

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.

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Donald Trump's Debt to Willie Horton

Special Report: A precursor of Donald Trump's race-messaging campaign can be found in George H.W. Bush's exploitation of the Willie Horton case in 1988, an ugly reminder of America's racist heritage, writes JP Sottile.

By JP Sottile

America's first "celebrity" launched his successful campaign for the Presidency with a simple, effective message: Mexicans are pouring across the border and they are bringing crime, they are bringing drugs and they are raping America's women. That fallacious opening salvo portended the relentlessly "politically incorrect" tone of Donald J. Trump's 17-month-long drive to the White House.

On the campaign trail Trump described a society on the brink of chaos. He regaled audiences attending his live shows with tall tales featuring roving gangs of menacing "illegals." He promised to ban dangerous Muslim interlopers. He warned of a Syrian fifth column skulking into the homeland through the hollow humanitarianism of a refugee-filled "Trojan Horse." He painted a foreboding picture of African-American neighborhoods as Third World "war zones." He promised a national crackdown on crime with controversial policing measures like the potentially unconstitutional "stop and frisk" program. He declared himself the "law and order" candidate. And he repeatedly promised to "make America safe again."

Along the way, Trump solidified his support and confounded his critics with fictitious crime statistics that implied a national crisis due to rampant Black murderers and crime-prone immigrants. And he's continued touting a bogus spike in the murder rate during frothy stops along his victory lap into the White House. Mostly, Trump's calculated indifference to countervailing data allowed him to exploit a long-standing, politically profitable fear of crime despite little evidence that it is, in fact, an issue.

Not coincidentally, last year Gallup found that Americans "concern" about crime spiked to a 15-year high. The percentage of Americans expressing worry about crime skyrocketed from 39 percent in 2014 to 53 percent just two years later. That's in spite of the fact that the aggregate crime rate remains at a 20-year

low and in spite of the fact that the national homicide rate is at a 51-year low (even with the data-skewing murder rate of Chicago).

At the same time, Gallup also found that six in ten Americans also believe “racism against Blacks is widespread.” That’s up from 51 percent during Obama’s first year in office (2009). No doubt it’s a direct result from the recent barrage of shocking videos showing African-Americans in brutal and sometimes fatal encounters with police. These viral videos, along with mounting evidence that law enforcement disproportionately targets African-Americans, exposed an undeniable crisis in American policing.

Of course, the intersection between race and corrupt, unconstitutional policing is not new. Just imagine all those decades of unrecorded abuse before camera-phones finally offered corroborating evidence to widespread claims of physical assaults, harassing traffic stops, planted evidence and summary execution. But, then again, video evidence of police brutality isn’t new, either.

America got a stark look at excessive force when Rodney King’s vicious beating hit the evening news in 1991. It led to a high-profile trial. The failure to convict the offending officers then led to the “Rodney King Riot” in 1992. What did not follow was some long-overdue soul-searching about systemic racism in law enforcement. Instead, America got the 1994 Crime Bill, mass incarceration and a notable two decade-long gap in the tape between King’s beating and recent video evidence showing “high-profile” police-involved killings and a pattern of questionable treatment of Black Americans. That deafening silence is over.

Now the data shows non-Whites are far more likely to be subjected to traffic stops, to be arrested and to be incarcerated – particularly for simple drug possession. A new study by the Economic Policy Institute determined that “Black men are incarcerated at six times the rate of [W]hite men” and that “By the age of 14, approximately 25 percent of African American children have experienced a parent – in most cases a father – being imprisoned for some period of time.” The study’s authors also demonstrate a compelling causal relationship between disproportionate incarceration and the much-discussed “achievement gap” between Black and White students.

More perniciously, a recent USA Today investigation found that “[B]lack people across the nation – both innocent bystanders and those fleeing the police – have been killed in police chases at a rate nearly three times higher than everyone else.” And most disturbingly, Black and Hispanic men are “2.8 and 1.7 times more likely to be killed by police use of force than white men,” according to a controversial new study.

Perhaps that’s why the timing and the success of Trump’s tendentious,

“politically incorrect” campaign is so telling. His loud arrival on the political scene coincided with the first sustained public examination of law enforcement’s excesses after a nearly three decade-long crackdown under the guise of a drug war that, according to a new study by Human Rights Watch, still arrests Americans for drug possession at a mind-boggling rate of 1 person every 25 seconds.

Also not coincidentally, #BlackLivesMatter emerged as the first forceful African-American social and political movement in decades. NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick’s kneeling protest against police violence became a lightning rod of controversy. And for the first time since the George H.W. Bush campaign ran the infamous Willie Horton ads during the 1988 Presidential campaign, race reemerged from the political hinterlands to take a central role in an American presidential campaign.

Racebait And Switch

Donald J. Trump set the stage for his White House run back in 2011 as the self-appointed ringmaster of Birtherism. He built his political brand by attacking the legitimacy of America’s first Black President. By the time Trump began his assault on GOP field, 66 percent of his supporters believed President Obama was born elsewhere and 43 percent believed he was a “secret Muslim.” Many of his hardcore devotees believed these falsehoods through to the end of the campaign. And many still do today.

With that predicate established, Trump astutely pivoted to hyperbolic and fallacious messaging about a perceived Muslim “threat.” He said Obama was “the Founder of ISIS.” And he outlined a ban on Muslim immigration. Throughout the campaign he contributed to – or simply exploited – the widespread misconception that Muslims make up 17 percent of the U.S. population when, in fact, they are a scant 1 percent of Americans. Either way, the perception was political gold for Trump.

That’s because 2016 was a campaign of perception and emotion, not facts and figures. And like a bristling political antenna, Trump picked up the growing unease in rural and suburban America and masterfully transmitted broad emotional, identity-based appeals rooted in the nation’s shifting demography. He expanded traditional racial parameters of who is dangerous to include Muslims, Mexicans and immigrants in general. He connected voters’ anger with the sense that America had been “lost.” He promised to return America to a supposed state of greatness.

Unsurprisingly, the strongest bastions of Trump’s “red meat and potatoes” support were, according to the Wall Street Journal, those small Midwestern towns

and counties that experienced the fastest-shifting ethnic, religious and racial demographics over the last 15 years. On Election Day, his unshakable base of White Working Class males swelled, according to a FOX News exit poll, to include educated Whites, Whites of greater economic means and White women. Yes, he brought the vaunted Reagan Democrats back to the Republican fold. But he also got an unexpected boost from higher income Whites and suburban White women.

Despite the data, some argue that this coalition of Whites is not a "White backlash" vote. Trump's slightly better than Romney (by 2 points each) performance with Black and Latino voters did exceed quite low expectations (although he still only got 8 percent of African-Americans). It is also true that a combination of Hillary Clinton's vulnerabilities, economic dissatisfaction and thirst for change all contributed to Trump's win. But that doesn't fully explain the stark Whiteness of his base – which produced an Electoral College victory centered specifically in so-called "Duck Dynasty" America *and* a notable overall popular vote loss in aggregate America.

How Did Trump Win?

So, how did Trump form a strange coalition of the so-called Alt-Right movement and its motley crew of White Nationalists, Klansmen and disgruntled Caucasians with a surge of more educated, more affluent Whites, suburban women and the reborn Reagan Democrats?

Trump resurrected a well-established and all-too successful political ploy that takes racism and perniciously hides it in real issues – like crime, poverty, taxes, job scarcity, social welfare policy. He effectively underlined issues like economic insecurity, fear of terrorism and resentment against trade with politically incorrect, ethnically-themed and racially-conscious messaging. Like his use of faulty crimes statistics, he used these appeals to draw out the grudges and grievances of people who felt transgressed by politicians and/or were fearful and uneasy about the direction of the country.

These grudges simmered underneath the palpable economic grievances of working-class Americans and, specifically, working-class White Americans. But this was about more than just economic dislocation. Making America great "again" also spoke to fears about the changing face of the nation.

Trump hearkened back to a time *before* all those "politically correct" demographic changes so colorfully embodied by Obama's coalition. Those were the very voters Hillary Clinton pursued. Instead, Trump built his monolithic, monochromatic base with a well-worn process of coding that replaces overt racism with far more complicated political messaging that marbles issues with bigotry, xenophobia and racism.

For example, Trump's economic messages about Mexican immigrants and wily Chinese negotiators can appeal to racists and xenophobes while also appealing to people who are not bigots, but endure real or perceived economic hardships that appear to be addressed by expelling immigrant labor or renegotiating "fairer" trade deals.

In other words, it is possible to rationalize a racially-motivated policy as "not racist" because you don't have to irrationally "hate" Mexicans to agree with a policy of removing an "illicit" labor pool. Nor do you have to "hate" clever Chinese leaders for doing to America what you think American negotiators would've done to the Chinese if America's leaders weren't so darn "stupid."

The issues of wage decline from immigration or deindustrialization from bad trade deals can therefore be "race neutral." It can be easily rationalized as "not racist" to want enforceable borders and better negotiations. It can also seem wholly justifiable to shut down Muslim immigration from specific countries. It possible to believe it's not based on their religion or ethnicity, but because terrorists (thanks to a conveniently squishy application of the term) always seem to come from "over there." Therefore, it isn't technically racist to just want to stop terrorism. Just like it wasn't necessarily racist to want less crime back in 1988.

Back then, the infamous Willie Horton ad and the relentless "law and order" messaging of the Bush campaign linked crime with Black men to build an electoral victory. The upshot then was a two-plus decade-long merger of crime with racist tropes about Black men. The upshot now is the marbling of economic unease with racism against Mexicans, ethnonationalism against Chinese and fear of Muslim interlopers. And then like now, this powerful style of messaging made it possible to explicitly embrace or tacitly accept prejudicial proclamations that would've otherwise been unacceptable.

In fact, there's a certain symmetry to Trump's meteoric rise and the conclusion that American law enforcement still grapples with systemic racism. His posture as the "law and order candidate" tapped into the backlash against the backlash against the era of mass incarceration. His consciously abrasive style resurfaced a deeply encoded racism that – like hundreds of thousands of Black men – was locked away into the prison system during the War on Drugs.

Law And Order

Racism has been evermore deeply encoded into the criminal justice system since the civil rights movement scored key victories in the mid-1960s. The old system of Jim Crow was methodically replaced with a "New Jim Crow" that, as Michelle Alexander so painfully detailed, turned incarceration as tool of de facto re-

segregation. Controlling African-Americans was expressed as a need to “get tough on crime.” And the phrase “‘law and order” became a subtle way of playing on racial fears and trading in a less overt forms of racism.

When Richard Nixon ran on “law and order” during the tumult and race riots of 1968, there was little doubt what he meant. It was about getting a handle on angry Black Americans reeling from the violent loss of Martin Luther King, Jr.

It was also a coded response to the new socio-political reality of post-Jim Crow America. At the same time, the Civil and Voting Rights Acts meant White America had lost (at least technically) its legally sanctioned place atop the racially stratified system. America was changing and not everyone was happy about it.

What arose out of that toxic cocktail of backlash and resentment was the racially conscious “Southern Strategy.” In 1972, Nixon’s political team leveraged the “old” Jim Crow South into a sweeping electoral victory. Nixon’s “Silent Majority” of disgruntled working, middle-class, suburban and Southern Whites transformed the Republican Party for decades to come. Notably, 1972 was also the year Nixon officially declared the War on Drugs.

According to Dan Baum, Nixon’s drug war might’ve actually been a surreptitious counter-attack against dissent on both the political Left and, perhaps most balefully, on an increasingly forceful Black activist movement. Writing in Harper’s, Baum cites infamous Nixon aide John Ehrlichman who said Nixon secretly turned the criminal justice system into a tool of political payback and racial control:

“We knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.”

In other words, the quite real issues of drugs and crime were weaponized for political and racial purposes. Nixon’s War On Drugs and his call for “law and order” became nods and winks to law enforcement as they cracked-down on “crime”... and his opponents. Successive GOP campaigns focused on these quite real issues of drugs and crime. They also paid no political price for the disproportionate outcomes of the policies – particularly those faced particularly by Black Americans. It didn’t become an issue because the issue wasn’t officially “racism.” It was law and order.

By the time former California Governor and committed drug warrior Ronald Reagan

made his own “law and order” appeals during the 1980 campaign, many White voters had fled to the suburbs while many White working-class voters grappled with the economic unease brought on by imported Japanese cars. They struggled with chronic economic stagflation and felt trapped in a sense of national malaise. Some were looking for scapegoats and blamed government programs that supposedly were helping Blacks and other minorities. Sounds familiar, doesn’t it?

The Rise of Lee Atwater

It was in this milieu that a whip-smart, guitar-playing Southern-born GOP strategist named Lee Atwater honed the racial massaging that would eventually lead to the most notorious campaign ad in American political history. However unintentionally, he helped to expand Nixon’s War on Drugs into a generational crackdown on Black America. And he created a bipartisan consensus on crime that ultimately haunted Donald Trump’s opponent

During a now-infamous 1981 interview, Lee Atwater explained the evolution of coded racism from its earliest iteration in the Southern Strategy to its penultimate expression during the 1980 campaign to elect Ronald Reagan. Said Atwater:

“You start out in 1954 by saying, ‘Nigger, nigger, nigger.’ By 1968 you can’t say ‘nigger’ – that hurts you, backfires. So you say stuff like, uh, forced busing, states’ rights, and all that stuff, and you’re getting so abstract. Now, you’re talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you’re talking about are totally economic things and a byproduct of them is, blacks get hurt worse than whites.... ‘We want to cut this,’ is much more abstract than even the busing thing, uh, and a hell of a lot more abstract than ‘Nigger, nigger.’”

Sadly, Atwater’s language was far less shocking in 1981. But Atwater’s blunt talk (which was uncovered by James Carter IV in 2012) exposed a fundamental truth about American politics and the evolution of racism in American politicking. As a political matter, racism *had to be* increasingly coded over time. The further America got from the Civil Rights Act, the less acceptable it was to be overtly racist. Instead, race-based appeals were surreptitiously transmitted through coded messages. This was something Lee Atwater knew from first-hand experience.

Atwater – along with his friend Karl Rove – was a rising star in the College Republicans at the same time Nixon’s Southern Strategy was reshaping the party. The South Carolina native then cut his sharp teeth on his home state’s rough-hewn politics. He even worked for former Dixiecrat Strom Thurmond. But his big leap to the big time came after he helped The Gipper win a racially-tinged knife fight in the suddenly crucial South Carolina primary. In 1981, Atwater was given

a spot as White House advisor as a reward for helping plot Reagan's own Southern Strategy march to the White House.

Frankly, the Gipper was no stranger to the political power of the wedge issue or the code word. He's long been accused of delivering smoothly-edged, racially-coded messages before, during and after his successful 1980 campaign. Atwater's interview adds to that record, particularly since Reagan pioneered the conflation of both taxes and social welfare policy with the resentments against Black Americans. In 1976, he launched specious attacks against a fallacious cadre of so-called "Welfare Queens." He linked "welfare reform" and "State's Rights" during a purposeful 1980 campaign stop in Mississippi. As President, he often derided supposed "dependency" on government.

These coded messages implied that Blacks wantonly fed off the public trough through "government handouts". It was implied that cutting off the "free" flow of funds into that trough would force "personal responsibility" onto a recalcitrant group of "lazy" Blacks living off harder-working Whites. Unsurprisingly, "personal responsibility" became a popular GOP code-phrase for three decades.

These messages are louder and clearer given Atwater's 1981 interview.

But as conservative blogger John Hinderaker rightly points out, Atwater was not just saying coded racism works. He was also saying that blatant racism does not. Atwater – who counted African-Americans among his closest friends, who struggled to prove himself through an ill-fated stint on the Board of Trustees of Howard University and who even cut a blues record with B.B. King – may have actually believed this was "progress." And it some strange way it probably was.

Like a discordant film negative, the Southern Strategy and the Silent Majority revealed the changing reality of American society. Crass, blatant racism was being pushed out of the public square. That was a good thing. But coded messages remained a potent political tool.

And when Atwater decided to "Strip the Bark" off of Democratic presidential nominee Michael Dukakis during the 1988 campaign and, more importantly, to make convicted murderer Willie Horton his "running mate" ... he created a whole new socially-acceptable category of racial profiling – the drug-dealing superpredator. He turned the 1988 election into a *de facto* referendum on the criminality of Black males. And his winning strategy set the tone for an era of mass incarceration.

Changing the Narrative

In 1988, night was falling on Morning in America. The "Black Monday" crash of

1987 on Wall Street shocked the economy out of its freewheeling frenzy. The nation's capital was in a yearly competition with other major cities for the ignominious title "Murder Capital of America." And the often-ridiculed "Just Say No" anti-drug campaign metastasized into a full-on hysteria about a new drug – the dreaded scourge of "crack cocaine."

Less than two years earlier, the media mania after the drug-overdose death of college basketball star Len Bias galvanized a congressional response to the growing national freakout about cocaine and especially its cheaper derivative "crack," which was associated more with the Black inner-cities. On Oct. 27, 1986, the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 became law and its almost comically disproportionate punishment for crack possession versus powder cocaine launched a process of African-American incarceration that can only be described as systematic.

Although tons of "upscale" powder cocaine had long fueled many of Wall Street's financial high-rollers and some of Hollywood's creative lows, the cheap, portable rocks became an obsession for politicians and law enforcement. Over the next two years, the "crack crisis" reached a fever pitch. The War On Drugs unfolded much like a domestic Vietnam War as fear of well-armed gangs, bleak tales of crack babies and relentless "if it bleeds, it leads" coverage by local television news brought the growing violence into America's safe suburban living rooms every night at 5, 6 & 11.

Also unfolding every night was the high-stakes drama of the Iran-Contra scandal. The wounded Reagan Administration limped through the Congressional hearings of 1987. Reagan's approval rating dropped to a four-year low. In his final year more Americans actually disapproved than approved of the Gipper. And the stench of constitutional crisis threatened the Presidential aspirations of Vice President George H.W. Bush.

During the 1988 campaign, Vice President Bush's comical "out of the loop" defense undermined his competence *and* underlined his shiftiness. On one hand, Newsweek ran a cover story about Poppy's battle with "The Wimp Factor." On the other, The Nation ran a story indicating Bush may have been a long-time CIA operative. And, perhaps most ominously for team Bush, Sen. John Kerry's "Kerry Committee" had been digging into allegations of drug trafficking by Reagan's beloved Nicaraguan Contra rebels and found damaging evidence of a cocaine connection that first came to light in a 1985 story by Brian Barger and Robert Parry for the Associated Press.

The campaign to succeed Reagan looked like a big mess.

The lingering scandal, along with signs of a coming recession, catapulted a

mild-mannered straight-shooter from Massachusetts, its Governor named Michael Dukakis, to the top of the Democratic ticket. At the time, Dukakis's desire to restore competence to a government looked like a winning pitch. In fact, the unfolding Iran-Contra scandal and its relentless buck-passing was a primary motivation for the accountability-obsessed Dukakis. As he's since said, his run was motivated by a desire to clean-up Washington after the Iran-Contra mess.

As such, the stern and technocratic Dukakis offered a starkly reliable antidote to the malicious maelstrom of the late-stage Reagan White House. For him it was going to be a campaign of facts, figures and forthrightness. Initially, the American people bought his brand. By the time the Democrats triumphantly left their convention in Atlanta, Dukakis opened up a 17-point lead over Vice President George H.W. Bush and Bush's political team – led by Atwater – struggled to shift the conversation away from the scandals and away from a referendum on competence. Lee Atwater turned to the reliable voter response from the issue of crime.

Really, it was a no-brainer for the GOP's boyish wonder. He had to change the narrative. And he had to hit voters in the gut. At the time, violent crime reached record highs and the media was already obsessed with the issue. His plan to "make Willie Horton" Dukakis's running-mate simply took the most effective tool in America's historical woodshed (the issue of race) and married it to a quite real issue (the rise in crime).

Horton, a convicted murderer, had raped a White woman while out of a Massachusetts prison on "furlough," a prison-reform strategy with the goal of allowing prisoners to gradually reintegrate back into the community. Atwater used the Horton case as a crude tool to strip the bark off of Dukakis, who was also tied to liberal softness that opposed the death penalty and was portrayed as tolerating marauding urban drug criminals. The strategy quickly peeled ten points off Dukakis' lead.

By late August, an unremitting focus on crime, felon furloughs and the death penalty (which Dukakis opposed) – along with an ill-advised ride in a tank by the bobble-headed Dukakis – flipped the race. Bush was up by four points going into September. But Atwater wasn't done. His transformation of the issue crime was just beginning.

The Bush Campaign first featured Willie Horton in stump speeches during the summer of 1988. But those speeches lacked the one thing that made the ad so infamously toxic – Willie Horton's iconic face. So, under Atwater's guidance, the appropriately-named Americans for Bush Political Action Committee (AMBUSH) produced ads that not only framed the contest as a "law and order" election, but it reframed one of America's oldest racist tropes.

Horton, a convicted murderer, had been released on a weekend furlough when he stabbed a man and “repeatedly” raped his girlfriend, a storyline that the narration bluntly pointed out under the image of Horton’s mugshot. It then paired Horton’s glowering expression, sullen eyes and wildly unkempt afro with the memorable phrase “weekend passes for murderers.” It was ostensibly an ad about crime, but it scored a direct hit by rebooting a dangerous canard first highlighted on film by D.W. Griffiths’ *Birth of a Nation*—the Black man as sexual predator.

The first Willie Horton ad had a limited run beginning on Sept. 7, 1988. It was followed up by the notorious “Revolving Door” ad a couple weeks later. That ad featured a bevy of criminals heading into and out of prison – with, as writer Ismael Reed pointed out, the lone Black man in the line slyly looking up when the narrator said the word “rape.” Again the message was clear—if you are afraid of crime you should be afraid of Black men. Taken together, those ads turned a not-uncommon furlough program into political poison.

Although the ads did not by themselves alter the outcome of the election, they swirled into a national controversy. Even if the ad never ran on your local station, you were likely to have seen, heard or read about Willie Horton. The ads effectively linked the national hysteria about crime and crack with a racially-charged portrayal that inexorably intertwined the issue of crime and with the faces of Black men. It normalized a specific, spurious portrayal of Black male criminals.

The Kill Switch

The two ads also set-up CNN anchor Bernard Shaw’s famous opening question to Dukakis in the second Presidential debate. That question: “If Kitty Dukakis were raped and murdered, would you favor an irrevocable death penalty for the killer.” Dukakis quickly responded, “No I don’t Bernard, and I think you know I’ve opposed the death penalty all my life.” Dukakis went on to say he wanted to fight a “real war, not a phony war against drugs.” He proposed interdiction overseas and drug education at home. But none of that mattered. His death penalty answer was his campaign’s death sentence.

It was also the beginning of a post-Horton era in American society and criminal justice. Approval for the death penalty spiked to an all-time high in the years immediately after the 1988 campaign. The Black incarceration rate accelerated to society-shifting levels. It was followed by controversial new policing tactics that escalated arrests for trivial offenses and that imposed draconian punishments for drug crimes, like Stop and Frisk (1990), Broken Windows Theory (early 1990s), asset forfeiture (jumped 58 percent in 1990), “Three Strikes” laws (1994-6) and the “zero tolerance” focus on drug users and “street level”

crime over large-scale distributors (1988).

Like the outcome of the election of 1988, it's impossible to quantify the exact effect of the Willie Horton ad on the decade-long crackdown that followed. Like Trump's politically incorrect campaign, it relied on perceptions and feelings. Not fact and figures. Atwater's law-and-order campaign was in code, so it's hard to decipher the impact. But, just like the beating of Rodney King, the Willie Horton ad did not inspire soul-searching about racism. Instead, it signaled the beginning of an era of public and political tolerance for excesses in the name of law and order. King's beating may have been an outgrowth of the excessive policing these politics engendered. But the outrage and riot that followed the acquittal further cemented the racial divide between Atwater's new coalition and those left behind on the drug war's front lines.

The Scene of the Crime

Lee Atwater's successful "law and order" campaign quickly evolved into a bipartisan consensus on crime. In effect, Atwater built a new "law and order" majority that merged the Southern Strategy with Reagan Democrats and, most importantly, the moderate, White, Baby Boomer Middle Class voters now firmly planted in America's suburbs.

By 1992, "moderate" Democrats – like Southerner Bill Clinton – acknowledged the power of the GOP's "tough-on-crime" approach. Then-candidate Clinton's promise to put "100,000 cops on the street" catered specifically to the War on Drugs-based constituency that Atwater created. In a sense, racism was sanitized because it had become so inexorably subsumed into the category of crime. The consensus against crime was easily rationalized as "not racist." But, like so many things, Clinton took it a step further.

During his run against President George H.W. Bush, Clinton made certain to demonstrate his separation from left-wing sympathy toward Black anger by publicly upbraiding a rapper named Sista Souljah. In fact, "Sista Souljah moment" became political shorthand for triangulating against your own base by attacking a vulnerable proxy. She was one of many rappers making stark, musical statements against White racism and against police brutality in Black communities.

And in a moment of blatant grandstanding, Clinton excoriated her racialism. Of course, he didn't dare confront N.W.A. or Ice-T or any of the higher profile artists reporting from the frontlines of the Drug War. Instead, he took advantage of an easy target of opportunity to triangulate against African-Americans and traditional Liberals in his own party. It instantly burnished his crime-fighting credentials, which included stern enforcement of the death

penalty. And it worked like a charm.

Clinton expunged the Democrats' perceived "weakness" on crime. He distanced himself from the legacy of Dukakis and the much-derided moniker "liberal." Then as President he lorded over an escalation of the War On Drugs. By 1994, Clinton signed the draconian, bipartisan 1994 Crime Bill. He shepherded through welfare reform – a.k.a. the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act – in 1996. Yup, there's that "personal responsibility" code word Reagan loved so much. Clinton turned it into policy. And during the State of the Union that same year he made another Reaganesque turn when he announced that "the era of big government is over."

Atwater's triumph was complete – but he wouldn't live to see it.

Lee Atwater was struck by an aggressive brain tumor in 1990. Some felt it was karma. Suffering mightily, he literally spent his dying days apologizing for the ad, apologizing to Dukakis and fighting in vain to clear his name from the charge that he was racist.

The Bitter Ironies

Atwater's bare-knuckled campaign was a direct response to G.H.W. Bush's weakness on Iran-Contra. If the campaign had been about Bush's competence, his trustworthiness or his role in the Reagan White House, Houston would've had a problem. So, the focus on high crimes committed in the Reagan White House was replaced by street crimes committed in urban areas.

After all, Atwater didn't need urban voters to build an electoral victory. Atwater simply changed what should've been a national referendum on a constitutional crisis and replaced it with a referendum on law and order, on crack cocaine and on the furloughed Black male predator roaming freely in the urban decay of a changing America.

Most importantly, the Iran-Contra all-stars desperately needed Poppy Bush to retain control of the Executive Branch, particularly with independent counsel Lawrence Walsh's investigation churning in the background. Certainly, they could forget getting pardoned under the notoriously staid Dukakis.

And although Gary Webb wouldn't start his groundbreaking investigation into the Contra-cocaine connection to the crack epidemic until 1995, the Kerry Committee already had cracked open the lid on Contra narco-trafficking. No doubt, the scandal's biggest players knew there were more damning revelations looming behind the firewall. Losing the White House in 1988 could've been much more than a political rebuke. It could've meant prison. And that's the bitterest irony.

Atwater helped preserve the legal firewall between the perpetrators of Iran-Contra and the seediest, most destructive elements of that scandal ... by repurposing the fallout from a drug war that was partially due to the CIA-tolerated crack cocaine pipeline into South Central L.A. In essence, the CIA's protection of Nicaraguan Contras instrumental in that pipeline helped generate part of the "law and order" political justification that ultimately kept the covert perps in power. It was an all-too vicious circle for Black Americans that got them coming and going.

The final irony is that nearly three decades later, Hillary Clinton would bank on African-American turnout to win the White House. But they didn't quite turn out in the numbers she had hoped. Despite winning the popular vote, Clinton lost the "Battle of the Bases" in Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin. Her racially diverse urban base was trumped by Trump's monochromatic cadre of supporters in those states' rural counties. Was that flaccid Clinton turnout partially because she was haunted by her own support for the crime crackdown consensus that got her husband elected and reelected?

Perhaps even more damning were her not-so-coded comments in support of the 1994 crime bill when she warned of Black "superpredators." She even said society needs to "bring them to heel." Whether or not that specifically cost her the White House, it certainly didn't help. She underperformed Obama's 2012 total with African-Americans by 5 points (Clinton: 88 percent vs. Obama: 93 percent). It also didn't help that 1.4 million Black Americans had also lost the right to vote thanks to the grinding incarceration she'd once supported. Like far too many others who actually lost years of their lives to needless incarceration, she too was haunted by ghost of elections past. She merely lost the White House. Too many African-Americans lost far more.

The Ghost Of Willie Horton

Although there are as many interpretations of Donald Trump's win as there are blatherati on a CNN panel, the one undeniable thru-line of his campaign was his effective use of both dog whistling and blatant bullhorning. Like the role of Willie Horton in the 1988 campaign, the exact electoral impact of Trump's encoded messaging is hard to quantify.

As Peter Grier pointed out in the Christian Science Monitor, Trump wasn't elected "solely by [W]hite men in pickups who fly Confederate flags." He did get "almost 63 million votes," and, Grier continues, "you don't get that many without winning some women, some college-educated voters, and even some minorities." True enough.

But also like 1988, the question is far bigger and the impact potentially far

deeper than one electoral snapshot in time. Whether Trump won *because of* or *in spite of* his resurrection of racially encoded messaging, the simple fact is that his win gave racists and bigots and, for that matter, misogynists a reason to feel both validated and vindicated. Trump normalized the use of so-called “politically incorrect” language that, whether intentionally or not, expanded the old boundaries of racial coding to encompass Mexican criminals, Muslim terrorists and Chinese economic thieves ... and even made sexual assault seem acceptable.

Will it also translate into a so-called deportation force that will eject millions of Latinos? And what does it mean to eject Latinos “humanely”? If you have to say you’ll do something “humanely,” it probably means it could easily become inhumane.

Will Latinos – who are already disproportionately subject to criminal penalties – become targets of crackdown on “narcoterrorism”? Like Trump on crime, his pick for Homeland Security wildly overstates the problem ... and ignores the true perpetrators of the opioid crisis in the pharmaceutical industry.

Will Trump’s gung-ho pick for Attorney General – the racism-tainted Sen. Jeff Sessions, R-Alabama – leverage crime fears into a recharged War on Drugs? Will it happen in spite of voter-led efforts to dismantle it? Does the sudden rise in prison stock prices portend bounce-back for prison privatization and an incarceration rate that’s finally relenting a bit? Will #BlackLivesMatter become a political target under a hostile Department of Justice?

Will Team Trump’s notable hostility to Islam and his supporters’ comfort with the Muslim ban translate into a loyalty test? Will hate crimes continue past a post-election surge? And will it whip up into a wider war if and when one of his hotels is targeted by a lone wolf?

And will Trump’s mantra-like recitation of China as the culprit behind the deindustrialization of America (instead of the true culprits at Walmart and on Wall Street) lead to a trade war ... or worse?

While those among Trump’s supporters can claim that none of these possibilities is necessarily indicative of racism, the problem is that he’s marbled these issues with race. Like it or not, people voted for whole package, not just the issue. Frankly, it’s another reminder – perhaps an all-too bitter one – that *how elections are won* often matters just as much, if not more, than the victory itself. It’s a cliché, but the journey does matter. And Donald J. Trump’s journey to the White House followed a well-worn path through a half-century of racially coded messages littering the campaign trails of the post-Civil Rights Era.

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Risks of Trump's 'Winning' Obsession

Donald Trump's more pragmatic approach to foreign policy may be an improvement over the recent ideological obsessions but his own obsession with "winning" could cause trouble, says ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

A slogan from the sports world—"winning isn't everything; it's the only thing" — which usually is associated with Vince Lombardi, although he probably got it from another football coach, has always had a vacuous quality. It sounds like an attempt to make a contrast where there isn't really a contrast. What meaningful difference is there between "everything" and "only thing"?

But if there is any semantic substance to the phrase, maybe it has to do with winning as a pure, abstract value in its own right, separate from anything about the specific endeavor that was the vehicle for one contestant winning and another one losing. Winning per se is seen as the only thing that matters because everything else about the game that was played and won doesn't matter. And in the sports world, this begins to make sense; the activity is just a game, and it really doesn't matter in the larger course of human events.

Apply this frame of mind to more consequential endeavors, however, and the implications are more disturbing. In this regard, consider the incoming U.S. president and what we know, and don't know, about his outlook on foreign policy. Despite the earnest and usually sincere efforts by many commentators to discern pattern, direction, and purpose amid Donald Trump's tweets and other utterances, the dominant picture is still one of inconsistencies, contradictions, slogans, and lack of a record. We are, late in the transition period, still mostly flying blind regarding the actual future foreign policy of this new presidency. We have little idea of what Trump really cares about in the substance of U.S. foreign policy, as distinct from rhetoric that has worked in a campaign and that helps in his effort to portray himself as a populist.

We do know, however, that Trump cares a lot about winning — or more precisely, about being seen as a winner. He constantly returns to the framework of "winners" and "losers" as his way of identifying what is good and bad and what

matters to him. His repeated stress on associating himself with the biggest or best or most successful whatever is part of making sure that he is always seen as a winner. And on November 8th he registered the biggest win that any individual could. The slogan about winning being the only thing that does appear to apply to Donald Trump and to what drives him.

The Drawback of 'Winning'

There are many drawbacks in applying to foreign policy an outlook that is more appropriate to sports, but one set of drawbacks is suggested in a perceptive piece by Mark Katz about prospects for U.S.-Russian relations in the Trump administration. Katz observes that the principal demands that Vladimir Putin is likely to make as conditions for an improved relationship are ones that Trump would have good reason to agree to.

Accept the Russian annexation of Crimea? It's a fait accompli that is not going to be reversed anyway. Lift Ukraine-related sanctions on Russia? The sanctions are bad for business. Promise that none of the former Soviet republics apart from the Baltic states will join NATO or the European Union? The Europeans don't want them as members. Accept continuation of a Russian-allied Assad regime in Damascus? The jihadist alternatives are even worse.

Although Katz doesn't say so, these are valid reasons and low-cost ways for not just Trump but *any* U.S. president to accept much of what Putin wants in the interest of a better relationship that would have benefits for the United States. The problem, as Katz points out, is that Trump cannot be perceived as caving in to Putin. He has to be seen instead as having wrung concessions from Putin, and preferably as having gotten the better of him. Katz emphasizes that Trump especially must be seen doing so in the eyes of a domestic audience that includes hawkish, anti-Russian Congressional Republicans. Trump has the added baggage of the alleged Russian hacking and interference in the U.S. election; any favorable move he makes toward Putin risks being interpreted as payback for election favors.

On top of this is Trump's personal fixation about winning. He will feel a need to get Putin to back down on some of his demands not only to satisfy John McCain and Lindsey Graham but to satisfy himself that he can tout himself as having "won" a negotiation. The result may be that potential trades and understandings that could serve both U.S. and Russian interests will be forgone.

The general point that Trump is ill-disposed to understand and accept is that what best serves U.S. interests is not always easily recognized or defined as a "win". The most effective diplomacy yields agreements that both sides can honestly describe as successes. The sort of foreign government behavior most

likely to serve U.S. interests over the long term is what the foreign government perceives to serve its own long-term interests, rather than being a concession that was wrung out of it and that it will seek the first opportunity to reverse.

Complications for Trump

The issues of election interference and Trump's professed admiration for Putin make relations with Russia an especially delicate case, but the impulse to win is likely to complicate other negotiations and relationships as well. This may be the case with China, as suggested by Trump already trying to put the one-China policy in play.

Most of this mistake probably can be attributed to naïveté, and specifically to a failure to understand how the Taiwan issue figures in Chinese thinking, regardless of how justified or unjustified that thinking is to us. But it may also be an early indication, along with Trump's mercantilist approach to trade and outdated perceptions of such things as currency manipulation and job losses, of approaching the entire U.S.-Chinese relationship in win-loss terms.

Another case is Iran, where there already is a recent important deal in the form of the agreement that limits Iran's nuclear program. Here Trump's self-promoted image as the man who can reach better deals than anyone else fits with the existing Republican Party mantra that we should have gotten a "better deal" with Iran.

All of this ignores the long and laborious negotiating history of this agreement, what the Iranians have given up, and the nonproliferation objectives achieved. A quixotic attempt to reach some alternative that could better be described as a "win" – even though it would not move Iran any farther away from a nuclear weapon than it already is, nor advance any other U.S. interests – risks destroying the very important benefits of the existing agreement.

Notwithstanding Trump's trumpeting of his skills as a deal-maker, and notwithstanding all that has been said and written about the "transactional" approach this businessman is likely to take toward foreign policy, a man with his mindset is not about to operate in his new job the way he did in his old one. As head of a privately-owned business, profits and losses could be kept private – and with his refusal to make his tax returns public, they are largely staying that way. The public side of the business could be limited to his promotion of himself and his brand, with bragging about having the most luxurious buildings or the best golf courses.

Now the game has changed for him. The public perception of gains and losses is different. If Trump really were to approach foreign relations in a pragmatic,

businesslike way, that in general would be good for U.S. interests. But probably his need to be seen to “win” will get in the way. When winning is the only thing for the chief executive, that is not so good for the country.

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New McCarthyism Targets Trump

Official Washington’s New McCarthyism is painting President-elect Trump as almost a “traitor” for seeking détente with Russia, a moment when peace-oriented Americans face a complex choice, says John V. Walsh.

By John V. Walsh

When President Obama expelled Russian diplomats over the hysterical and unproven accusation of Russia “hacking the election,” Russian President Vladimir Putin refused to be drawn into a petty squabble, saying he would delay any response until Donald Trump assumed office. Instead Putin invited American diplomats and their families in Moscow to join the official holiday celebrations in the Kremlin.

Then came the shock that shook Official Washington: President-elect Trump, in the form of a tweet heard round the world, wrote: “Great move on delay (by V. Putin) – I always knew he was very smart!”

And just to be sure that everyone saw it, Trump “pinned” the tweet which means it is the first thing seen by viewers of his account. This was a first use of “pinning” for Trump. And to be doubly sure, he posted it on Instagram as well. This was no spontaneous midnight outburst but a very deliberate action taken on Friday noon, Dec. 30, the day after Obama had issued his retaliation order.

The implications of this move are, arguably, breathtaking. Trump treated Putin as his ally, not as a hated adversary. And he treated Obama and the bipartisan foreign policy elite of Washington as his adversaries, not his allies – a move that makes perfect sense if Trump’s desire is to rein in the War Party’s New Cold War and to strive for a New Détente with Russia.

If the main enemy is those who are stoking the New Cold War and risking worse,

then Trump has placed himself squarely against these war hawks. And stop to consider for a moment who these folks are. Besides President Obama and Hillary Clinton, they represent a full-blown armchair army: neocons, liberal interventionists, the mainstream media, various Soros-funded “non-governmental organizations,” virtually all the important think tanks, the leadership of both major parties, and the CIA and the other U.S. intelligence agencies. This array of Official Washington’s power elite has been working 24/7 at demonizing Putin and stoking tensions with nuclear-armed Russia. Trump took on all of them on with his tweet!

Putin as Ally Against the War Party

As Trump looks for new allies in pursuit of a New Détente and a relaxation of U.S.-Russian tensions, Putin is foremost among them. Thus, in the struggle for peace, Trump has drawn new lines, and they cross national borders. Not since Ronald Reagan embraced Mikhail Gorbachev or Richard Nixon went to China have we seen a development like this. In this new battle to reduce tensions between nuclear powers, Trump has shown considerable courage, taking on a wide range of attackers.

Later that afternoon, Maya Kosoff writing for Vanity Fair put out an article entitled “Twitter Melts Down over ‘Treason’ After Trump Praises Putin.” The first batch of such tweets came from “journalists and other foreign policy experts,” the next from Evan McMullin, the former CIA officer who tried to draw off Republican votes from Trump in the general election, who tweeted: “To be clear, @realDonaldTrump is siding with America’s greatest adversary even as it attacks our democracy. Never grow desensitized to this.”

Finally came the predictable rash of tweets calling Trump’s words “treasonous” or “seditious.” In response, Team Trump refused to issue a “clarification,” saying instead that Trump’s words spoke for themselves.

As stunning as Trump’s tweet was in many ways, it was in other ways entirely predictable. Despite the mainstream media’s scorn and Hillary Clinton’s mocking him as Putin’s “puppet,” Trump has held firm to his promise that he will seek peace with Russia and look for areas of cooperation such as fighting terrorism.

So, even when Trump’s Russia comments appeared to cost him politically, he stuck with them, suggesting that he believes that this détente is important. The rule of thumb is that if a politician says something that will win votes, you do not know whether it is conviction or opportunism. But if a politician says something that should lose her or him votes, then you can bet it is heartfelt.

Trump was bashed over his resistance to the New Cold War both during the

Republican primaries when many GOP leaders were extremely hawkish on Russia and during the general election when the Clinton campaign sought to paint him as some sort of Manchurian Candidate. Even his vice presidential candidate Mike Pence staked out a more hawkish position than Trump.

Trump stood by his more dovish attitude though it presented few electoral advantages and many negatives. By that test, he appears to be sincere. So, his latest opening to Putin was entirely predictable.

A Choice of Peace or War

What is troubling, however, is that some Americans who favor peace hate Trump so much that they recoil from speaking out in his defense over his “treasonous” tweet though they may privately agree with it. Some progressives are uncomfortable with the mainstream’s descent into crude McCarthyism but don’t want to say anything favorable about Trump.

After all, a vote for President is either thumbs up or thumbs down – nothing in between – though voters may like or dislike some policy prescriptions of one candidate and other positions of another candidate. And progressives could list many reasons to not vote for Trump.

But a presidential administration is multi-issued – not all or none. One can disagree with a president on some issues and agree on others. For instance, many progressives are outraged over Trump’s harsh immigration policies but agree with him on scrapping the TPP trade deal.

In other words, there is no reason why those who claim to be for peace should not back Trump on his more peaceful approach toward Putin and Russia, even if they disdain his tough talk about fighting terrorism. That is the reality of politics.

What I’ve discovered is that many progressives – as well as many on the Right – who oppose endless war and disdain empire will tell you in whispers that they do support Trump’s attempt at Détente 2.0, though they doubt he will succeed. In the meantime, they are keeping their heads down and staying quiet.

But clearly Trump’s success depends on how much support he gets – as weighed against how much grief he gets. By lacking the courage to defend Trump’s “treasonous tweet,” those who want to rein in the warmongers may be missing a rare opportunity. If those who agree with Trump on this issue stay silent, it may be a lost opportunity as well.

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Anti-Trump Coalition Shows Cracks

When national Democrats are not blaming Vladimir Putin for Hillary Clinton's defeat, they're pointing fingers at anti-war Democrats and Greens who found Clinton's hawkishness and corporatism unacceptable, notes Nat Parry.

By Nat Parry

Somewhat surprisingly, a genuine grassroots, broad-based movement has emerged to oppose the incoming Trump administration, but perhaps less surprisingly – given the American left's self-marginalizing tendencies – the nascent efforts may already be descending into sectarianism, finger-pointing and divisive identity-based politics.

One early sign of the anti-Trump coalition's fracturing came when a group of women decided after Hillary Clinton's defeat that they would organize a "Million Women March" to commiserate the first major-party female presidential nominee's electoral loss to Donald Trump, a misogynist.

The day after the election, a Hawaii woman named Teresa Shook created a Facebook event and invited a few dozen of her friends to march on Washington on Jan. 21, the day after Trump's inauguration. The idea was picked up by a Hillary Clinton Facebook fan page called Pantsuit Nation, with more than three million members, and suddenly there were multiple event pages with thousands of women signing up.

The original name of the march, however, was hastily dropped after the organizers were accused of "cultural appropriation." Apparently the organizers hadn't considered that the name "Million Woman March" was already used in 1997 by a demonstration organized for black women.

As one critic wrote on Facebook, "I take issue with white feminists taking the name of something that Black people started to address our struggles. ... I will not even consider supporting this until the organizers are intersectional, original and come up with a different name."

Other concerns were raised about whether an event organized primarily by white women would properly address issues of class and race, but some of those fears now seem to have been allayed. The "national co-chairs" of the event include women of color Tamika Mallory, Carmen Perez, and Linda Sarsour, with notable credentials in civil rights and social justice activism on their resumes.

Mallory, for example, is "nationally recognized as a fiery and outspoken champion for social justice who has worked closely with the Obama Administration

as an advocate for civil rights issues,” according to the event’s website. Perez “has dedicated 20 years to advocating for many of today’s important civil rights issues, including mass incarceration, gender equality, violence prevention, racial healing and community policing.”

The event’s partner organizations include both established mainstream organizations such as the National Organization for Women and Oxfam, and upstarts further to the left such as Code Pink and Center for Popular Democracy. While Democratic Party-affiliated groups, such as the Indian American Democratic Club, have endorsed, so too have alternative parties such as the Baltimore County Greens.

Tactical Differences

But although many Democrats have gotten behind the women’s march, they seem to be keeping other counter-inaugural efforts at arm’s length. While Greens and anti-capitalists are uniting to take a stand on Jan. 20 in opposition to Trump’s swearing-in ceremonies, Democratic Party-affiliated groups are nowhere to be seen in the lists of endorsements for Inauguration Day protests.

For example, an “Occupy Inauguration” effort has been endorsed by the U.S. Green Party and Socialist Alternative, but no Democrats. The DC Welcoming Committee, “a collective of experienced local activists and out-of-work gravediggers,” is spearheading #DisruptJ20, which aims to “shut down the Inauguration,” while other events are taking place in spite of Democrats across the country.

Democratic Party efforts, on the other hand, include a “Boycott Trump” campaign initiated by the Democratic Coalition Against Trump, which claims to be “directly countering Donald Trump” through grassroots action, advertising and opposition research. The organization, comprised of Democratic elected officials, party chairs, delegates, grassroots leaders and activists in all 50 states, pledges to build “a movement to stop Trump,” although has not endorsed counter-inaugural activities.

“There is an effort by Clinton supporters and the Democratic Party machine to keep the message safe,” said Sara Flounders, co-coordinator of the International Action Center, which plans to protest on Jan. 20. “But people who believed in the current electoral system just days ago are changing. They feel betrayed.”

Although at the moment, the Democratic Party and more left-wing elements seem to share common goals of “resisting the Trump regime,” many on the Democratic side still blame supporters of the Green Party’s presidential nominee Jill Stein for allegedly costing Clinton the election.

Under this logic, people who support parties in competition with Democrats still

somehow owe their votes to the Democratic nominee on election day. It doesn't seem to matter to Democratic partisans that Greens and other third party supporters have opted out of the two-party system in favor of building alternatives.

As Slate staff writer Jim Newell described the strange thinking in a column last month, "Democrats are still in the business of blaming people who are not Democrats for Hillary Clinton losing a presidential election." Since third parties exist and don't seem to be going anywhere, Newell notes that rather than bashing their supporters, Democrats might be better served by changing their campaign strategies "to limit defections to third parties, like they did in the previous two presidential elections."

Blaming Progressives

This, however, is not what Democrats are doing. Instead, they seem intent on vilifying people on the left for not uniting behind their candidate, Hillary Clinton, who many could not support due to her pro-war policies and the backing she enjoyed from Wall Street.

On social media, Democratic partisans are issuing such attacks as "@DrJillStein HRC was the most qualified presidential candidate, and you ruined EVERYTHING," and "you are a major reason why 2016 was the worst year ever." Some have even accused Stein supporters of "caus[ing] the apocalypse."

Beyond bashing Green Party supporters, some Democrats continue to lay the blame for Clinton's historic loss at the feet of Bernie Sanders supporters. At Mother Jones magazine, Kevin Drum writes that "Republicans would have twisted [Sanders] up like a wet rag and tossed him down the drain."

Drum also blames millennials for Clinton's defeat, saying that young people "abandoned [her] for third-party candidates."

This follows similar arguments made by Prof. Gil Troy, who wrote at Time Magazine on Nov. 14 that "Senator Bernie Sanders earned the 2016 'Ralph Nader Award' for the Leftist Most Responsible for Helping Republicans Win the Presidency."

By forcing her to express support for some progressive policies during the primaries, such as eliminating tuition at in-state colleges and universities, she was unable to mount "an effective re-centering in the fall," Troy wrote. (This "effective re-centering" might have been further hampered when Wikileaks published excerpts from a paid speech Clinton gave in 2013, in which she acknowledged that on certain policy issues, she holds "both a public and a private position.")

Troy further asserted that “just as Ralph Nader siphoned tens of thousands of votes on Election Day 2000 in Florida from Al Gore, causing the deadlock and George W. Bush’s victory, Bernie Sanders’ similar vampire effect enfeebled Hillary Clinton.”

According to this view, even running a progressive primary election challenge – much less a third party campaign – is unacceptably dangerous, creating a so-called “vampire effect” that “siphons votes” that rightfully belong to someone else.

So, discouragingly to those who may have hoped for effective opposition to Trump and the Republicans, even with common ground being sought at the moment between progressives and mainstream Democrats, recriminations continue, and unless a genuine effort at promoting understanding is made, the nascent alliance between leftists and moderates will most likely fizzle out after Jan. 20 – if it lasts that long.

Nat Parry is co-author of *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush*. [This article first appeared at

<https://essentialopinion.wordpress.com/2017/01/03/nascent-anti-trump-coalition-already-fracturing/>]

Danger in Democrats Demonizing Putin

With the Clintons’ corporate money machine floundering after a devastating election defeat, Democrats are desperate to find someone to blame and have dangerously settled on Vladimir Putin, writes Norman Solomon.

By Norman Solomon

Many top Democrats are stoking a political firestorm. We keep hearing that Russia attacked democracy by hacking into Democratic officials’ emails and undermining Hillary Clinton’s campaign. Instead of candidly assessing key factors such as longtime fealty to Wall Street that made it impossible for her to ride a populist wave, the party line has increasingly circled around blaming Vladimir Putin for her defeat.

Of course partisan spinners aren’t big on self-examination, especially if they’re aligned with the Democratic Party’s dominant corporate wing. And the option of continually fingering the Kremlin as the main villain of a 2016 morality play is clearly too juicy for functionary Democrats to pass up – even

if that means scorching civil liberties and escalating a new cold war that could turn radioactively hot.

Much of the current fuel for the blame-Russia blaze has to do with the horrifying reality that Donald Trump will soon become president. Big media outlets are blowing oxygen into the inferno. But the flames are also being fanned by people who should know better.

Consider the *Boston Globe* article that John Shattuck – a former Washington legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union – wrote in mid-December. “A specter of treason hovers over Donald Trump,” the civil libertarian wrote. “He has brought it on himself by dismissing a bipartisan call for an investigation of Russia’s hacking of the Democratic National Committee as a ‘ridiculous’ political attack on the legitimacy of his election as president.”

As quickly pointed out by Mark Kleiman, a professor of public policy at New York University, raising the specter of treason “is simply wrong” – and “its wrongness matters, not just because hyperbole always weakens argument, but because the carefully restricted definition of the crime of treason is essential to protecting free speech and the freedom of association.”

A Liberal Zeitgeist

Is Shattuck’s piece a mere outlier? Sadly, no. Although full of gaping holes, it reflects a substantial portion of the current liberal zeitgeist. And so the argument that Shattuck made was carried forward into the new year by Robert Kuttner, co-editor of *The American Prospect*, who approvingly quoted Shattuck’s article in a Jan. 1 piece that flatly declared: “In his dalliance with Vladimir Putin, Trump’s actions are skirting treason.”

The momentum of fully justified loathing for Trump has drawn some normally level-headed people into untenable – and dangerous – positions. (The “treason” approach that Shattuck and Kuttner have embraced is particularly ironic and misplaced, given that Trump’s current course will soon make him legally deserving of impeachment due to extreme conflicts of interest that are set to violate the Emoluments Clause of the Constitution.)

Among the admirable progressives who supported Bernie Sanders’s presidential campaign but have succumbed to Russia-baiting of Trump are former Labor Secretary Robert Reich and Congressman Keith Ellison, who is a candidate for chair of the Democratic National Committee.

Last week, in a widely circulated post on his Facebook page, Reich wrote: “Evidence continues to mount that Trump is on Putin’s side.” But Reich’s list of “evidence” hardly made the case that Trump “is on Putin’s side,” whatever that

means.

A day later, when Trump tweeted a favorable comment about Putin, Rep. Ellison quickly echoed Democratic Party orthodoxy with a tweet: “Praising a foreign leader for undermining our democracy is a slap in the face to all who have served our country.”

Some of Putin’s policies are abhorrent, and criticizing his regime should be fair game as much as criticizing any other. At the same time, “do as we say, not as we do” isn’t apt to put the United States on high moral ground. The U.S. government has used a wide repertoire of regime change tactics including direct meddling in elections, and Uncle Sam has led the world in cyberattacks.

Intervention in the election of another country is categorically wrong. It’s also true that – contrary to conventional U.S. wisdom at this point – we don’t know much about a Russian role in last year’s election. We should not forget the long history of claims from agencies such as the CIA that turned out to be misleading or downright false.

Late last week, when the Obama administration released a drum-rolled report on the alleged Russian hacking, Democratic partisans and mainline journalists took it as something akin to gospel. But the editor of ConsortiumNews.com, former Associated Press and *Newsweek* reporter Robert Parry, wrote an assessment concluding that the latest report “again failed to demonstrate that there is any proof behind U.S. allegations that Russia both hacked into Democratic emails and distributed them via WikiLeaks to the American people.”

Key Questions

Even if the Russian government did intervene in the U.S. election by hacking emails and publicizing them, key questions remain. Such as:

–Do we really want to escalate a new cold war with a country that has thousands of nuclear weapons?

–Do we really want a witch-hunting environment here at home, targeting people with views that have some overlap with Kremlin positions?

–Can the president of Russia truly “undermine our democracy” – or aren’t the deficits of democracy in the United States overwhelmingly self-inflicted from within the U.S. borders?

It’s so much easier to fixate on Putin as a villainous plotter against our democracy instead of directly taking on our country’s racist and class biases, its structural mechanisms that relentlessly favor white and affluent voters, its

subservience to obscene wealth and corporate power.

There's been a lot of talk lately about refusing to normalize the Trump presidency. And that's crucial. Yet we should also push back against normalizing the deflection of outrage at the U.S. political system's chronic injustices and horrendous results – deflection that situates the crux of the problem in a foreign capital instead of our own.

We should reject the guidance of politicians and commentators who are all too willing to throw basic tenets of civil liberties overboard, while heightening the risks of brinkmanship that could end with the two biggest nuclear powers blowing up the world.

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WPost's New 'Fake News' on Russian 'Hack'

Exclusive: The Washington Post's latest folly – falsely reporting a Russian “hack” into Vermont's electric grid – reflects the paper's steep decline from the days of Watergate, reports ex-British intelligence officer Annie Machon.

By Annie Machon

The Democratic National Committee (DNC) has been hacked – cue a national American trauma, allegations of dirty tricks, fears that democracy has been subverted, all leading to what the next U.S. president would call “our long national nightmare.”

But, no, I am not talking about the current Russo-phobic hysteria currently engulfing the mainstream U.S. media, replete with claims about “fake news,” expelled Russian diplomats, and a lack of skepticism about the evidence-lite hacking allegations.

Instead, I am dipping back into history – the old Watergate scandal – when Richard Nixon's “plumbers” stole information the old-fashioned way; they broke into the DNC offices, rifled the files and planted listening devices. On June 17, 1972, when police captured five burglars inside the DNC offices at the Watergate building in Washington, the case slowly unfolded over the next two

years until President Nixon resigned on Aug. 9, 1974, and was replaced by Vice President Gerald Ford who declared “our long national nightmare is over.”

During those two years, The Washington Post became internationally and justifiably famous for breaking the story about Nixon’s role in the Watergate cover-up and – since then – generations of cub reporters have dreamed of being the next Woodward and Bernstein. Besides leading to the downfall of the mendacious and paranoid Nixon, the scandal contributed to the reining in of an out-of-control intelligence establishment culminating in the Church Committee hearings of 1975.

What followed was greater, if unfortunately temporary, control of the U.S. intelligence agencies and at least an apparent respect for the rights of American citizens under the terms of the U.S. Constitution. The work of The Washington Post then was indeed relevant and world-changing.

The movie depiction of the Post’s investigation, “All the President’s Men” celebrated this exposé and confirmed in Western minds that our wonderful free press spoke truth to power. And perhaps, in this case, the press did (although I have to say that I preferred the meltdown scene in the prophetic movie, “The Network,” which envisioned the slide of the news media into ratings-driven madness).

Lost Credibility

But – regarding The Washington Post – how the mighty have fallen. Over the past couple of months, the Post has blown what was left of its journalistic reputation out of the water.

First it unblushingly reported the PropOrNot “blacklist” of “fake news” Internet sites that were allegedly working at the Kremlin’s command to swing the U.S. election to Donald Trump, except that the list encompassed many of the most reputable independent (i.e., not U.S. corporate-owned) English-language international news sites (including Consortiumnews.com). Threatened with angry writs from some of the sites, the paper quickly printed a disclaimer distancing itself from the anonymous people behind PropOrNot, but still not apologizing for the McCarthyistic smear.

Then, last Friday, the newspaper was at it again – breathlessly reporting that the Vermont energy grid was apparently hacked by the scapegoat du jour, Russia. Although there should have been obvious questions asked: Why Vermont? What has that state ever done to Russia? Well, not much as it turns out; nor Russia to Vermont.

Yet again the Post has revised its reporting down to the fact that a laptop,

completely unconnected to the grid, according to the energy provider's statement, had been infected by malware. In other words, there was no Russian hacking into the Vermont power grid.

And yet, because it's The Washington Post, this fake breaking "news" was taken seriously and metastasized through the body politic of America and beyond. This Russian hacking became a "post-truth" reality, no matter how fact-free the original story. (I hereby propose a #factfreediet for us all on Twitter for January, so we can highlight this phenomenon.)

Explaining Why

But here are the obvious next questions: Why did this non-story appear in The Washington Post and why now? Has The Washington Post suddenly fallen prey to a revamped Operation Mockingbird, its editorial staff stuffed to the gills with CIA agents of influence?

As I have written before, the CIA and its associates within the Deep State appear to be hell bent on undermining the legitimacy of the Trump election result and this hyping of Russian hacking is one of the key weapons in this struggle. So perhaps the Deep State players are (re)activating a few agents of influence in the mainstream American media?

But there may possibly be a more tangential explanation for The Washington Post's plunge into fiction: Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon.com and one of the wealthiest people in the world. Amazon is not only the favorite purveyor of all goods online, but also suspected (at least in the U.K.) of massive tax avoidance scams as well as abusive employment practices in the same country.

Bezos is also, since 2013, the proud owner of The Washington Post, a purchase that heralded his unexpected business swerve into the old mainstream media. The deal to buy the newspaper was reported in the business press to have cost him \$250 million.

Interestingly in the same year Amazon cut a deal to develop a cloud-based service for the CIA – a deal worth a reported \$600 million over ten years. It also appears that this service has expanded across all 17 of America's intelligence agencies, so who can tell what it might be worth to Amazon now and in the future?

It is no doubt just an interesting coincidence that the Bezos-owned Washington Post is the fount of the current stream of CIA assertions that the Russians are hacking key U.S. institutions, starting with the DNC – which then somehow became "hacking the election" – and now the utility grid. Bezos himself has asserted that he exerts no direct control over the editorial decisions of the newspaper,

and he has left in place many of the neoconservative editors who preceded his stewardship, so there may not be any need for direct orders.

Of course, all state-level players, including the Russians and certainly the Americans, are going to be probing the basic systems underpinning all our countries for vulnerabilities. That is what intelligence agencies do, and it is also what mercenary spy companies do on behalf of their corporate clients, and what hackers (either of the criminal flavor or the socially-minded hacktivists) do too. The dodgy malware, the code, and the vulnerabilities are all out there, often for sale or squirreled away by the national spy agencies for potential future advantage.

Whatever the truth about the DNC hacking allegations, The Washington Post sadly seems uninterested in properly pursuing it – indeed it seems interested in little beyond pursuing the specific political agenda of fanning a dangerous distrust of Russia and undermining the legitimacy of President-elect Trump.

If such a compliant corporate culture had existed back in 1972 at the time of the first DNC “hack,” the Watergate scandal would surely never have been exposed. And the old media still wonders why it is no longer trusted?

Annie Machon is a former intelligence officer in the UK’s MI5 Security Service (the U.S. counterpart is the FBI).

Kerry’s Belated Israel Truth-telling

After four years of getting “played” by Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, Secretary of State Kerry told some truths about Israel-Palestine that raised hackles among Netanyahu’s acolytes, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar describes.

By Paul R. Pillar

Secretary of State John Kerry’s speech last week on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is an excellent statement of the realities that are inescapable aspects of this conflict and that anyone who claims to deal with the dispute seriously must understand.

Most of those realities the secretary described with admirable clarity and directness. A few others, at least as important, come through between the lines, although the hand of political correctness on matters involving Israel still weighs so heavily that even a Secretary of State with less than a month to go

before becoming a private citizen does not feel free to state them directly.

Important points that the Secretary made explicitly, and that should be takeaways from the speech for everyone, include these:

For U.S. policymakers dealing with this conflict, U.S. interests must come first. The United States should not, any more than any other outside party claiming to want to resolve the conflict, act as lawyer for one side or the other. U.S. presidents and secretaries of state are paid to advance the interests of their own country, not those of any foreign government or entity.

As Kerry put it near the outset of his speech, “My job, above all, is to defend the United States of America – to stand up for and defend our values and our interests in the world. And if we were to stand idly by and know that in doing so we are allowing a dangerous dynamic to take hold which promises greater conflict and instability to a region in which we have vital interests, we would be derelict in our own responsibilities.”

A two-state solution, notwithstanding how much out of reach it seems to become each day, is still the only outcome that can provide lasting peace and enable Israel to be a Jewish and democratic state. For the Palestinians, indefinite denial of their own nation-state means indefinite denial of the aspirations for self-determination felt by any other people, and indefinite subjugation, discontent and the inevitable violence that results from such denial. For Israelis, the basic demographic and geographic facts that frame the national choice remain the same as they have always been with regard to being a Jewish state, being democratic, and being in control of all the land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River. Israel can be any two of those things, but it is impossible to be all three.

To those inclined to discard the idea of a two-state solution right now and to speak of one state, Kerry asked this: “So if there is only one state, you would have millions of Palestinians permanently living in segregated enclaves in the middle of the West Bank, with no real political rights, separate legal, education, and transportation systems, vast income disparities, under a permanent military occupation that deprives them of the most basic freedoms. Separate and unequal is what you would have. And nobody can explain how that works. Would an Israeli accept living that way? Would an American accept living that way? Will the world accept it?”

Impediments to Peace

Israeli settlements are not the only impediment to a peace settlement, but they are one of the biggest impediments. Apologists for Israeli policies routinely

argue in a monocausal way about troubles in the Middle East, saying that if X doesn't explain everything then we should behave as if it explains nothing. West Bank settlements have often been the X in this mode of argumentation. Kerry went into considerable detail in his speech with facts and figures about how the settlement program is, as a straightforward matter of geography, making a viable Palestinian state less and less of a possibility.



He observed, "If more and more settlers are moving into the middle of Palestinian areas, it's going to be just that much harder to separate, that much harder to imagine transferring sovereignty, and that is exactly the outcome that some are purposefully accelerating."

Condoning expansion of some settlements but not others is not a solution. This is a favorite pseudo-solution to the settlements problem among those who want to appear reasonable while tilting heavily toward Israel and the settlement movement. The underlying presumption is that most of the biggest and oldest settlement blocs will become part of Israel in a final agreement, so we should be cool with new construction there and limit our displeasure to newer settlements that are even deeper in the West Bank.

Such a formula flouts the principle of international law that prohibits any colonization by the conqueror of militarily conquered territory. It also flouts the concept—repeatedly voiced at least as much by the Israeli government as by anyone else—that the terms of a final agreement should be determined in direct negotiations between the parties and not predetermined, including by outsiders.

Kerry aptly described the problem as being that "the decision of what constitutes a bloc is being made unilaterally by the Israeli Government, without consultation, without the consent of the Palestinians, and without granting the Palestinians a reciprocal right to build in what will be, by most accounts, part

of Palestine.”

Settlements do not contribute to Israeli security, and instead detract from it. Kerry noted how many settlements “actually increase the security burden on the Israeli Defense Forces.” He also could have mentioned how prominently the Israeli occupation, including the colonization through settlements, has figured as a *cause célèbre* for extremist violence.

Unsustainable Occupation

It's not only the colonization through settlements, but also other aspects of the occupation, that are unsustainable. They also are a form of oppression and denial of rights to an entire population. Kerry spoke of visiting West Bank communities where he “met Palestinians struggling for basic freedom and dignity amidst the occupation, passed by military checkpoints that can make even the most routine daily trips to work or school an ordeal, and heard from business leaders who could not get the permits that they needed to get their products to the market and families who have struggled to secure permission just to travel for needed medical care.”

The position of the international community on the issue of the occupation has been one of overwhelming consensus (except for the United States and Israel) and consistency. The resolution passed by the Security Council last month was not a departure, despite contentions that it was. The distinction drawn between Israel and the territory it occupies is consistent with the consensus view that Israel is a full and legitimate member of the community of nations while its occupation of Palestinian territory is illegitimate.

Neither is there anything new in the resolution involving East Jerusalem – which is just as much a part of militarily conquered territory as the rest of the West Bank and just as much subject to negotiation to determine final status, rather than having that status determined by unilateral and expansive line-drawing by one of the parties.

The characteristics of a lasting and fair peace have been well known for some time. The terms still must be determined through negotiations between the parties, but this is not as if there were doubt about what the overall shape would have to be to constitute a lasting peace, or doubt about it being possible to construct a workable two-state solution – at least until and unless continued Israeli colonization through settlements extinguishes that possibility altogether. Kerry described the necessary characteristics by laying out six general principles for any agreement – principles that many different international statesmen could have expressed in very similar terms in previous years, and that many have in fact expressed.

In addition to these realities, the dedication of this Secretary of State, and the president under whom he serves, to work for outcomes that would serve the security and well-being of Israel as well as other concerned parties comes through strongly.

Thomas Friedman captures this well when he writes, "Barack Obama and John Kerry admire and want to preserve Israel as a Jewish and democratic state in the Land of Israel. I have covered this issue my entire adult life and have never met two U.S. leaders more committed to Israel as a Jewish democracy."

President Obama bestowed on Israel the biggest aid package that the United States has ever given to anyone, and before last month he was the only U.S. president who, using the U.S. veto power, had never allowed the United Nations Security Council to pass any resolution critical of Israel. Against this background, the calumnies being thrown at Mr. Obama by the Israeli government and those who follow its lead are offensive and inexcusable.

Between the Lines

Secretary Kerry's speech reflected some additional realities in a more subtle and indirect way, including the following.

The current Israeli government rejects a two-state solution. By now, not only the deeds but even the words of this government and its senior members have made obvious how much of a smokescreen have been Prime Minister Netanyahu's occasional utterances, intended for international audiences, ostensibly accepting the idea of a Palestinian state. Power in Israel has moved toward members of the hard right who are unabashed about openly rejecting the concept of such a state and openly calling for annexation of occupied territory. It takes two negotiating partners to make a deal. Right now there is no such partner on the Israeli side. There will not be until and unless there is a major political redirection in Israel.

There is huge asymmetry in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Secretary Kerry – although striving to observe the usual convention about casting comparable blame on both sides, and devoting a significant part of his speech to offenses and shortcomings on the Palestinian side – touched on this lightly at a couple of points in his speech, such as in quoting the pertinent observation of Shimon Peres: "The original mandate gave the Palestinians 48 percent, now it's down to 22 percent. I think 78 percent is enough for us."

The asymmetry is patently huge regarding the instruments of power, including instruments to inflict armed violence. It is fundamentally huge in the sense that one side is the occupier and the other side is the occupied. It is within

the power of an occupier, but not the occupied, to end an occupation.

This asymmetry sheds light on the attitudes of each side toward negotiations and who does or does not want to negotiate in good faith, a subject on which there have been many accusations with little regard for the historical record. One can cut through the cloud of accusations by reflecting on what each side would have to gain from *not* negotiating in good faith.

Most Israelis currently don't have it all that bad with continuation of the status quo, and their rightist leaders evidently think they can keep a good thing going indefinitely despite the aforementioned demographic and geographic facts. The Palestinians, by contrast, are obviously the big losers in a continuation of the status quo: no state, no self-determination, no end to their subjugation, and no unilateral means to end any of this. They have ample reason to negotiate seriously, because they know a negotiated peace is the only way out of their current predicament.

The asymmetry also gives perspective to Israeli complaints, a crescendo of which followed last week's Security Council resolution, about being singled out for criticisms not directed at others. As a reading of this resolution suggests, if Israel receives criticism that others don't, it is because Israel is doing things that others don't.

There is no doubt that if Palestinians or other Arabs were colonizing land that they had seized through military force from Israel, such colonization would be every bit as much the target of critical Security Council resolutions. But Palestinians aren't colonizing seized land, and as Kerry noted, they are being kept from building even on land that is supposed to be theirs.

Different Interests

U.S. interests differ substantially from Israeli interests, especially as the latter are defined by the current Israeli government. A cottage industry has grown up over the past couple of years devoted to highlighting bad chemistry between Obama and Netanyahu, but personalities and chemistry between leaders have little to do with strain in U.S.-Israeli relations. Sure, dealing with the likes of Netanyahu tends to stimulate personal irritation, but that is hardly specific to Obama. It was Bill Clinton who, after his first meeting with the importunate Israeli prime minister, said with exasperation, "Who's the f***ing superpower here?"

The main strands of Israeli policy – and certainly almost everything having to do with the settlement program and occupation policies in general, which constitute a very large part of what Israeli policy is about – are not only

incongruent with U.S. interests but directly opposed to them. This will be true as long as those policies continue, even if the prime minister were to get a personality transplant.

There is every reason to believe that the United States and Israel can be good friends, especially when bearing in mind that the current right-wing government represents only one part of what is a spectrum of diverse views within Israel. And friends don't let friends drive drunk.

As Friedman observes, it's unfortunate that President-elect Trump is "passing Israel another bottle of wine." Or as Secretary Kerry put it, "Regrettably, some seem to believe that the U.S. friendship means the U.S. must accept any policy, regardless of our own interests, our own positions, our own words, our own principles – even after urging again and again that the policy must change. Friends need to tell each other the hard truths, and friendships require mutual respect."

Commentary often seen in the opinion pages that seems to assume a perfectly harmonious no-daylight-between-us relationship as what should be normal in U.S.-Israel relations, and that searches for missteps by the U.S. administration of the day as the reason the relationship is not perfectly harmonious, disregards the serious underlying conflict of interests. This conflict of interests routinely gets disguised with the term "ally" – a term that usually refers to mutually beneficial cooperation and commitment but in this case is applied to a one-way relationship in which enormous largesse in one direction is met in the other direction by such behavior as undermining the patron's foreign policy initiatives and interfering in its internal politics.

Netanyahu's government seems to go out of its way to poke a stick in the eye of its benefactor, with the settlement program one of its favorite sticks. Neither incorrect use of a term nor tweets about how harmony will break out on January 20 can hide such realities.

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The War Against Alternative Information

The U.S. government is creating a new \$160 million bureaucracy to shut down

information that doesn't conform to U.S. propaganda narratives, building on the strategy that sold the bloody Syrian "regime change" war, writes Rick Sterling.

By Rick Sterling

The U.S. establishment is not content simply to have domination over the media narratives on critical foreign policy issues, such as Syria, Ukraine and Russia. It wants total domination. Thus we now have the "Countering Foreign Propaganda and Disinformation Act" that President Obama signed into law on Dec. 23 as part of the National Defense Authorization Act for 2017, setting aside \$160 million to combat any "propaganda" that challenges Official Washington's version of reality.

The new law mandates the U.S. Secretary of State to collaborate with the Secretary of Defense, Director of National Intelligence and other federal agencies to create a Global Engagement Center "to lead, synchronize, and coordinate efforts of the Federal Government to recognize, understand, expose, and counter foreign state and non-state propaganda and disinformation efforts aimed at undermining United States national security interests." The law directs the Center to be formed in 180 days and to share expertise among agencies and to "coordinate with allied nations."

The legislation was initiated in March 2016, as the demonization of Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russia was already underway and was enacted amid the allegations of "Russian hacking" around the U.S. presidential election and the mainstream media's furor over supposedly "fake news." Defeated Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton voiced strong support for the bill: "It's imperative that leaders in both the private sector and the public sector step up to protect our democracy, and innocent lives."

The new law is remarkable for a number of reasons, not the least because it merges a new McCarthyism about purported dissemination of Russian "propaganda" on the Internet with a new Orwellianism by creating a kind of Ministry of Truth – or Global Engagement Center – to protect the American people from "foreign propaganda and disinformation."

As part of the effort to detect and defeat these unwanted narratives, the law authorizes the Center to: "Facilitate the use of a wide range of technologies and techniques by sharing expertise among Federal departments and agencies, seeking expertise from external sources, and implementing best practices." (This section is an apparent reference to proposals that Google, Facebook and other technology companies find ways to block or brand certain Internet sites as purveyors of "Russian propaganda" or "fake news.")

Justifying this new bureaucracy, the bill's sponsors argued that the existing agencies for "strategic communications" and "public diplomacy" were not enough, that the information threat required "a whole-of-government approach leveraging all elements of national power."

The law also is rife with irony since the U.S. government and related agencies are among the world's biggest purveyors of propaganda and disinformation – or what you might call evidence-free claims, such as the recent accusations of Russia hacking into Democratic emails to "influence" the U.S. election.

Despite these accusations – leaked by the Obama administration and embraced as true by the mainstream U.S. news media – there is little or no public evidence to support the charges. There is also a contradictory analysis by veteran U.S. intelligence professionals as well as statements by Wikileaks founder Julian Assange and an associate, former British Ambassador Craig Murray, that the Russians were not the source of the leaks. Yet, the mainstream U.S. media has virtually ignored this counter-evidence, appearing eager to collaborate with the new "Global Engagement Center" even before it is officially formed.

Of course, there is a long history of U.S. disinformation and propaganda. Former CIA agents Philip Agee and John Stockwell documented how it was done decades ago, secretly planting "black propaganda" and covertly funding media outlets to influence events around the world, with much of the fake news blowing back into the American media.

In more recent decades, the U.S. government has adopted an Internet-era version of that formula with an emphasis on having the State Department or the U.S.-funded National Endowment for Democracy supply, train and pay "activists" and "citizen journalists" to create and distribute propaganda and false stories via "social media" and via contacts with the mainstream media. The U.S. government's strategy also seeks to undermine and discredit journalists who challenge this orthodoxy. The new legislation escalates this information war by tossing another \$160 million into the pot.

Propaganda and Disinformation on Syria

Syria is a good case study in the modern application of information warfare. In her memoir *Hard Choices*, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton wrote that the U.S. provided "support for (Syrian) civilian opposition groups, including satellite-linked computers, telephones, cameras, and training for more than a thousand activists, students and independent journalists."

Indeed, a huge amount of money has gone to "activists" and "civil society" groups in Syria and other countries that have been targeted for "regime change."

A lot of the money also goes to parent organizations that are based in the United States and Europe, so these efforts do not only support on-the-ground efforts to undermine the targeted countries, but perhaps even more importantly, the money influences and manipulates public opinion in the West.

In North America, representatives from the Syrian “Local Coordination Committees” (LCC) were frequent guests on popular media programs such as “DemocracyNow.” The message was clear: there is a “revolution” in Syria against a “brutal regime” personified in Bashar al-Assad. It was not mentioned that the “Local Coordination Committees” have been primarily funded by the West, specifically the Office for Syrian Opposition Support, which was founded by the U.S. State Department and the U.K. Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

More recently, news and analysis about Syria has been conveyed through the filter of the White Helmets, also known as Syrian Civil Defense. In the Western news media, the White Helmets are described as neutral, non-partisan, civilian volunteers courageously carrying out rescue work in the war zone. In fact, the group is none of the above. It was initiated by the U.S. and U.K. using a British military contractor and Brooklyn-based marketing company.

While they may have performed some genuine rescue operations, the White Helmets are primarily a media organization with a political goal: to promote NATO intervention in Syria. (The manipulation of public opinion using the White Helmets and promoted by the New York Times and Avaaz petition for a “No Fly Zone” in Syria is documented here.)

The White Helmets hoax continues to be widely believed and receives uncritical promotion though it has increasingly been exposed at alternative media outlets as the creation of a “shady PR firm.” During critical times in the conflict in Aleppo, White Helmet individuals have been used as the source for important news stories despite a track record of deception.

Recent Propaganda: Blatant Lies?

As the armed groups in east Aleppo recently lost ground and then collapsed, Western governments and allied media went into a frenzy of accusations against Syria and Russia based on reports from sources connected with the armed opposition. CNN host Wolf Blitzer described Aleppo as “falling” in a “slaughter of these women and children” while CNN host Jake Tapper referred to “genocide by another name.”

The Daily Beast published the claims of the Aleppo Siege Media Center under the title “Doomsday is held in Aleppo” and amid accusations that the Syrian army was executing civilians, burning them alive and “20 women committed suicide in order

not to be raped.” These sensational claims were widely broadcast without verification. However, this “news” on CNN and throughout Western media came from highly biased sources and many of the claims – lacking anything approaching independent corroboration – could be accurately described as propaganda and disinformation.

Ironically, some of the supposedly “Russian propaganda” sites, such as RT, have provided first-hand on-the-ground reporting from the war zones with verifiable information that contradicts the Western narrative and thus has received almost no attention in the U.S. news media. For instance, some of these non-Western outlets have shown videos of popular celebrations over the “liberation of Aleppo.”

There has been further corroboration of these realities from peace activists, such as Jan Oberg of Transnational Foundation for Peace and Future Research who published a photo essay of his eyewitness observations in Aleppo including the happiness of civilians from east Aleppo reaching the government-controlled areas of west Aleppo, finally freed from areas that had been controlled by Al Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate and its jihadist allies in Ahrar al-Sham.

Dr. Nabil Antaki, a medical doctor from Aleppo, described the liberation of Aleppo in an interview titled “Aleppo is Celebrating, Free from Terrorists, the Western Media Misinformed.” The first Christmas celebrations in Aleppo in four years are shown here, replete with marching band members in Santa Claus outfits. Journalist Vanessa Beeley has published testimonies of civilians from east Aleppo. The happiness of civilians at their liberation is clear.

Whether or not you wish to accept these depictions of the reality in Aleppo, at a minimum, they reflect another side of the story that you have been denied while being persistently force-fed the version favored by the U.S. State Department. The goal of the new Global Engagement Center to counter “foreign propaganda” is to ensure that you never get to hear this alternative narrative to the Western propaganda line.

Even much earlier, contrary to the Western mythology of rebel “liberated zones,” there was strong evidence that the armed groups were never popular in Aleppo. American journalist James Foley described the situation in 2012 like this:

“Aleppo, a city of about 3 million people, was once the financial heart of Syria. As it continues to deteriorate, many civilians here are losing patience with the increasingly violent and unrecognizable opposition – one that is hampered by infighting and a lack of structure, and deeply infiltrated by both foreign fighters and terrorist groups. The rebels in Aleppo are predominantly from the countryside, further alienating them from the urban crowd that once

lived here peacefully, in relative economic comfort and with little interference from the authoritarian government of President Bashar al-Assad.”

On Nov. 22, 2012, Foley was kidnapped in northwestern Syria and held by Islamic State terrorists before his beheading in August 2014.

The Overall Narrative on Syria

Analysis of the Syrian conflict boils down to two competing narratives. One narrative is that the conflict is a fight for freedom and democracy against a brutal regime, a storyline promoted in the West and the Gulf states, which have been fueling the conflict from the start. This narrative is also favored by some self-styled “anti-imperialists” who want a “Syrian revolution.”

The other narrative is that the conflict is essentially a war of aggression against a sovereign state, with the aggressors including NATO countries, Gulf monarchies, Israel and Jordan. Domination of the Western media by these powerful interests is so thorough that one almost never gets access to this second narrative, which is essentially banned from not only the mainstream but also much of the liberal and progressive media.

For example, listeners and viewers of the generally progressive TV and radio program “DemocracyNow” have rarely if ever heard the second narrative described in any detail. Instead, the program frequently broadcasts the statements of Hillary Clinton, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power and others associated with the U.S. position. Rarely do you hear the viewpoint of the Syrian Ambassador to the United Nations, the Syrian Foreign Minister or analysts inside Syria and around the world who have written about and follow events there closely.

“DemocracyNow” also has done repeated interviews with proponents of the “Syrian revolution” while ignoring analysts who call the conflict a war of aggression sponsored by the West and the Gulf monarchies. This blackout of the second narrative continues despite the fact that many prominent international figures see it as such. For example, the former Foreign Minister of Nicaragua and former President of the UN General Assembly, Father Miguel D’Escoto, has said, “What the U.S. government is doing in Syria is tantamount to a war of aggression, which, according to the Nuremberg Tribunal, is the worst possible crime a State can commit against another State.”

In many areas of politics, “DemocracyNow” is excellent and challenges mainstream media. However in this area, coverage of the Syrian conflict, the broadcast is biased, one-sided and echoes the news and analysis of mainstream Western corporate media, showing the extent of control over foreign policy news that

already exists in the United States and Europe.

Suppressing and Censoring Challenges

Despite the widespread censorship of alternative analyses on Syria and other foreign hotspots that already exists in the West, the U.S. government's new "Global Engagement Center" will seek to ensure that the censorship is even more complete with its goal to "counter foreign state and non-state propaganda and disinformation." We can expect even more aggressive and better-financed assaults on the few voices daring to challenge the West's "group thinks" – smear campaigns that are already quite extensive.

In an article titled "Controlling the Narrative on Syria", Louis Allday describes the criticisms and attacks on journalists Rania Khalek and Max Blumenthal for straying from the "approved" Western narrative on Syria. Some of the bullying and abuse has come from precisely those people, such as Robin Yassin-Kassab, who have been frequent guests in liberal Western media.

Reporters who have returned from Syria with accounts that challenge the propaganda themes that have permeated the Western media also have come under attack. For instance, Canadian journalist Eva Bartlett recently returned to North America after being in Syria and Aleppo, conveying a very different image and critical of the West's biased media coverage. Bartlett appeared at a United Nations press conference and then did numerous interviews across the country during a speaking tour. During the course of her talks and presentation, Bartlett criticized the White Helmets and questioned whether it was true that Al Quds Hospital in opposition-held East Aleppo was attacked and destroyed as claimed.

Bartlett's recounting of this information made her a target of Snopes, which has been a mostly useful website exposing urban legends and false rumors but has come under criticism itself for some internal challenges and has been inconsistent in its investigations. In one report entitled "White Helmet Hearsay," Snopes' writer Bethania Palmer says claims the White Helmets are "linked to terrorists" is "unproven," but she overlooks numerous videos, photos, and other reports showing White Helmet members celebrating a Nusra/Al Qaeda battle victory, picking up the bodies of civilians executed by a Nusra executioner, and having a member who alternatively appears as a rebel/terrorist fighter with a weapon and later wearing a White Helmet uniform. The "fact check" barely scrapes the surface of public evidence.

The same writer did another shallow "investigation" titled "victim blaming" regarding Bartlett's critique of White Helmet videos and what happened at the Al Quds Hospital in Aleppo. Bartlett suggests that some White Helmet videos may be

fabricated and may feature the same child at different times, i.e., photographs that appear to show the same girl being rescued by White Helmet workers at different places and times. While it is uncertain whether this is the same girl, the similarity is clear.

The Snopes writer goes on to criticize Bartlett for her comments about the reported bombing of Al Quds Hospital in east Aleppo in April 2016. A statement at the [website](#) of Doctors Without Borders says the building was “destroyed and reduced to rubble,” but this was clearly false since photos show the building with unclear damage. Five months later, the September 2016 [report](#) by Doctors Without Borders says the top two floors of the building were destroyed and the ground floor Emergency Room damaged yet they re-opened in two weeks.

The many inconsistencies and contradictions in the statements of Doctors Without Borders resulted in an [open letter](#) to them. In their last report, Doctors Without Borders (known by its French initials, MSF) acknowledges that “MSF staff did not directly witness the attack and has not visited Al Quds Hospital since 2014.”

Bartlett referenced satellite images taken before and after the reported attack on the hospital. The images do not show severe damage and it is unclear whether or not there is any damage to the roof, the basis for Bartlett’s statement. In the past week, independent journalists have visited the scene of Al Quds Hospital and report that that the top floors of the building are still there and damage is unclear.

The Snopes’ investigation criticizing Bartlett was superficial and ignored the broader issues of accuracy and integrity in the Western media’s depiction of the Syrian conflict. Instead the article appeared to be an effort to discredit the eyewitness observations and analysis of a journalist who dared challenge the mainstream narrative.

U.S. propaganda and disinformation on Syria has been extremely effective in misleading much of the American population. Thus, most Americans are unaware how many billions of taxpayer dollars have been spent on yet another “regime change” project. The propaganda campaign – having learned from the successful demonizations of Iraq’s Saddam Hussein, Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi and other targeted leaders – has been so masterful regarding Syria that many liberal and progressive news outlets were pulled in. It has been left to RT and some Internet outlets to challenge the U.S. government and the mainstream media.

But the U.S. government’s near total control of the message doesn’t appear to be enough. Apparently even a few voices of dissent are a few voices too many.

The enactment of HR5181, “Countering Foreign Propaganda and Disinformation,” suggests that the ruling powers seek to escalate suppression of news and analyses that run counter to the official narrative. Backed by a new infusion of \$160 million, the plan is to further squelch skeptical voices with operation for “countering” and “refuting” what the U.S. government deems to be propaganda and disinformation.

As part of the \$160 million package, funds can be used to hire or reward “civil society groups, media content providers, nongovernmental organizations, federally funded research and development centers, private companies, or academic institutions.”

Among the tasks that these private entities can be hired to perform is to identify and investigate both print and online sources of news that are deemed to be distributing “disinformation, misinformation, and propaganda directed at the United States and its allies and partners.”

In other words, we are about to see an escalation of the information war.

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Trump and Revenge of the ‘Realists’

Henry Kissinger’s potential role as an intermediary between President-elect Trump and Russian President Putin suggests a comeback by the old-line “realists” versus the neocons and liberal interventionists, writes Gilbert Doctorow.

By Gilbert Doctorow

During a holiday getaway to India, I picked up the local newspaper, *The Times of India*, and encountered an article entitled “From Russia with Love” by Indian political observer Swagato Ganguly with the subtitle: “A rapprochement between Putin and Trump could transform the world in 2017.”

The author set this prediction within the broader context of a possible return to the “Westphalian principle of sovereignty, which bars intervention in another state’s domestic affairs.” The article goes on to ask: “What If Trump were to repeat Nixon’s rapprochement in reverse? President Nixon’s handshake with Chairman Mao in 1972 may have decisively tilted the Cold War in America’s favour, as it broke the Chinese away from the Soviet bloc. Today China, rather

than Russia is America's principal strategic rival."

This Indian international affairs prognosis was based on Henry Kissinger's identification of the Peace of Westphalia principles as the key to Realpolitik and on implementation of his signature strategy from the past even if Kissinger was not mentioned. Kissinger's strategy was to ensure that Washington was closer to Beijing and to Moscow than either of the two was to one another, a relevant point again given Kissinger's reappearance on the political scene in recent days.

The question of Henry Kissinger's possible designation as a foreign policy adviser to President Donald Trump and specifically as intermediary between Trump and Vladimir Putin for normalization of relations arose after the 93-year-old Kissinger gave a series of interviews to the German newspaper *Bild* and other media in the days before Christmas.

In the less serious media outlets, we heard about Kissinger's special rapport with Putin with whom, we are told, he has met often. These same gossips tell us that in Moscow Kissinger's expertise and experience are held in high regard. All of these glib statements are deeply flawed, however. They are more appropriate to society pages or *People* magazine than to serious discussion of where former Secretary of State Kissinger can and should fit into the evolving foreign policy team that President-elect Trump is assembling, and to what that foreign policy should reasonably resemble.

The superficial comments also ignore the record of Henry Kissinger's policy recommendations on Russia in the decades since the end of the Cold War, which place him squarely among those responsible for getting us into the confrontation with Russia that reached its climax under Barack Obama. And, these comments miss how the times and the challenges we face today are so very different from the late 1960s and early 1970s when Kissinger and Nixon made their very important changes to the architecture of international relations.

Real Positives

But there are some real positives in Henry Kissinger's emergence among Trump's advisers. Kissinger brings an aura of intellectual rigor to the Trump camp as America's best-known thinker and practitioner of the Realist School of international affairs, meaning a foreign policy based on national interest. That is a more accurate and less aggressive packaging than the "America First" slogan, which Donald Trump used during his electoral campaign, though the intent of both terms is identical.

Even Harvard Professor Ernest May, a severe critic of Kissinger over Vietnam War

policies, wrote of him in letters published in *The New York Times* in 1994: "Mr. Kissinger's scholarly credentials and public stature give his name on the title page the quality of a Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval."

At the same time, beginning in the 1990s, Henry Kissinger modified his message of realism to accommodate the then-dominant American school of idealism, or values-based foreign policy. This mixed message resulted from Kissinger's defending himself from the ridicule of the triumphant neoconservatives who criticized his détente policies of the 1970s for seeking merely to manage relations with the Soviet Union when the overthrow of the "Evil Empire" was entirely possible, as later events had seemingly proven through the uncompromising "promotion of democracy" as practiced by Ronald Reagan.

Thus, the updated Kissinger line was that universal moral principles serve as the ultimate objective of foreign policy, but realism must guide the day-to-day management of international affairs. Lest this seem to be a neat division between tactics and strategy, the two become confused in Kissinger's public stance given that he always has placed primary emphasis on achieving a "balance of power" in the international community, which alone can keep the peace and safeguard the vital interests of all parties.

Thus, it would be fair to say that Kissinger is a realist who at times uses idealist vocabulary to meet the expectations of and to motivate the general public, which is unmoved by considerations of balance of power and *realism*.

Finally, in speaking of the gravitas that Kissinger may bring to the Trump team, he is correctly perceived as a champion of the art of diplomacy, which is another word for compromise and deal-making. It is precisely diplomacy that has been sorely lacking in the U.S. government in recent decades. Under both Republican and Democratic presidents, ideology has held sway at the State Department and in the White House.

Some Negatives

The most severe negative one can say about Kissinger and Russia goes back to the fateful year 1994. In 1993, Boris Yeltsin had made an important visit to Warsaw during which he withdrew all Russian objections to Poland's joining NATO. The clearly understood quid pro quo, which the Kremlin expected for this major concession to U.S. and Polish wishes, was that Russia be named next in line for membership in the club. Indeed, during 1994, the Clinton Administration was weighing that very possibility. At this point, in Congressional testimony, Henry Kissinger delivered strong objections and played a significant role in the defeat of Russia's candidacy.

We get a fairly good idea of Kissinger's reasoning back then in the passages relating to American policy on Russia in the last chapter of his 1994 master work *Diplomacy*. A *realistic* approach to Russia meant America had to look at the respective foreign policy interests and national traditions, and to pay less attention to domestic Russian politics and the personalities of its leaders.

Kissinger said this meant taking into account Russia's long tradition of expansionism, as evidenced by military bases in the former Soviet republics and interventionism in their "near abroad." And as if to drive a stake through the heart of unnecessary chumminess with Moscow, Kissinger reminded his readers that Russia had always stood apart from the Western world. It had no democratic traditions or familiarity with modern market economics. In his words, it did not partake of the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the Age of Discovery.

Indeed, Kissinger's thinking about Russian history is so clear one might imagine he knows what he is talking about. The question is of key importance because the Realist School is built upon the assumption that one can accurately appraise the strengths of all players and that one has a solid knowledge of the history and traditions of the players. In this it distinguishes itself from idealism, with its focus on universal values and disinterest in regional knowledge.

From Kissinger's own academic career in studying European diplomacy in the Nineteenth Century, Russia should have been on his plate, given that the country was one of the three decisive players in the first half of the century (Holy Alliance) and one of the five or six decisive players in the second half of the century. However, that was manifestly not the case.

Kissinger is widely reputed to be a voracious reader. Yet, it is obvious that Russia has never and does not now figure among the topics he reads. In *Diplomacy*, for his analysis of Russia, he relied on the very dated Nineteenth Century classics of Russian history like Vasily Klyuchevsky that he read in translation during his graduate student days at Harvard.

Klyuchevsky is unquestionably a good starting point for students of Russian history. He was the father of the historiography that came down to Kissinger in the person of Michael Karpovich, the founder of Russian studies at Harvard. But his notion of Russia's *manifest destiny* of borders moving out across the Eurasian land mass was part of a Liberal and anti-tsarist historiography. By today's standards, reading Klyuchevsky has mainly curiosity value. To put the issue in terms closer to an American reader, it is as if Kissinger were using de Tocqueville as the key source for writing about contemporary America.

Among the main Twentieth Century works on Russia cited in Kissinger are those by his comrade in realism, George Kennan. Notwithstanding Kennan's generally high

reputation in Washington, his choice of sources and interpretation of Russia is tendentious in ways that Kissinger was unable to judge, and that is why it is regrettable Kissinger did not read other sources.

Kissinger's argument in *Diplomacy* for the separateness of Russian history may be no more than the conventional wisdom of his times. He speaks of Russia as a paradox, an obvious allusion to Winston Churchill's witticism that Russia was "a riddle wrapped in an enigma." But then Churchill was not a serious scholar and Kissinger is assumed to be one. The notion of separateness is, in fact, misleading if not fallacious.

Kissinger's prescription for a policy vis-à-vis Russia after the Cold War assumed that "imperial expansionism" was the country's defining national tradition. But then the same was true of all the key world powers. Kissinger indulges in tired mystification of Russia drawing on the Nineteenth Century nationalist movement and writers such as Dostoevsky. Such smoke and mirrors writing would be seen as unduly psychological and irrelevant to foreign relations if someone served them up as a description of Germany, for instance. Thus, we read in Kissinger: "The paradox of Russian history lies in the continuing ambivalence between messianic drive and a pervasive sense of insecurity. In its ultimate aberration, this ambivalence generated a fear that, unless the empire expanded, it would implode."

It is rather sad to consider that one of America's great scholar-statesmen of the Twentieth Century was taken in by mystical tripe when formulating and implementing the nation's policies towards its chief nuclear adversary. This puts into question the validity of attention to history and local specifics, which Kissinger says are distinguishing features of *realism* versus *idealism*, which operates amid universalistic over-simplifications.

Russian Uniqueness?

Henry Kissinger's later writings offering foreign policy recommendations for the world at large and specific major countries in particular display the same wrong footing when dealing with Russia. His 2001 opus facetiously entitled *Does America Need a Foreign Policy?* is a case in point. Kissinger breaks the international community into regional groupings and Russia is placed among the "great powers of Asia."

Once again Kissinger tells us "Russia has always been sui generis – especially when compared with its European neighbors" – a fancy way of saying Russia is not like the others. His highlighting the "mystical" Russian Orthodox Church and autocracy suggests a trite approach to this complex nation. We hear again of Russia's "creeping expansionism" as a returning theme of Russian history.

Kissinger rightfully faults American policy to Russia for excessive personalization of relations at the expense of sober reflections on respective interests and institutions to drive and implement any rapprochement. But then he falls prey to personalization himself. He characterizes the then new Russian President Vladimir Putin as a KGB operative whose secret police background presupposed a strong national commitment: "It leads to a foreign policy comparable to that during the tsarist centuries, grounding popular support in a sense of Russian mission and seeking to dominate neighbors where they cannot be subjugated."

If this argumentation, this jumping to conclusions, were delivered by anyone other than Henry Kissinger, one might dismiss it offhandedly. What we have here is the soft underbelly of Realpolitik: realism can be only as useful as the expertise and judgment of its practitioner.

At the same time, Kissinger's bark was more fearsome than his bite. In his specific remarks on how America should conduct its foreign policy towards Russia, he urged moderation, continued readiness to assist the country with its transition to democracy and free markets, and attentiveness to Russia's voice in international forums.

Note especially his comment on prospective NATO expansion into the Baltic States, which Kissinger believed in 2001 would be provocative, saying it would put NATO forces within 30 miles of St Petersburg, one of Russia's largest population centers. He correctly foresaw that "Advancing the NATO integrated command this close to key centers of Russia might mortgage the possibilities of relating Russia to the emerging world order as a constructive member."

But it is curious that in his 2001 book Kissinger was unable to offer any serious incentives for Russia to behave nobly. He derided even the watered down affiliation of Russia with NATO in the NATO-Russia Council. He believed it gave the Russians too much say and was "not the wisest solution."

Finally, he dropped all pretense at diplomatic niceties, telling his readers that "NATO is basically a military alliance, part of whose purpose is the protection of Europe against a reimperializing Russia. ... To couple NATO expansion with even partial Russian membership in NATO was, in a sense, merging two contradictory courses of action ... [As] Russia becomes a de facto NATO member, NATO ceases to be an alliance, or becomes a vague collective security instrument."

Rethinking the Group Think

Having participated actively in keeping Russia out of the security architecture

of Europe, Kissinger became alarmed in recent years by the consequences of such exclusion as Russia and the U.S.-led West slid into mutual recriminations and confrontation. From this point on, Henry Kissinger began to play a clearly constructive role in the midst of each successive crisis in relations that threatened war.

The first case was in 2008-09 when bilateral relations hit bottom during and after the Russian-Georgian War. The second has come in 2013 to the present, when in the context of the developments in and around Ukraine, Russia and the U.S. became actively engaged in what is a proxy war, entailing as well economic and information wars.

For instance, in November 2014, Kissinger was one of the few prominent Westerners who dared question the prevailing narrative blaming Putin and Russia almost exclusively for the crisis in Ukraine. Kissinger said, in an interview with the German newsmagazine Der Spiegel, that the West was exaggerating the significance of the Crimean annexation given the peninsula's long historic ties to Russia.

"The annexation of Crimea was not a move toward global conquest," Kissinger said. "It was not Hitler moving into Czechoslovakia" as former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and others suggested.

Kissinger noted that prior to the overthrow of Ukraine's elected President Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014, Putin had no intention getting involved in a crisis in Ukraine, saying:

"Putin spent tens of billions of dollars on the Winter Olympics in Sochi. The theme of the Olympics was that Russia is a progressive state tied to the West through its culture and, therefore, it presumably wants to be part of it. So it doesn't make any sense that a week after the close of the Olympics, Putin would take Crimea and start a war over Ukraine."

Instead Kissinger argued that the West with its strategy of pulling Ukraine into the orbit of the European Union was responsible for the crisis by failing to understand Russian sensitivity over Ukraine and making the grave mistake of quickly pushing the confrontation beyond dialogue.

But Kissinger also faulted Putin for his reaction to the crisis. "This does not mean the Russian response was appropriate," Kissinger said.

Still, Kissinger told Der Spiegel, "a resumption of the Cold War would be a historic tragedy. If a conflict is avoidable, on a basis reflecting morality and security, one should try to avoid it. We have to remember that Russia is an important part of the international system, and therefore useful in solving all

sorts of other crises, for example in the agreement on nuclear proliferation with Iran or over Syria. This has to have preference over a tactical escalation in a specific case.”

Kissinger could well bring such a practical perspective to the incoming Trump administration and have the gravitas to force Official Washington to undertake a rethinking of its current Russia-bashing “group think.”

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