, So, the implicit RT criticism of the U.S. political process is certainly not out of the ordinary.

The report also takes RT to task for covering the Occupy Wall Street movement and for reporting on the environmental dangers from "fracking," topics cited as further proof that the Russian government was using RT to weaken U.S. public support for Washington's policies (although, again, these are topics of genuine public interest).

### **Behind the Curtain**

Though it's impossible for an average U.S. citizen to know precisely what the U.S. intelligence community may have in its secret files, some former NSA

officials who are familiar with the agency's eavesdropping capabilities say Washington's lack of certainty suggests that the NSA does not possess such evidence.

For instance, that's the view of William Binney, who retired as NSA's technical director of world military and geopolitical analysis and who created many of the collection systems still used by NSA.

Binney, in an article co-written with former CIA analyst Ray McGovern, said, "With respect to the alleged interference by Russia and WikiLeaks in the U.S. election, it is a major mystery why U.S. intelligence feels it must rely on 'circumstantial evidence,' when it has NSA's vacuum cleaner sucking up hard evidence galore. What we know of NSA's capabilities shows that the email disclosures were from leaking, not hacking."

There is also the fact that both WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and one of his associates, former British Ambassador Craig Murray, have denied that the purloined emails came from the Russian government. Going further, Murray has suggested that there were two separate sources, the DNC material coming from a disgruntled Democrat and the Podesta emails coming from possibly a U.S. intelligence source, since the Podesta Group represents Saudi Arabia and other foreign governments.

In response, Clapper and other U.S. government officials have sought to disparage Assange's credibility, including Clapper's Senate testimony on Thursday gratuitously alluding to sexual assault allegations against Assange in Sweden.

However, Clapper's own credibility is suspect in a more relevant way. In 2013, he gave false testimony to Congress regarding the extent of the NSA's collection of data on Americans. Clapper's deception was revealed only when former NSA contractor Edward Snowden leaked details of the NSA program to the press, causing Clapper to apologize for his "clearly erroneous" testimony.

### **A History of Politicization**

The U.S. intelligence community's handling of the Russian "hack" story also must be viewed in the historical context of the CIA's "politicization" over the past several decades.

U.S. intelligence analysts, such as senior Russia expert Melvin A. Goodman, have described in detail both in books and in congressional testimony how the old tradition of objective CIA analysis was broken down in the 1980s.

At the time, the Reagan administration wanted to justify a massive arms buildup,

so CIA Director William Casey and his pliant deputy, Robert Gates, oversaw the creation of inflammatory assessments on Soviet intentions and Moscow's alleged role in international terrorism, including the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II.

Besides representing "politicized" intelligence at its worst, these analyses became the bureaucratic battleground on which old-line analysts who still insisted on presenting the facts to the president whether he liked them or not were routed and replaced by a new generation of yes men.

The relevant point is that the U.S. intelligence community has never been repaired, in part because the yes men gave presidents of both parties what they wanted. Rather than challenging a president's policies, this new generation mostly fashioned their reports to support those policies.

The bipartisan nature of this corruption is best illustrated by the role played by CIA Director George Tenet, who was appointed by President Bill Clinton but stayed on and helped President George W. Bush arrange his "slam dunk" case for convincing the American people that Iraq possessed caches of WMD, thus justifying Bush's 2003 invasion.

There was the one notable case of intelligence analysts standing up to Bush in a 2007 assessment that Iran had abandoned its nuclear weapons program, but that was more an anomaly – resulting from the acute embarrassment over the Iraq WMD fiasco – than a change in pattern.

Presidents of both parties have learned that it makes their lives easier if the U.S. intelligence community is generating "intelligence" that supports what they want to do, rather than letting the facts get in the way.

The current case of the alleged Russian "hack" should be viewed in this context: President Obama considers Trump's election a threat to his policies, both foreign and domestic. So, it's only logical that Obama would want to weaken and discredit Trump before he takes office.

That doesn't mean that the Russians are innocent, but it does justify a healthy dose of skepticism to the assessments by Obama's senior intelligence officials.

[For more on this topic, see Consortiumnews.com's "[Escalating the Risky Fight with Russia](#)" and "[Summing Up Russia's Real Nuclear Fears.](#)"]

**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](#)).**

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# The Dubious Case on Russian ‘Hacking’

Still not showing evidence, U.S. intelligence chief James Clapper told senators he’s really sure Russia was the source of “hacked” Democratic emails, but the case remains weak, say ex-intelligence officials William Binney and Ray McGovern.

By William Binney and Ray McGovern

It has been several weeks since the New York Times reported that “overwhelming circumstantial evidence” led the CIA to believe that Russian President Vladimir Putin “deployed computer hackers” to help Donald Trump win the election. But the evidence released so far has been far from overwhelming.

The long anticipated Joint Analysis Report issued by the Department of Homeland Security and the FBI on Dec. 29 met widespread criticism in the technical community. Worse still, some of the advice it offered led to a very alarmist false alarm about supposed Russian hacking into a Vermont electric power station.

Advertised in advance as providing proof of Russian hacking, the report fell embarrassingly short of that goal. The thin gruel that it did contain was watered down further by the following unusual warning atop page 1: “DISCLAIMER: This report is provided ‘as is’ for informational purposes only. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) does not provide any warranties of any kind regarding any information contained within.”

Also, curiously absent was any clear input from the CIA, NSA or Director of National Intelligence James Clapper. Reportedly, Mr. Clapper will get a chance on Friday to brief an understandably skeptical Donald Trump, who has called the briefing delay “very strange,” even suggesting that top intelligence officials “need more time to build a case.”

## **Clapper’s Checkered History**

Mr. Trump’s skepticism is warranted not only by technical realities, but also by human ones, including the dramatis personae involved. Mr. Clapper has admitted giving Congress on March 12, 2013, false testimony regarding the extent of the National Security Agency’s collection of data on Americans. Four months later, after the Edward Snowden revelations, Mr. Clapper apologized to the Senate for testimony he admitted was “clearly erroneous.” That he is a survivor was already apparent by the way he landed on his feet after the intelligence debacle on Iraq.

Mr. Clapper was a key player in facilitating the fraudulent intelligence. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld put Mr. Clapper in charge of the analysis of satellite imagery, the best source for pinpointing the location of weapons of mass destruction – if any.

When Pentagon favorites like Iraqi émigré Ahmed Chalabi plied U.S. intelligence with spurious “evidence” on WMD in Iraq, Mr. Clapper was in position to suppress the findings of any imagery analyst who might have the temerity to report, for example, that the Iraqi “chemical weapons facility” for which Mr. Chalabi provided the geographic coordinates was nothing of the kind. Mr. Clapper preferred to go by the Rumsfeldian dictum: “The absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.” (It will be interesting to see if he tries that out on the President-elect Friday.)

A year after the war began, Mr. Chalabi told the media, “We are heroes in error. As far as we’re concerned we’ve been entirely successful.” By that time it was clear there were no WMD in Iraq. When Mr. Clapper was asked to explain, he opined, without adducing any evidence, that they probably were moved into Syria.

With respect to the alleged interference by Russia and WikiLeaks in the U.S. election, it is a major mystery why U.S. intelligence feels it must rely on “circumstantial evidence,” when it has NSA’s vacuum cleaner sucking up hard evidence galore. What we know of NSA’s capabilities shows that the email disclosures were from leaking, not hacking.

Here’s the difference:

*Hack:* When someone in a remote location electronically penetrates operating systems, firewalls or other cyber-protection systems and then extracts data. Our own considerable experience, plus the rich detail revealed by Edward Snowden, persuades us that, with NSA’s formidable trace capability, it can identify both sender and recipient of any and all data crossing the network.

*Leak:* When someone physically takes data out of an organization – on a thumb drive, for example – and gives it to someone else, as Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning did. Leaking is the only way such data can be copied and removed with no electronic trace.

Because NSA can trace exactly where and how any “hacked” emails from the Democratic National Committee or other servers were routed through the network, it is puzzling why NSA cannot produce hard evidence implicating the Russian government and WikiLeaks. Unless we are dealing with a leak from an insider, not a hack, as other reporting suggests. From a technical perspective alone, we are convinced that this is what happened.

Lastly, the CIA is almost totally dependent on NSA for ground truth in this electronic arena. Given Mr. Clapper's checkered record for accuracy in describing NSA activities, it is to be hoped that the director of NSA will join him for the briefing with Mr. Trump.

**William Binney (williambinney0802@comcast.net) worked for NSA for 36 years, retiring in 2001 as the technical director of world military and geopolitical analysis and reporting; he created many of the collection systems still used by NSA. Ray McGovern (rrmcgovern@gmail.com) was a CIA analyst for 27 years; he briefed the president's daily brief one-on-one to President Reagan's most senior national security officials from 1981-85. [This article previously appeared in The Baltimore Sun at**

**<http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/opinion/oped/bs-ed-hacking-intelligence-20170105-story.html>**]

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## Fear and Misunderstanding of Russia

Much of America's recent demonization of Russia relates to deep cultural and even religious differences between the two countries, requiring a deeper understanding of the other's strengths and weaknesses, writes Paul Grenier.

By Paul Grenier

Given the recent near-hysteria over Russia's alleged hacking of U.S. political email traffic, it is difficult to imagine a U.S. -Russia relationship established upon a peaceful footing – or, to put it another way, a relationship so stable and constructive that it no longer would depend on the vagaries of changing political personalities.

Let's look at it first through the prism of realism. If we are realists, we throw America's habitual moralism out the window and offer the Russians a deal. The "normalization" negotiations between a realist America and the regional power of Russia might unfold along lines something like this:

The United States would propose a provisional alliance with Russia to thwart a rising China, which continues to grow inexorably in wealth and power. China's ascendance naturally makes U.S. policymakers nervous, and thus does the United States (in the realist view) have a vested interest in a U.S.-Russian alliance.

According to this realist playbook, Russia would be flattered by these attentions but would want to know precisely what kind of *provisional* alliance

the United States had in mind. Given that realists always seek to be open and honest, this particular realist government would explain that its attention is focused on China's apparent expansionist ambitions in the South China Sea. After all, according to the realist outlook, nation-states not only usually *do* pursue constant expansion of their power whenever and wherever possible, as China seems to be doing now, but *should* pursue such hegemonic expansion whenever possible because, in an anarchic world, that is the way to survive.

Would Russia accept such an offer? It might. But if it did, it would be with a certain sense of bad faith to match that surrounding the U.S. proposition. It would not be a friendship but an alliance based on mutual interest. If circumstances were to change, as inevitably they would at some point, the underlying sentiments of national interest might well evaporate – as they should.

But such conditionality wouldn't contradict the realist conception of international relations. Under the realist model, there simply is no basis for a *good faith* long-term settlement. It is excluded by the power-political assumptions of the realist model, as is frankly acknowledged in such foundational realist texts, for example, as John Mearsheimer's *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.

And realists are correct, no doubt, in arguing that Americans should stop moralizing about Russia taking actions to defend its vital interests in its own neighborhood in exactly the same manner as the United States does in defense of its vital interests in its own region.

And yet realism's dismissive attitude toward the moral dimension – as historian Matthew Dal Santo recently pointed out – contains a flaw. It requires that the United States renounce certain moral concerns that are foundational to what America is. Would a coldly rational America still be *America*? And would Russia itself ultimately even welcome such a "partner"?

The prominent Russian political philosopher Boris Mezhuev, in a recent essay (in Russian) about the history of the America First movement, mused that an isolationist United States during World War II would not at all have been welcomed, first and foremost by Russia itself. It might have led to the annihilation of Russia at the hands of the Nazi war machine. Mezhuev's point is that it is not the rejection of universal ideals that we should seek in international relations, but the finding of the right ideal.

### **Stop Being Russia**

According to the outlook that might be described as the democracy-idealism/neoconservative-interventionist school, the only way to achieve a

lasting settlement is for Russia to cease being what it is at the moment and to become instead much more like the United States. Russia should become a liberal democracy. Only then – because, as many Wilsonian idealists have argued, “liberal democracies don’t fight one another” – can the relationship be stabilized for the long term.

The theory is not entirely implausible. There are indeed forces within Russia that strongly identify with American liberal democratic values. American diplomats and journalists frequently run into people who hold such sentiments. They pop up among one’s well-traveled Russian-intelligentsia friends and are widely quoted in the articles written by prominent journalists who happen to be imbued themselves with the Wilsonian sensibility.

The problem with this line of thought – aside from the impossibility of imposing it from the outside – is that the Russian version of liberal democracy differs fundamentally from the American version.

The fact is that Russia today is already in many ways liberal. But its liberalism is of a peculiarly Russian sort. It does not deny rights and freedom, but it grounds them not negatively (in terms of what government shall not do), as does the Enlightenment liberalism of Locke and Hobbes, but rather in terms of Eastern Christianity’s image of what man is. As a result, there is no Russian liberalism, or Russian politics of any other sort – including its standard semi-authoritarianism – that separates the state from religion in the way that the United States does today.

An authentically *Russian* liberalism, in other words, is hardly less starkly different from our secular, liberationist order than is Russia’s present political arrangement under Vladimir Putin. The fact is that there simply is not available to Russia a political order that is aligned with the present-day American version of secular liberal democracy. Both its history and its mores exclude it. And if we try to impose it anyway, in defiance of Russian history and self-understanding, then we will find ourselves repulsed in the same way Napoleon was.

As Henry Kissinger wrote, “No power will submit to a settlement, however well-balanced and however ‘secure,’ which seems totally to deny its vision of itself.”

So where does that leave us? It leaves us precisely in the relationship in which the two countries currently languish. The realists, in such meager numbers as they exist, have little to offer beyond a temporary reprieve. As for the democracy idealists, they have witnessed Russia’s rejection of U.S.-style liberal democracy and secularism, and they have drawn the only possible



conclusion: Russia is incorrigibly evil.

To prove their point, the idealists and neoconservatives point to Russian acts of violence, such as its bombardments in Syria or Chechnya or its support for the separatists in Eastern Ukraine. The Russians, for their part, cast back at America and its Western allies the West's own acts of aggression and accompanying untruths.

### **Rejecting Lectures**

It's instructive, in this regard, to recall British Foreign Secretary David Miliband's famous phone conversation with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, in which the latter, after pointedly reminding the former about the Anglo-U.S. invasion of Iraq, demanded of Miliband, "Who are you to f\*\*\*ing lecture me?"

Critics of Russia likewise point to various lies that Russian politicians have told in defense of their foreign-policy aims. But telling lies is in the very nature of international relations and certainly the waging of wars, as is reflected in the familiar accusation that "the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy."

And yet, though nations often tell lies as part of their self-defense, it doesn't follow that what they are defending is therefore essentially a lie. It may be in some cases – Nazi Germany, for example, or ISIS. But such cases are rare.

In short, both the United States and Russia have used lots of violence against their enemies. In both cases, this violence has no doubt exceeded ethical norms. Both have told lies. So which side is the more evil? How does one prove such a thing?

Robert Kaplan, who generally belongs to America's democracy-idealist camp, suggested in a recent essay that we can answer this question by means of a close reading of Russian literature.

Kaplan's "The Real War of Ideas," published in *The National Interest* in September, stakes its claim about Russia by reference to Anton Chekhov's fictional *My Life: A Provincial's Story*. A careful reading of this work, Kaplan tells us, allows us to "realiz[e] the utter impossibility of any good ever coming out of Russia."

This remarkable story, Kaplan believes, holds the key to understanding Russia as a whole. "[E]verything from the czar, to Lenin and Stalin, to Putin, is connected in some indirect way to the Russian social reality" described by Chekhov. Here, for Kaplan, is the story's money quote:

“They [the peasant *muzhiks*] were mostly nervous, irritated, insulted people; they were people of suppressed imagination, ignorant, with a poor, dull outlook, with ever the same thoughts about the gray earth, gray days, black bread, people who were sly but, like birds, only hid their heads behind a tree – who didn’t know how to count. They wouldn’t go to your haymaking for twenty roubles, but they would go for a half-bucket of vodka, though for twenty roubles they could buy four buckets. ... [As for their masters, their money] had been acquired by a whole series of brazen, shameless deceptions.”

Here’s an interesting question: why, out of all the tremendous variety of Russian literature, has Kaplan chosen precisely this short story focusing on ignorant peasants, instead of, say, *War and Peace*? Answer: to demonstrate that Chekhov’s Russia is the same as Putin’s Russia – in the double sense that Russia has never successfully become modern and liberal and, for Kaplan, never will.

The peasantry symbolizes what is pre-modern and illiberal. These particular peasants, furthermore, are incapable of acting as a rational liberal should – maximizing their own advantage and thereby increasing wealth for society as a whole. Chekhov’s peasants cannot even properly calculate how to maximize their consumption of vodka!

The Chekhov passage has, furthermore, far-going implications for Russia’s place within the international order. If Russia were smart enough to become part of the Western order, if it played according to American rules, Russia would earn more than it does now! And yet Russia stubbornly, stupidly, and in contradiction of its own interest refuses this reasonable tradeoff. Russia’s rulers and oligarchs of today, like its peasant masters of yesteryear, prefer to practice deceit, because such is their nature. That, for Kaplan, is what Chekhov’s story tells us.

### **Selective Reading**

Kaplan’s reading of the Chekhov story, however, is incomplete. On the very same page of Chekhov’s text, between the word “buckets” and the closing words about the masters’ “brazen, shameless deceptions,” there are the following lines:

“In fact, there was filth, and drunkenness, and stupidity, and deceit, but with all that you could feel, nevertheless, that the muzhiks’ life was generally upheld by some strong, healthy core. However much the muzhik looks like a clumsy beast as he follows his plow, and however much he befuddles himself with vodka, still, on looking closer, you feel that there is in him something necessary and very important that is lacking, for instance, in Masha and the doctor – namely, he believes that the chief thing on earth is truth [*pravda*], and that his salvation and that of all people lies in truth alone, and therefore he loves justice more than anything else in the world.”

Had he quoted the Russian author in full, I would be in agreement with Mr. Kaplan about the importance of this story for understanding Russia. To be sure, modern Russia, with its impeccable metro systems and fashionable cafes, has little in common with the peasant world here described (though in the provinces, something of that peasant world – fortunately to my mind – still remains). Modern Russians, furthermore, know how to count very well.

What then remains constant? First, the centrality of truth and justice. We have already, above, briefly discussed the role of lies. They are, sadly, something of a constant in foreign relations. What needs stressing here is something else. The attempt to lure or to force Russia into a world that requires that it “deny its vision of itself” by forcing it to be liberal – and thereby to interpret everything exclusively in terms of advantage, rights, losses, and profits – will not work.

This is confirmed not only by Russian behavior but also by the explicit words of its foreign minister, who in a recent interview insisted that “Russia’s only role in the world is to stand up for the truth [*pravda*] together with other powers, but exclusively on equal terms.”

The second constant is Christianity. The text’s reference to “salvation” and the word *pravda* itself have clearly Christian overtones. Russian Christianity differs from American Christianity. American Protestant Christianity embraces individualism and is open to change; in many ways, it has hitched its cart to the modernization project.

Russian Orthodox Christianity uses virtually the same liturgy today as it has for hundreds of years. Its standard of perfection in iconography is the same as it has been for hundreds of years. Russian spirituality is oriented to what is timeless and to beauty. American spirituality is oriented to the future and to rights. Both Russia and America can be very tough. But that toughness defends two very different ideals.

Kaplan’s selective quotation of the Chekhov story quite likely was unintentional. He may genuinely have found unimportant the passage about truth and justice and salvation, because these things fall outside the realm of modern American liberalism. His inability to notice the good in Russia when that good falls outside of the specifically liberal framework is something very common in recent Western reporting on Russia.

### **No Junior Partner**

An accommodation with Russia will never be reached by ignoring what Russia is, still less by attempting to transform it into a junior United States. Nor is there any need to do so. An accommodation between Russia and the United States

can be reached by applying what is healthy in the realist and idealist traditions, and jettisoning what is false.

Realism is right to the extent that it teaches that one's own nation's ideals do not necessarily embrace the whole of the human good. It teaches a salutary humility. Realism is wrong, however, when it dismisses moral considerations altogether, among other reasons because such a dismissal eliminates the only possible foundation of long-term trust.

The idealist school clings to the United States' longstanding vision of itself as a force for good in the world. There is no need for the United States to abandon this vision. All that is needed is for the United States to expand its notion of the good.

For my money, a good place to start would be with the writings of Semyon Frank, one of the most respected Russian philosophers in Russia today. "In all that is human as such," Frank wrote, "... there is nothing sacred; 'the will of the people' can be just as stupid and criminal as the will of an individual man. Neither the rights of man nor the will of the people are sacred in themselves. Only the *truth* as such, only the absolute good which is independent of man, is primordially sacred."

Russia, for its part, needs to guard against the temptation of identifying this good, this *absolute*, with Russia itself.

**Paul Grenier is an essayist who writes frequently on cities, political philosophy, and foreign affairs. He co-directs a project, under the aegis of Solidarity Hall, on East-West dialogue. [This article originally appeared in The American Conservative at <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/legitimate-differences/>]**

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## Resisting the Congressional Watchdog

Not that political corruption doesn't happen with divided government, but with Republicans controlling all three branches, the prospects for more Abramoff-type scandals rise, warn Bill Moyers and Michael Winship.

By Bill Moyers and Michael Winship

Mark Twain noted that man is the only animal that blushes – or needs to. He also believed that "public office is private graft." Those two observations from our

greatest and most sagacious humorist intersected with a bang on Capitol Hill Monday night, when the bright lights of the Republican House Conference met in secret behind closed doors at the end of the New Year's holiday.

They tried to vote themselves an especially tasty treat: eviscerating the independent Office of Congressional Ethics (OCE). That's the office created in 2008 in the wake of the Jack Abramoff scandal and the placement of three congressmen behind bars. The conference voted to absorb it into the House Ethics Committee. In other words, they wanted to weaken OCE and put it under the control of some of the very folks the office is charged with investigating for possible influence peddling and other assorted mischief.

If the conference had its way, OCE would wind up having all the clout of the token student representative on your local board of education, giving unscrupulous legislators freedom to rob the public blind without fear of exposure.

But a funny thing happened on the way to congressional visions of new secret bank accounts in the Cayman Islands. The public can become like sheep when the shepherd is a demagogue, but when the public is outraged over outright unfairness and chicanery, it can roar like a lion. Once word of the vote leaked out, phone calls, emails and social media recriminations from all points of the political spectrum began flooding the sacred halls of the House of Representatives, which was once called The People's House before it became the predator's lair.

Talk about embarrassment. Imagine this new Congress, pledged to "drain the swamp," taking as its first action a rule that in effect would have helped make the swamp part of the National Park Service.

The nonpartisan Project in Government Oversight (POGO), declared that OCE needed "to be strengthened and expanded – not taken out back and shot in the middle of the night." So the GOP conference fled into another closed-door session and changed its mind. We were only kidding, they said. The Office of Congressional Ethics is alive and well – until the next time we try to kill it.

Just before the meeting, our august President-elect bestowed the Congress with two of his imperial tweets. "With all that Congress has to work on, do they really have to make the weakening of the Independent Ethics Watchdog, as unfair as it," read the first, followed by, "... may be, their number one act and priority. Focus on tax reform, healthcare and so many other things of far greater importance! ?#DTS."

DTS stands for Drain the Swamp, of course, although we're sure many of our

progressive brethren would prefer bawdier acronyms involving the President-elect himself. Nonetheless, many are claiming it was these very dispatches from fearless leader that turned the vote around. But read his words carefully: He's more concerned about bad timing; he has no great love for the OCE.

In fact, shortly before the tweets, his amanuensis Kellyanne Conway was telling George Stephanopoulos on *Good Morning America* that "gutting it doesn't mean there won't be a mechanism" – just that there had been "overzealousness in some of the processes over the years."

Most members of the House agree it was the public outcry that swiveled those usually obdurate minds on Capitol Hill; Trump merely once again displayed his ability to jump on the prevailing public sentiment or someone else's success and ride it to vainglory, like the story of the French revolutionary John F. Kennedy liked to tell: There go my people, the revolutionary said. I must find out their destination so I can lead them.

### **Beware the Congress**

In the end, what this New Year's imbroglia tells us is three things. First, it's a reminder once again of the mediocre caliber of too many of the men and women running for the House and Senate these days.

All too often, people of public spirit who would make ideal candidates are discouraged from running by the horrors of perpetual fundraising – the vise of money in politics – not to mention the spotlight shone on every small detail of their personal and professional lives. Many of the people who wind up taking the bit and running are soulless empty suits, in it for the power and the payoffs during and after tenure. Or they're already rich in the first place.

Which leads us to the second thing: venality, so often hand-in-hand with mediocrity. All indications are that our incoming president regards the White House as a pirate galleon built to increase his family's trove of plunder many fold, and the notion seems to be rubbing off on Congress. New York Times columnist Frank Bruni asked, "Is it any wonder that House Republicans felt OK about trying to slip free of some of their own ethical shackles, no matter how ugly the optics? ...

"It's the tone that Trump has set and the culture that he's creating. He operates with an in-your-face defiance, so these House Republicans did, too. He puts his own desires and comfort first, so they reserved the right to do the same. With more than a few of his Cabinet picks, he demonstrated little sense of fidelity to what he promised voters and even less concern about appearances. House Republicans decided to treat themselves to a taste of that freedom."

Third, we have to keep ever vigilant. Other anti-democratic measures inserted in the same rules package slipped past the public. The first imposes a fine on House members taking photos or video in the chamber – a petty, vindictive, retroactive slap to those lawmakers who last June sat-in to protest Congress' refusal to take action on gun control. You'll recall that after Republicans quickly adjourned and cut off the C-SPAN cameras, the protesting members, led by Rep. John Lewis, the civil rights legend, used their cell phones to send out video and keep the story alive.

Even worse, the new rules allow not just members of Congress to subpoena and question officials and citizens; it extends that fearsome power to staff members, opening the door to witch hunts and persecutions that could make Benghazi and Clinton's emails seem like a stroll in the park. Rep. Louise Slaughter, D-New York, ranking member of the House Rules Committee, said, "Freely handing out the power to compel any American to appear, sit in a room, and answer staff's invasive questions on the record – without members even being required to be present – is truly unprecedented, unwarranted and offensive."

Every battle won't be won. Nonetheless, the public DID manage to keep the House GOP from surreptitiously murdering the Office of Congressional Ethics, and that's proof we can make a difference if we keep the pressure on and hammer home our resistance and opposition when democracy and liberty are threatened.

The problem, neatly summarized as usual by Mark Twain, is that, "To lodge all power in one party and keep it there is to insure bad government and the sure and gradual deterioration of the public morals." This week, we got a vigorous, healthy and inspiring reminder that protest matters. Keep that in mind as the perfidies unfold this year under the one-party monopoly that will soon control our federal government.

**Michael Winship is the Emmy Award-winning senior writer of *Moyers & Company* and *BillMoyers.com*, and a former senior writing fellow at the policy and advocacy group Demos. Follow him on Twitter at @MichaelWinship. Bill Moyers is the managing editor of *Moyers & Company* and *BillMoyers.com*. [This article originally appeared at <http://billmoyers.com/story/protest-stopped-predators-will-back/>]**

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