

Bowing to Silly US Propaganda

The U.S. government and mainstream media are so lost in their own propaganda that U.S. foreign policy lurches around the globe like a dangerous half-blind giant. False narratives are so powerful that even Sen. Bernie Sanders bends to the delusions, a danger to both U.S. national interests and the planet, writes Rick Sterling.

By Rick Sterling

If the U.S. is to ever change its foreign policy, which is currently based on dominance and aggression, to a foreign policy based on diplomacy and respect for international law, there needs to be a foundation of realistic assessments. Foreign policy decisions need to be based on reality not fantasy and propaganda.

Unfortunately, dysfunction, deception and propaganda extend across the spectrum from congressional Republicans to Hillary Clinton to the White House to Sen. Bernie Sanders. The following are recent examples:

–Benghazi Hearings in Congress ignore important issues to focus on superficial. Congress recently held hearings on what happened in Benghazi, Libya, leading up to the death of Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other U.S. personnel on Sept. 11, 2012. The hearings focused on what former Secretary of State Clinton knew, when she knew it and whether she should have ordered more security. Before that, millions of dollars were spent exploring the fact that she maintained her email at a home server.

Yet, the root cause of Stevens' death and consequences of the US/NATO overthrow of the Gaddafi government have been ignored. The hearings were silent on the deaths of tens of thousands of Libyans, the eruption and expansion of terrorism within Libya and beyond, and the massive numbers of refugees fleeing across the Mediterranean Sea into Europe. Instead of evaluating the consequences of "regime change" in Libya, Congressional members focused on cheap political advantage. Mainstream media said nothing about the shallowness of the hearings; they were happy to report on political maneuvering and whether or not Clinton would lose her temper or be able to get "above the fray."

Points which would have been informative to explore include: Were the claims of imminent "massacre" in Benghazi exaggerated and largely false? These claims paved the way to the UN Security Council resolution and NATO imposed No Fly Zone. Was it a fake emergency? Who authorized the transition from "protecting civilians" to a campaign of attack and Libyan government overthrow? UN Security Council members China and Russia both say there were deceived and that the U.S. and NATO violated the UN Security Council resolution.

Politicians and much of the media have portrayed Gaddafi as “crazy” for many years. For readers interested in a reality check, see the short video of [Gaddafi’s speech](#) to the Arab League in 2008 as he points out the contradictions of acknowledging Israel on the 1967 boundary, as he warns the Arab League leaders of plots and coups, and as he says “we might be next” (for assassination). For a concise contrast of Libya before and after the NATO-backed invasion see [this article](#) aptly titled “From Africa’s wealthiest democracy under Gaddafi to Terrorist Haven after US Intervention.”

–Clinton advocates No Fly Zone for Syria despite U.S. military opposition and Turkey turning against it. U.S. military leadership has generally opposed the “no fly zone” idea because a “no fly zone” begins with military attacks on anti-aircraft positions and is an act of war. They have underscored that imposing such a zone in Syria would be vastly more difficult than in Libya where there were no sophisticated anti-aircraft installations. Even then it took seven months of intense bombing to overthrow the Tripoli government. The risks in Syria would be huge with a significant chance of international war. The idea is reckless and irresponsible for the following reasons:

The areas are controlled by armed opposition groups, predominately Jabhat al Nusra (Al Qaeda). Very few civilians remain in the areas proposed for “no fly zone” in Syria. Most have fled to areas under Syrian government control, especially around Latakia and Tartous. Others have gone to Turkey. The proposal is basically to make U.S. and NATO the air force for Al Qaeda. Amazing.

If a “no fly zone” were imposed, it would more likely become an “intense conflict zone” rather than a “safe zone” as promoted by interventionists. It would bring U.S. and NATO directly into the conflict which is what the proponents want. There already exists a “safe zone.” It’s called the Turkish border.

Of crucial importance, the second Turkish Parliamentary elections are Nov. 1. Polls indicate the ruling “Justice and Development Party” (AKP) will probably lose majority control of the parliament. It’s possible they will lose power altogether. Either way, this will put a stop to the schemes for an all powerful Turkish President (Erdogan) and continuation of the war on Syria. All three non-AKP parties in Turkey oppose the current policies supporting war and terrorism in Syria. Thus, Clinton’s “no fly zone” proposal is opportunistic and out of step with reality in Syria and Turkey.

–White House continues anti-Assad lies as they are further exposed in Turkey. The White House must know very well that Assad government forces did NOT carry out the chemical weapons attack on the outskirts of Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013. White House officials must be acutely aware of this because they could not get

the U.S. intelligence community to agree with a statement that President Bashar al-Assad was behind the atrocity in the days following the attack. Instead of the usual "U.S. Intelligence assesses with high confidence " they had to substitute the "U.S. Government assesses " Although rarely remarked or noted in the mainstream media, this was a significant deviation.

Despite this, and the investigations by some of the most acclaimed U.S. investigative journalists (Seymour Hersh, Robert Parry, Gareth Porter, Russell Baker) all pointing to the Assad government NOT being responsible, just a couple weeks ago the White House spokesman asserted the Assad government "used chemical weapons against his own people."

Last week in Turkey, two deputies of the social democratic party CHP held a press conference to expose the evidence of Turkish involvement in shipping sarin to Syria and the refusal of the Erdogan government to pursue the investigation or charge the culprits. This evidence, including wiretaps, supports the conclusions of Hersh and others that the chemical weapons used in the Aug. 21, 2013 attack were supplied by Turkey to armed "rebels." This further exposes the fact-free propaganda that "Assad used chemical weapons on his own people." Politicians and mainstream media outlets such as PBS Frontline just keep repeating it.

-Bernie Sanders joins the absurd propaganda campaign against Venezuela and its deceased leader Hugo Chavez. As recently reported at Venezuelanalysis, Sen. Sanders referred to Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez as a "dead communist dictator." It's nonsense, just like the White House claim that Venezuela is a "threat to U.S. national interests." It's sad that Sanders is following that path.

Chavez was a socialist, not a communist; he was member and leader of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela. Between 1998 and 2013, Chavez and the PSUV competed in elections 17 times. They won every time except once. Elections in Venezuela are vastly more free and fair than elections in the US. They have high turnout; they have very active and hard campaigning; there is a paper trail to verify the accuracy of the electronic voting, over 50 percent of the electronic votes are matched to the paper votes to confirm the accuracy of the vote counting.

National Lawyers Guild and Task Force on the Americas (and others) have sent many delegations to Venezuela. They have observed conditions including the voting process. The National Lawyers Guild's statement on the 2013 election concluded the Venezuelan elections were "well organized, fair and transparent."

"The U.S. would do well to incorporate some of the security checks and practices

that are routine in Venezuela to improve both the level of participation and the credibility of our elections,” said NLG attorney Robin Alexander.

So why in the world is Bernie Sanders promoting false propaganda that Chavez was a “communist dictator”? Task Force on the Americas, based in the San Francisco Bay Area, has written a letter to the Sanders campaign asking him to review and correct his inaccurate statement.

There is profound need for dramatic changes in U.S. foreign policy. Given that over 55 percent of the discretionary budget of the U.S. goes to the military, it’s likely that positive changes in domestic policy will depend on changes in foreign policy. The starting point has to be realistic assessments of conditions in other countries, sincere examinations of the consequences of past actions and a genuine commitment to abide by international law. As we can see from the above examples, there is a long way to go.

Rick Sterling is an independent researcher/writer. He is on the board of Task Force on the Americas. He can be reached at rsterling1@gmail.com

Hillary Clinton’s Failed Libya ‘Doctrine’

From the Archive: As the long-running Benghazi investigation returns to center stage with another round of Hillary Clinton’s testimony, the former Secretary of State’s larger failure remains obscured how she once envisioned the bloody Libyan “regime change” as the start of a “Clinton Doctrine,” as Robert Parry reported last July.

By Robert Parry (Originally published on July 1, 2015)

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton fancied the violent 2011 “regime change” in Libya such a triumph that her aides discussed labeling it the start of a “Clinton Doctrine,” according to released emails that urged her to claim credit when longtime Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi was deposed. And Clinton did celebrate when Gaddafi was captured and murdered.

“We came; we saw; he died,” Clinton exulted in a TV interview after receiving word of Gaddafi’s death on Oct. 20, 2011, though it is not clear how much she knew about the grisly details, such as Gaddafi being sodomized with a knife before his execution.

Since then, the cascading Libyan chaos has turned the “regime change” from a positive notch on Clinton’s belt and into a black mark on her record. That violence has included the terrorist slaying of U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other U.S. diplomatic personnel in Benghazi on Sept. 11, 2012, and jihadist killings across northern Africa, including the Islamic State’s decapitation of a group of Coptic Christians last February.

It turns out that Gaddafi’s warning about the need to crush Islamic terrorism in Libya’s east was well-founded although the Obama administration cited it as the pretext to justify its “humanitarian intervention” against Gaddafi. The vacuum created by the U.S.-led destruction of Gaddafi and his army drew in even more terrorists and extremists, forcing the United States and Western nations to abandon their embassies in Tripoli a year ago.

One could argue that those who devised and implemented the disastrous Libyan “regime change” the likes of Hillary Clinton and Samantha Power should be almost disqualified from playing any future role in U.S. foreign policy. Instead, Clinton is the Democratic frontrunner to succeed Barack Obama as President and Power was promoted from Obama’s White House staff to be U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, where she is at the center of other dangerous U.S. initiatives in seeking “regime change” in Syria and pulling off “regime change” in Ukraine.

In fairness, however, it should be noted that it has been the pattern in Official Washington over the past few decades for hawkish “regime change” advocates to fail upwards. With only a few exceptions, the government architects and the media promoters of the catastrophic Iraq War have escaped meaningful accountability and continue to be leading voices in setting U.S. foreign policy.

A Dubious Validation

In August 2011, Secretary of State Clinton saw the Libyan “regime change” as a resounding validation of her foreign policy credentials, according to the emails released in June and described at the end of a New York Times [article](#) by Michael S. Schmidt.

According to one email chain, her longtime friend and personal adviser Sidney Blumenthal praised the military success of the bombing campaign to destroy Gaddafi’s army and hailed the dictator’s impending ouster.

“First, brava! This is a historic moment and you will be credited for realizing it,” Blumenthal wrote on Aug. 22, 2011. “When Qaddafi himself is finally removed, you should of course make a public statement before the cameras wherever you are, even in the driveway of your vacation home. You must go on camera. You must establish yourself in the historical record at this moment. The

most important phrase is: 'successful strategy.'"

Clinton forwarded Blumenthal's advice to Jake Sullivan, a close State Department aide. "Pls read below," she wrote. "Sid makes a good case for what I should say, but it's premised on being said after Q[addafi] goes, which will make it more dramatic. That's my hesitancy, since I'm not sure how many chances I'll get."

Sullivan responded, saying "it might make sense for you to do an op-ed to run right after he falls, making this point. You can reinforce the op-ed in all your appearances, but it makes sense to lay down something definitive, almost like the Clinton Doctrine."

However, when Gaddafi abandoned Tripoli that day, President Obama seized the moment to make a triumphant announcement. Clinton's opportunity to highlight her joy at the Libyan "regime change" had to wait until Oct. 20, 2011, when Gaddafi was captured, tortured and murdered.

In a TV interview, Clinton celebrated the news when it appeared on her cell phone and even paraphrased Julius Caesar's famous line after Roman forces achieved a resounding victory in 46 B.C. and he declared, "veni, vidi, vici" "I came, I saw, I conquered." Clinton's reprise of Caesar's boast went: "We came; we saw; he died." She then laughed and clapped her hands.

Presumably, the "Clinton Doctrine" would have been a policy of "liberal interventionism" to achieve "regime change" in countries where there is some crisis in which the leader seeks to put down an internal security threat and where the United States objects to the action.

Of course, the Clinton Doctrine would be selective. It would not apply to brutal security crackdowns by U.S.-favored governments, say, Israel attacking Gaza or the Kiev regime in Ukraine slaughtering ethnic Russians in the east. But it's likely, given the continuing bloodshed in Libya, that Hillary Clinton won't be touting the "Clinton Doctrine" in her presidential campaign.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). You also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America's Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

The More Complex Truth of Benghazi

From the Archive: More than three years after the Benghazi attack, which claimed the lives of four Americans, Republicans again are grilling former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in the hyper-politicized inquiry that has obscured the more complex reality of what happened, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar observed in 2013.

By Paul R. Pillar (Originally published on Dec. 30, 2013)

David Kirkpatrick's investigative piece in the *New York Times* about the Sept. 11, 2012 lethal attack on a U.S. compound in Benghazi is well worth reading, though not because its conclusions ought to have been surprising to any disinterested observer of what was going on in Libya at the time.

Once dust from the confusion in the very first hours after the incident settled, the conditions that gave rise to the incident were fairly clear. One was widespread popular outrage, exhibited not only in Libya but also beyond its borders, from a scurrilous video that many Muslims found insulting to the founder of their faith.

Another was lawlessness that has prevailed in Libya ever since the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi, and continues to prevail there, and that is characterized by a mélange of militias and other armed groups with a variety of interests and grievances, some of them antipathetic to the United States.

That this has not been broadly understood is due mainly to the unrelenting effort of some in the opposition party in the United States to exploit the death of four U.S. citizens in the incident to try to discredit the Obama administration and its Secretary of State at the time (who is seen as a likely contender in the next presidential election).

The line propounded in this effort is, first, that the incident can have only one of two possible explanations: either the attack was a completely spontaneous and unorganized popular response to the video, or it was a terrorist attack that had nothing to do with emotions surrounding the video and instead was a premeditated operation by a particular terrorist group, Al Qaeda.

The propounded line further holds that the administration offered the first of these two explanations, that this explanation was a deliberate lie, and that the second explanation is the truth. The *Times* investigation demolishes all that. As for the spontaneous aspects of the attack, Kirkpatrick reports:

“Anger at the video motivated the initial attack. Dozens of people joined in, some of them provoked by the video and others responding to fast-spreading false rumors that guards inside the American compound had shot Libyan protesters. Looters and arsonists, without any sign of a plan, were the ones who ravaged the compound after the initial attack, according to more than a dozen Libyan witnesses as well as many American officials who have viewed the footage from security cameras.”

As for a role by Al Qaeda, the *Times* investigators concluded that the group “was having its own problems penetrating the Libyan chaos.” The only ways in which Al Qaeda members seem to figure into the story are in expressing surprise about the attack and in having difficulty establishing any foothold in Libya. There is no evidence that what happened in Benghazi was an Al Qaeda operation.

The ceaseless efforts at political exploitation are only part of the reason that American misunderstanding about anti-American violence persists. The themes in the exploitation resonate with certain unfortunate tendencies in how Americans look at such violence and especially at terrorism.

One such tendency involves the fallacy of monocausality: to talk in terms of *the* reason for terrorism or for a particular terrorist attack, and to think that if a purposeful group is involved than nothing else must be. But whatever enrages a larger population, whether it is a sacrilegious video or an offensive U.S. policy, establishes the climate in which a terrorist group can operate, motivates recruits to join it, and determines the sympathy or support it will have for its acts.

Another misleading tendency is loose, careless application of the label *Al Qaeda* to a broad and variegated swath of Sunni Islamist extremism that does not reflect any organizational reality. This tendency misleads Americans into believing that the danger of anti-American violence in general or terrorism in particular comes from the actual Al Qaeda, the group that did 9/11, when in fact more of it comes these days from other sources, including some of those armed groups in Libya.

The political exploitation of the Benghazi incident has already gone on so long and so hard that it has helped to cement some of these misconceptions into the American public’s mind, even if the exploitation were to stop now, which it won’t.

Paul R. Pillar, in his 28 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, rose to be one of the agency’s top analysts. He is now a visiting professor at Georgetown University for security studies. (This article first appeared as a [blog post](#) at The National Interest’s Web site. Reprinted with author’s permission.)

Misreading Benghazi and Terrorism

The Republican case of a Benghazi terror “cover-up” never made much sense because President Obama immediately called it an “act of terror.” But now other parts of the GOP’s contorted narrative are collapsing as well, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar observes.

By Paul R. Pillar

It always has been difficult to discern any logic behind the endless recriminations about the fatal incident in Benghazi, Libya, in September 2012 in which four Americans were killed, or rather about how the Obama administration is said to have described the incident at the time.

A notion somehow appears to be involved that President Barack Obama supposedly had been saying that international terrorism had been licked and didn’t want to admit that the incident in Libya demonstrated that this was not so. But Mr. Obama never had said that terrorism was licked. In fact, he had been saying a lot about it being a threat and had been shooting missiles from drones at a rate that did not suggest otherwise. And losing four Americans at an overseas mission is a bad thing to happen on any President’s watch regardless of whether the label of terrorism is applied or not.

Now the FBI, assisted by U.S. military commandos, has apprehended Ahmed Abu Khattala, who is accused of leading the fatal attack on the facility in Benghazi. So both the purveyors and the targets of the recriminations have occasion to make rhetorical adjustments.

Supporters of the administration can say, “All right, if you want to focus on terrorists responsible for the incident you’ve been making such a big deal about, we got the main culprit.” Opponents of the administration can say that it should not have taken two years to get him.

Mostly the opponents are falling into old habits in searching for ways to criticize Obama, by saying Abu Khattala should be taken to Guantanamo and kept out of the civilian criminal court system. That familiar posture, based on a chest-thumping desire to proclaim that we are at “war,” ignores how much Guantanamo has become a liability rather than an asset and how much more successful the regular criminal courts have been in meting out punishment to terrorists than have been the military tribunals, where the only two convictions of Guantanamo detainees who have been tried have been vacated on appeal.

Nabbing Abu Khattala and trying him for whatever role he had in the incident two

years ago is the right thing to do. But the more we devote attention, regardless of one's political posture or opinions of administration policy, to a character such as him, the more we perpetuate a misdirection of attention that afflicts much American policy debate about problems in the Middle East.

David Kirkpatrick's profile of Abu Khattala in the New York Times describes him as a "local, small-time Islamist militant" who stood out as being "erratic" as well as extremist. He had no known connections to international terrorist groups, according to officials who have been briefed on the relevant investigations.

Oh, and as the attack in Benghazi was taking place, Abu Khattala was telling others that the assault was retaliation for the inflammatory video that administration opponents back here in the United States have strenuously argued had nothing to do with the incident. In short, the Benghazi episode is hardly a milestone in international terrorism. The apprehension of this local thug, although it serves justice, also will have little to do with the prospects for international terrorism.

The general tendency that this case illustrates, beyond the partisan motivations that have sustained the ridiculously prolonged preoccupation with this one incident, is a fixation on the malevolent intentions, real or sometimes imagined, of individual evil-doers who play leading roles in either groups or states.

This fixation is at the expense of attention to broader patterns of public sentiment or political culture (and yes, sometimes even reactions to scurrilous videos) that have much more to do with where security problems will arise and where U.S. interests will be threatened.

We saw this tendency in George W. Bush's day, when threats to the United States were neatly packaged as "the terrorists", so neat that a chimerical alliance between a regime and a terrorist group became a principal rationale for toppling a leader without paying attention to the broad forces this would unleash and the extremism this would stimulate, all of which is reflected in the violent mess that is Iraq today.

We saw it more recently in the bipartisan support for military intervention in Libya, with again a focus on toppling a disliked leader and again inattention to the forces and culture that would be left in his place and that led to what happened at Benghazi two years ago.

We saw the tendency in a somewhat different way with the exuberance accompanying the killing of Osama bin Laden three years ago. Bin Laden obviously was a far

more consequential figure than dozens of Abu Khattalas, but by the last part of his life in hiding he was doing little directing of operations. The exuberance exceeded the impact his death had on the course of international terrorism.

President Obama never claimed that the raid at Abbottabad was a death knell of international terrorism, but Republicans' fears that it would be seen that way, what might be called Abbottabad envy, were a major motivation for hyping the Benghazi incident the way they have.

We have seen the tendency in excessive reliance on the use of armed drones, to the point that their counterproductive effect on counterterrorism through collateral casualties and associated anger may outweigh the benefit of eradicating the individual bad guys who are the targets.

And we see it today in how alarm over ISIS focuses narrowly on the evil intentions of this one group while paying less heed to the broader conflicts and objectives that have more to do with the chaos that worries us, a focus that has led otherwise respectable people to flirt with craziness by calling for the United States to go to war simultaneously in both Syria and Iraq.

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The More Complex Truth of Benghazi

The single-minded Republican drive to exploit the deaths of four U.S. diplomats in Benghazi, Libya, in 2012 and use the tragedy to embarrass President Obama and then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has obscured the more complex reality of what happened, writes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

David Kirkpatrick's investigative piece in the *New York Times* about last year's lethal attack on a U.S. compound in Benghazi is well worth reading, though not because its conclusions ought to have been surprising to any disinterested observer of what was going on in Libya at the time.

Once dust from the confusion in the very first hours after the incident settled, the conditions that gave rise to the incident were fairly clear. One was widespread popular outrage, exhibited not only in Libya but also beyond its

borders, from a scurrilous video that many Muslims found insulting to the founder of their faith.

Another was lawlessness that has prevailed in Libya ever since the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi, and continues to prevail there, and that is characterized by a mélange of militias and other armed groups with a variety of interests and grievances, some of them antipathetic to the United States.

That this has not been broadly understood is due mainly to the unrelenting effort of some in the opposition party in the United States to exploit the death of four U.S. citizens in the incident to try to discredit the Obama administration and its Secretary of State at the time (who is seen as a likely contender in the next presidential election).

The line propounded in this effort is, first, that the incident can have only one of two possible explanations: either the attack was a completely spontaneous and unorganized popular response to the video, or it was a terrorist attack that had nothing to do with emotions surrounding the video and instead was a premeditated operation by a particular terrorist group, Al Qaeda.

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Does Woodward Know Watergate?

Exclusive: Republicans are hyping the flap over Benghazi talking points by calling it "worse than Watergate," a false narrative that Bob Woodward has helped along by ignoring new evidence connecting Richard Nixon's sabotage of Vietnam War peace talks in 1968 to his political spying in 1971-72, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The Washington Post's Bob Woodward has popped up on TV recently affirming a key Republican talking point, likening the "scandal" over the Obama administration's Benghazi talking points to Richard Nixon's Watergate scandal, which Woodward helped make famous.

But, as he joins in hyping the GOP's Benghazi scandal-mongering, Woodward

doesn't appear to know that new documentary evidence has transformed our understanding of Watergate and especially its tie-in to the Vietnam War and how those documents make comparisons between Watergate and Benghazi both ludicrous and obscene.

During an appearance on MSNBC's "Morning Joe" on May 17, Woodward compared the administration's development of talking points for TV appearances by UN Ambassador Susan Rice in 2012 to Nixon's mendacious editing of his Oval Office tapes to conceal the role of his reelection campaign in the break-in at the Democrats' Watergate headquarters in 1972.

"You were talking earlier about kind of dismissing the Benghazi issue as one that's just political and the president recently said it's a sideshow," Woodward said. "But if you read through all these e-mails, you see that everyone in the government is saying, 'Oh, let's not tell the public that terrorists were involved, people connected to al-Qaeda. Let's not tell the public that there were warnings.'"

Then, noting that four U.S. diplomatic personnel died in the attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya, on Sept. 11, 2012, Woodward added, "I would not dismiss Benghazi. It's a very serious issue. As people keep saying, four people were killed."

But Woodward appears to have been relying on Republican talking points in his understanding of why Obama administration officials decided to leave out some details from Rice's talking points, specifically a concern that divulging certain specifics would compromise the ongoing investigation to catch the Islamic terrorist believed responsible.

At the time, there also remained genuine confusion over the connection between the Benghazi attack and angry demonstrations sweeping the Middle East over an American video mocking the Prophet Muhammad. Indeed, the recently released e-mails buttress then-CIA Director David Petraeus's testimony about concerns over the possibility of harming the investigation.

By contrast, Nixon systematically reviewed tape transcripts of his Oval Office conversations to remove sections that incriminated him and his top aides in a felonious cover-up. We also now know what Nixon's most dangerous secret was, i.e., why he hired ex-CIA officer E. Howard Hunt to organize an espionage team in the first place.

Nixon was terrified that a missing file might surface revealing FBI wiretaps of his 1968 campaign's sabotage of President Lyndon Johnson's Vietnam peace talks, a politically motivated case of obstruction that Johnson privately called

“treason.”

In other words, the ultimate secret of Watergate one that apparently still remains a mystery to Woodward was that Nixon was terrified that the American people might learn that he had extended the Vietnam War for an additional four years to get an edge in a political campaign.

As a result of LBJ’s failed peace initiative, some 20,000 more U.S. soldiers died along with an estimated one million Vietnamese and countless more dead in Cambodia. The war also tore apart America’s political and social fabric.

So, to put the flap over the Benghazi talking points in the same sentence with Nixon’s Watergate crimes suggests either a complete lack of proportionality or some self-serving agenda. It’s possible that Woodward doesn’t want to acknowledge the new evidence because it would show that he missed the most important element of a scandal that made his career.

Recognition of the fuller Watergate scandal also would shatter a favorite saying of Official Washington, “the cover-up is worse than the crime.” That surely wouldn’t be true if the Watergate scandal were understood to encompass Nixon’s treacherous scheme to block Johnson’s Vietnam peace deal.

Memoirs and Documents

We now know based on memoirs of principals and documents available at the LBJ Library in Austin, Texas, that in 1969, Johnson ordered his national security aide, Walt Rostow, to remove the wiretap file on Nixon’s peace-talk sabotage from the White House and that Nixon later learned of the file’s existence from FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover

However, Nixon’s senior advisers, Henry Kissinger and H.R. “Bob” Haldeman, were unable to locate the missing file, not realizing that it was in Rostow’s personal possession. Nixon’s concern about the incriminating wiretaps grew into a panic after June 13, 1971, when the New York Times began publishing the top-secret Pentagon Papers, which detailed the mostly Democratic lies that had drawn the United States into the Vietnam War from 1945 to 1967.

As those stories dominated the front pages of newspapers across the nation and the world, Nixon realized something that few others knew, that there was a sequel that was arguably even more scandalous, a file containing evidence of his campaign’s successful sabotage of Johnson’s peace talks, which could have negotiated an end to the war in 1968.

As the Pentagon Papers dominated the news, Nixon summoned Kissinger and Haldeman into the Oval Office again on June 17, 1971, and ordered them to redouble their

efforts to locate the missing file. Nixon's panic is captured on an Oval Office tape that was made public decades ago but not fully understood.

"Do we have it?" Nixon asked Haldeman about Johnson's file. "I've asked for it. You said you didn't have it."

Haldeman: "We can't find it."

Kissinger: "We have nothing here, Mr. President."

Nixon: "Well, damnit, I asked for that because I need it."

Kissinger: "But Bob and I have been trying to put the damn thing together."

Haldeman: "We have a basic history in constructing our own, but there is a file on it."

Nixon: "Where?"

Haldeman: "[Presidential aide Tom Charles] Huston swears to God that there's a file on it and it's at Brookings."

Nixon: "Bob? Bob? Now do you remember Huston's plan [for White House-sponsored break-ins as part of domestic counter-intelligence operations]? Implement it."

Kissinger: "Now Brookings has no right to have classified documents."

Nixon: "I want it implemented. Goddamnit, get in and get those files. Blow the safe and get it."

Haldeman: "They may very well have cleaned them by now, but this thing, you need to "

Kissinger: "I wouldn't be surprised if Brookings had the files."

Haldeman: "My point is Johnson knows that those files are around. He doesn't know for sure that we don't have them around."

But Johnson did know that the file was no longer at the White House because he had ordered Rostow to remove it in the final days of his own presidency.

On June 30, 1971, Nixon again berated Haldeman about the need to break into Brookings and "take it [the file] out." Nixon even suggested using former CIA officer E. Howard Hunt to conduct the Brookings break-in.

"You talk to Hunt," Nixon told Haldeman. "I want the break-in. Hell, they do that. You're to break into the place, rifle the files, and bring them in. Just go in and take it. Go in around 8:00 or 9:00 o'clock."

Haldeman: "Make an inspection of the safe."

Nixon: "That's right. You go in to inspect the safe. I mean, *clean it up.*"

For reasons that remain unclear, it appears that the Brookings break-in never took place. Also unclear to historians was the full significance of the missing file. They knew that it had a connection to Johnson's peace initiative in October 1968 but they assumed, mistakenly, that it was a file containing policy papers, not wiretap evidence.

The 'X' Envelope

The missing link to the story was filed away at the LBJ Library, where Rostow eventually deposited what he labeled "The 'X' Envelope." Rostow transferred the file to the library after Johnson's death in 1973 but with instructions that it not be opened for 50 years. Library officials eventually overrode Rostow's mandate but not until 1994 when the envelope was opened and declassification of its contents began.

But the two-decade delay caused serious damage to the historical record because, in the interim, a distorted narrative of the Watergate scandal had taken shape and solidified. Not knowing the contents of the missing file the one that Nixon thought might be at Brookings led Woodward and other Watergate reporters to concentrate on the cover-up, not the underlying crime.

Because of that mistaken focus, an entire generation of journalists cut their teeth saying, "The cover-up is worse than the crime." There also grew an animosity toward evidence suggesting that Republicans would go behind the back of a Democratic president to undermine an important foreign policy initiative like, say, trying to end the Vietnam War. Somehow disclosing such facts was deemed not "good for the country."

So, my discovery of the missing piece of the Watergate mosaic in 2012 was unwelcome news in many quarters, easier to ignore than to explain. However, the false narrative of Watergate is not old news; it has become a current reference point for Republican efforts to undermine another Democratic president on a foreign policy incident.

Because of the lack of proportionality made possible by the distorted Watergate narrative Sen. John McCain and other leading Republicans can breezily call the Benghazi story "worse" than Watergate. Then, by recycling some bad history, Bob Woodward contributes to the problem. [For details on Rostow's "X Envelope," see Robert Parry's *America's Stolen Narrative.*]

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for

The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).

The Lost 'Trifecta of Scandals'

From CNN to the Washington Post, the mainstream news media is abuzz about "the trifecta of scandals" besetting the Obama administration, a narrative that fails to assess the actual significance of the three "scandals." They don't measure up to the many important scandals that the media neglects, says Beverly Bandler.

By Beverly Bandler

Appropriate questions should be asked and answered about the controversies over the IRS screening of 501-c-4 applications, the subpoenas for AP phone calls, and the Benghazi attack. Abuse of power should be checked with vigor, but hysteria should be avoided. These issues require calm and reasoned perspective. Outrage should be reserved for real scandals of which there are plenty.

However, as some commentators rush to judgment especially about the IRS "scandal," a review of some genuine scandals past and present may be in order:

A real scandal is the lying to the American people by George W. Bush and his administration about non-existent WMD that led us into the illegal and immoral Iraq War (and the related scandals of torture, Guantánamo, Abu Ghraib, and Afghanistan). Bush's actions caused hundreds of thousands of deaths, millions of horrific injuries and the destruction and destabilization of Iraq. The United States will pay for that scandal for generations, not only in money but in loss of respect.

A real scandal is the complicity of Ronald Reagan in "grotesque human rights crimes including genocide in Central America, his tolerance of drug trafficking by his anticommunist clients, and his support for sophisticated propaganda operations to destroy troublesome journalists and other investigators," as journalist Robert Parry [reported](#) after Reagan's ally, ex-Guatemalan dictator Efraín Ríos Montt, was found guilty of genocide in an extermination campaign backed by Reagan in the 1980s.

A real scandal is the extent to which radical right-wing conservatives have managed to corrupt, to some extent, every single agency in the Executive Branch, for instance: restrictions placed on the Center for Disease Control by the

National Rifle Association, the constant right-wing threats against the Environmental Protection Agency, and the latest threat of the GOP to render the National Labor Relations Board inoperative. There's also been the ideological corruption of the Judicial Branch.

A real scandal is the magnitude of air and water pollution across the nation along with worsening threat of global warming, while government efforts to address these problems are obstructed by GOP corporatists.

A real scandal is the conservatives' use of one "study," the Reinhart/Rogoff report to push for an austerity budget when the "study" has now been exposed as fraudulent and the austerity theory itself revealed to be fraudulent while the rich get richer and millions of Americans face long-term unemployment.

A real scandal is the extent of poverty in the United States with almost half of Americans dying close to penniless, in a nation in which the top one-hundredth of one percent average some \$27 million per household while the average income for the bottom 90 percent is a little over \$31,000.

A real scandal is how consistently the United States lags in international measurements for education (17th in the developed world) and for health care (37th out of 191 countries). Increasingly, ignorance shapes the national discourse with many Americans who rate the Benghazi case a major scandal not even knowing where it is.

A real scandal is the deliberate misinterpretation of the Second Amendment by the Right for political purposes and to serve the firearms industry, a distortion compounded the failure of the Left and centrist politicians to challenge the falsehoods. General citizens and corporate journalists apparently don't read history and the Constitution or are unfamiliar with the English language.

A real scandal is the continued takeover of the United States political and economic system by the military-industrial complex and by corporations, a power grab facilitated by five right-wing justices on the U.S. Supreme Court and their 2010 decision in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*. That decision also laid the groundwork for the current IRS "scandal" because so many right-wing groups rushed to exploit the 501-c-4 tax-exempt "social welfare" category to carry out their political agendas.

The "social welfare" category was established for civic leagues or organizations not organized for profit but operated exclusively for the promotion of social welfare. In 1959, under the administration of Dwight Eisenhower, the meaning of this section was changed dramatically when the IRS decided the word

“exclusively” could, in effect, be read as “primarily.”

“For 54 years, the IRS has gotten away with the crime of changing the word ‘exclusively’ to ‘primarily,’” said Lawrence O’Donnell on *The Last Word* Monday. “The IRS took a hard, clear word like ‘exclusively’ and changed it into a soft word ‘primarily’ and then left it to the IRS agents to determine if your organization was primarily concerned with the promotion of social welfare.”

Thus, when the Supreme Court issued *Citizens United* in 2010 – prompting a flood of new 501-c-4 applications – some IRS bureaucrats sought ways to detect which of the applicants were likely exploiting the loophole. That led to the controversial use of word searches that were viewed as targeting Tea Party groups.

“The IRS does need some kind of test that helps them weed out political organizations attempting to register as tax-exempt 501(c)4 social welfare groups,” wrote Ezra Klein in the *Wonkblog* Monday. “But that test has to be studiously, unquestionably neutral.”

Another real scandal is why the perpetrators of the financial crisis that began in late 2007 have not been held accountable and when the evidence is clear why they have not been brought to trial. As Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Massachusetts, suggests, the banks and other guilty parties need to be taken to court.

A real scandal is how the Bush administration and the Republican Party cratered the economy, giving the nation a full decade without net jobs growth and leaving behind a crippling depression. A real scandal is how the Republican Party held the debt ceiling hostage in 2011 and may well try it again.

A real scandal is how the GOP has been taken over by anti-democratic, anti-rational, anti-science, neo-confederate, nihilist, obstructionist, corporatist forces becoming a political party unlike one ever seen in U.S. history. Conservatism is one thing, *crazy* is another.

Former Republican Mike Lofgren describes the GOP as “less and less like a traditional political party in a representative democracy and ... more like an apocalyptic cult,” one that is “ideologically extreme, scornful of compromise, and ardently opposed to the established social and economic policy regime.”

It is also a party of liars and one ruthlessly determined to destroy a president because he’s a Democrat along with the Democratic Party to impose an authoritarian, neo-fascist regime on the United States.

A real scandal is how the right-wing propaganda juggernaut has manipulated the corporate media and exploited American naiveté, lack of information and fear,

and how the listless Left with its “learned helplessness” has let right-wing extremists get away with it by failing to “step up to the plate” with an effective investment in public outreach.

Below, I have provided a list of links related to the IRS story. I don’t pretend to have them all, but have tried to provide a decent selection. *ThinkProgress* and *Mother Jones* are particularly informative and rational as usual. I hope they are helpful to you.

Oh, by the way, the Congressional Budget Office reports that the deficit “crisis” is solved for the next ten years. Now *there’s* a story.

Beverly Bandler’s public affairs career spans some 40 years. Her credentials include serving as president of the state-level League of Women Voters of the Virgin Islands and extensive public education efforts in the Washington, D.C. area for 16 years. She writes from Mexico.

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The Great Benghazi Distraction

The Benghazi "scandal" has enabled congressional Republicans to keep their "base" worked up to a fever pitch, but the hyping of the controversy beyond all reason is doing real harm to U.S. national security by distracting officials from actual foreign policy problems, according to ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

If I were apolitical adviser to those relentlessly pushing recriminations about the attack last year on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, I think my advice would be, "Give it a rest." This pseudo-scandal has become so forced, so contrived, and so blatantly driven by motives other than safeguarding the security of U.S. interests that the unending push has already passed the point where it serves any identifiable objectives, even partisan political ones.

The subject, about which a panel of inquiry has completed its work and issued its report, is already tiresome; imagine how much more tiresome it will be to voters by 2016 after three more years of it.

A [poll](#) on Benghazi released this week by Public Policy Polling suggests that the agitation on the subject is keeping a Republican base agitated but not making wider inroads on public opinion. One has to ask what good it does Republicans to dwell on something that keeps one segment of the population angry about Barack Obama (and Hillary Clinton) when that segment was already angry about Obama anyway.

When asked whom the respondent trusted more on the issue of Benghazi, 49 percent said Hillary Clinton and 39 percent said Congressional Republicans. On other questions asking for an overall favorable or unfavorable rating, Clinton enjoys an eight-point margin over Congressional Republicans, the same margin as in a similar poll in March.

The poll did show that the angry base has gotten the intended message that there is supposedly a scandal involved. A plurality of Republicans (but only small percentages of either Democrats or independents) said yes to the question of

whether this was the “biggest scandal in American history.” By margins of greater than three to one, Republicans polled said it was a worse scandal than Watergate, Iran Contra, or Teapot Dome.

That’s an interesting result given that in one case [Benghazi] the issue involved nuances conveyed in some talking points, while each of the others involved criminal behavior in the form of attempted subversion of an American election with a subsequent cover-up, illegal diversion of arms into a foreign war, or bribery of a cabinet officer to get preferred exploitation of publicly owned natural resources.

The customary ignorance of the American public is no doubt at play. Probably the proportion of the general population that could say today what Teapot Dome was about measures in the single digits. A scandal seems worse if you’ve actually heard about it.

The ignorance factor was suggested by another question in the poll asking where Benghazi is. Ten percent believe it is in Egypt, nine percent in Iran, six percent in Cuba, five percent in Syria, four percent in Iraq, and one percent each in North Korea and Liberia, with another four percent being unwilling to guess. Maybe those who said Cuba have Benghazi confused with Guantanamo. It would be interesting to know what those who said North Korea think the incident was about.

Probably the failure of the agitation about Benghazi to make wider inroads on public opinion is due not only to the tiresome, contrived and partisan nature of the agitation but also to the fact that it never had a logic in the first place. The message being promoted seems to be that the administration was shying away from describing the incident as terrorism in order not to undermine, during the 2012 election campaign, a claim to having success against international terrorists.

But when did Barack Obama ever contend that international terrorism has been licked? When the presidential candidates were asked in one of the debates, several months after Osama bin Laden had been killed, what each believed to be the biggest national security threat facing the country, Obama replied, “terrorism.” However the incident in Benghazi is characterized, four Americans were killed. There is no way to sugar-coat that, whether the T-word is used or not.

The endless harping about Benghazi has costs beyond, and more important than, wasted time by Republicans who have better ways to try to win votes and defeat Hillary Clinton. Among those costs is the fostering of misunderstanding of some fundamental realities about such incidents and about terrorism.

Shortly after the Benghazi attack I mentioned some of those realities, including the inherent hazards of overseas representation and the inability to protect every installation everywhere, and the fact that the details of such incidents are nearly always obscure initially and become clear only in hindsight.

As the harping continued other costs grew. These included promoting yet another misunderstanding about terrorism: the idea that popular anger at the United States and the machinations of a group are somehow mutually exclusive explanations for any terrorist incident. Still another is the notion that non-state violence is worth worrying about if it can be linked to al-Qaeda but is not much of a threat if it cannot. There also is the cost of inducing future secretaries of state and other officials to impair U.S. diplomacy by futilely pursuing a zero-risk approach to overseas representation.

As the pseudo-scandal continues to be pushed, other costs come to mind. An obvious one is the big distraction this entails from useful work Congress could otherwise be doing. Of course, we are no strangers to similarly ineffective use of congressional time and attention. Probably the Benghazi kick has been no more of a distraction than the House of Representatives voting for the 33rd time (or maybe it's more, it's so many there doesn't seem to be an accurate count) to repeal Obamacare.

One also needs to consider, however, the drain on the time and attention of officials in the Executive Branch. Having five different House committees holding hearings on the same subject is an enormous diversion from the main duties of those who are responsible for diplomatic security.

The poll questions about the relative severity of different scandals brings to mind another cost: a debasing of the currency regarding what really is a scandal and what episodes in our nation's history ought to be thought about and have lessons extracted from them. Another example of this is found in a column this week by the *Washington Post's* Jackson Diehl.

Diehl validly observes that the unending agitation over talking points about Benghazi is a misdirected digression from serious issues that ought to be addressed in a bipartisan manner, such as a failure to "adequately prepare for an emergency in post-revolution North Africa." One might broaden the point by saying that we also ought to be discussing, again in a bipartisan manner, what assumptions underlay the Western intervention in Libya and whether it ever was a good idea.

But then in an apparent effort to achieve some kind of partisan balance, or just to scratch some old itch, Diehl contends there is equivalence between the folderol over Benghazi and the episode in which in the course of selling the

invasion of Iraq the George W. Bush administration made a false claim about Iraqi purchases of uranium ore in Africa, with the office of Vice President Cheney doing battle with a former ambassador who investigated the matter.

There is no equivalence at all between these two episodes. The one involving the Vice President's office, like Watergate, Iran-Contra, and Teapot Dome, but unlike Benghazi, involved criminal behavior. Vice presidential aide I. Lewis Libby was convicted of perjury, providing false statements to investigators, and obstruction of justice.

Diehl also gets the other essentials about the episode wrong. Although he writes that what the retired ambassador, Joseph Wilson, said was mostly "grossly exaggerated, or simply false," the principal thing Wilson said, that no such purchases of uranium ore were ever made, was absolutely correct, with the administration's claim being dead wrong.

The reason the Vice President's office got so deeply involved in the matter was to try to find ways to discredit Wilson and the agency that hired him because the truths they spoke were complicating the effort to sell the Iraq War.

Although Diehl says we should have had "a serious discussion of why U.S. intelligence about Iraq was wrong," he fails to mention that on this very matter U.S. intelligence was *right*, having repeatedly warned the White House against using the temptingly juicy tidbit about purchases of uranium ore.

The episode was one of the most salient indications that far from being misled into Iraq by bad intelligence, the war-makers in the administration were determined for other reasons to launch the war and were only using intelligence selectively to try to bolster their campaign to sell the invasion.

And lest we forget, the damage to the national interest from that expedition was many, many times greater than anything involving Benghazi. Now *that's* scandalous.

Paul R. Pillar, in his 28 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, rose to be one of the agency's top analysts. He is now a visiting professor at Georgetown University for security studies. (This article first appeared as [a blog post at The National Interest's Web site](#). Reprinted with author's permission.)

The Real Benghazi Scandal

The Republican fixation on Benghazi "talking points" has obscured the bigger

scandal of last September's fatal attacks, the CIA's use of the consulate as an operational base without sufficient security. That failure underscores a series of other unexamined intelligence failures, says ex-CIA analyst Melvin A. Goodman.

By Melvin A. Goodman

When congressional Republicans complete manipulating the Benghazi tragedy, it will be time for the virtually silent Senate Intelligence Committee to take up three major issues that have been largely ignored.

The committee must investigate the fact that the U.S. presence in Benghazi was an intelligence platform and only nominally a consulate; the politicization by the White House and State Department of CIA analysis of the events in Benghazi; and the Obama administration's politicization of the CIA's Office of the Inspector General (OIG), a process that has virtually destroyed the office and deprived congressional intelligence committees of their most important oversight tool.

When U.S. personnel were airlifted from Benghazi the night of the attack, there were seven Foreign Service and State Department officers and 23 CIA officers onboard. This fact alone indicates that the consulate was primarily diplomatic cover for an intelligence operation that was known to Libyan militia groups.

The CIA failed to provide adequate security for Benghazi, and its clumsy tradecraft contributed to the tragic failure. On the night of the attack, the small CIA security team in Benghazi was slow to respond, relying on an untested Libyan intelligence organization to maintain security for U.S. personnel. After the attack, the long delay in debriefing evacuated personnel contributed to the confusing assessments.

The Senate Intelligence Committee should investigate why the State Department changed the CIA analysis of Benghazi before it went to the Hill. The Congress is entitled to the same intelligence analysis that is provided to the White House with few exceptions.

In the wake of the intelligence hearings in the mid-1970s in response to intelligence abuses during the Vietnam War, the CIA lost its exclusive relationship with the president and had to accept a rough equilibrium between the White House and the Congress. It serves both branches of government, and is accountable to both. It cannot act on presidential requests without clearance from the Congress.

The success of the Bush and Obama administrations in weakening the CIA's OIG has

ensured that CIA failures have gone unexposed and uncorrected. The statutory Inspector General was created in the wake of the Iran-Contra scandal to assure integrity at the CIA. After the office published reports critical of both CIA's performance before 9/11 and its detentions program, however, the CIA's operations managers wanted the office shut down.

Successive directors have complied. CIA Director Michael Hayden authorized an internal review of the OIG in 2007 that had a chilling effect on the staff. CIA Director Leon Panetta went even further, appointing an Inspector General in 2009 who lacked both professional experience in managing intelligence investigations as well as the watchdog mentality that the position requires.

When nine CIA operatives and contractors were killed by a suicide bomber at a CIA base in eastern Afghanistan, Panetta proclaimed that the bombing involved no operational failures and allowed the operational bureau responsible for the program to investigate itself rather than pursue an IG inspection. Even when the OIG documented Agency lies to the Congress concerning a secret drug interdiction program in Peru, no significant disciplinary action was taken.

As a result, the Agency's flaws have gone uncorrected. The politicization of intelligence in the run-up to the Iraq War in 2003 was the worst intelligence scandal in the CIA's history, but there were no penalties for those who supported CIA Director George Tenet's efforts to make phony intelligence a "slam dunk" as well as Deputy Director John McLaughlin's "slam dunk" briefing to President George W. Bush. The CIA's production of an unclassified white paper for the Congress on the eve of the vote to authorize force in October 2002 marked the misuse of classified information to influence congressional opinion, but there were no consequences.

The destruction of the torture tapes, a clear case of obstruction of justice in view of White House orders to protect the tapes, led to no recriminations at the CIA. The controversy over the use of drone aircraft; the intelligence failure that accompanied the Arab Spring in 2011; and the inadequate security presence in Libya in the wake of the killing of Muammar Gaddafi have not received the necessary scrutiny.

Any CIA component in the Middle East and North Africa is a likely target of militant and terrorist organizations because of the Agency's key role in the Bush administration's "war on terror" and the Obama administration's increasingly widespread use of drone aircraft.

The ability of the Nigerian underwear bomber to board a commercial airline in December 2009 marked an intelligence failure for the entire intelligence community, but there was no serious attempt to examine the breakdown in

coordination between five or six intelligence agencies, let alone pursue accountability. Instead, President Obama halted all efforts to return home Yemeni prisoners at Guantanamo. Like the use of lethal drones, the Guantanamo prison generates far more recruits for terrorism than any other U.S. action.

If more attention is not given to the biblical inscription at the entrance to the CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, that only the “truth will set you free,” the decline of the CIA and the intelligence community will continue.

Melvin A. Goodman, a senior fellow at the Center for International Policy, was an analyst at the CIA for 24 years. He is the author of the recently published *National Insecurity: The Cost of American Militarism* (City Lights Publishers) [This article previously appeared at Counterpunch and is reprinted with the author’s permission.]

The Right’s ‘Scandal’ Funhouse Mirror

Exclusive: Official Washington is captivated by the image of Obama “scandals,” including Benghazi talking points and extra IRS questions posed to Tea Party groups, but journalists are peering into the Right’s funhouse mirror which for decades has made big scandals small and small scandals big, says Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The modern American news media operates like a giant right-wing funhouse mirror reflecting back some large things as small and some small things as large. The Right gets to decide which items will be misshapen in which ways and the mainstream press then reinforces the distortions.

Though not very funny, this funhouse mirror has been in operation since at least the 1980s and is now so well established that most mainstream journalists and many politicians assume the exaggerations and minimizations are the way things really are.

This funhouse effect was first noticeable during the scandals of Ronald Reagan, when it didn’t seem to matter how much evidence was compiled about his complicity in grotesque human rights crimes including genocide in Central America, his tolerance of drug trafficking by his anticommunist clients, and his support for sophisticated propaganda operations to destroy troublesome journalists and other investigators.

The Right, as it built this hall of mirrors during those years, was determined to transform Reagan's shocking crimes into something insignificant. Meanwhile, careerists in the mainstream news media learned to behave as if these distortions were just normal, the way things should be seen. If you insisted the funhouse reflections weren't real, you quickly became an outcast.

For instance, the New York Times' Raymond Bonner detected politically motivated massacres in El Salvador, including the extermination of entire villages in the area of El Mozote, but the Reagan administration and its right-wing allies simply explained that there had been no massacres and that Bonner was just a biased reporter who needed to be removed, which he soon was.

You might think that a cover-up of mass murder in El Salvador as also was occurring in nearby Guatemala would be a big scandal, especially since President Reagan was facilitating the slaughters by providing modern equipment to the killers and by discrediting brave journalists who tried to reveal the truth. But that was not how things appeared in the funhouse mirrors of Official Washington. The troublesome reporters were just getting what they deserved.

Similarly, Reagan's Nicaraguan Contra rebels appeared to human rights investigators and other independent observers to be thugs who swept through Nicaraguan towns killing peasants, torturing prisoners, raping women and engaging in a variety of practices that one might, in other circumstances, call terrorism. But reflected in the funhouse mirror, these ugly images were made to disappear, along with well-documented evidence of Contra cocaine smuggling.

Even when reality occasionally intruded on Official Washington with outside disclosures about Reagan's White House illegally shipping weapons to the Contras (because one of the U.S. planes was shot down over Nicaragua) and about Reagan's team paying for some of those weapons by secretly selling missiles to Iran (as revealed by a Lebanese newspaper), the Iran-Contra scandal was quickly downsized into a legalistic dispute over whether it was ever okay to lie to Congress.

Trashing Gary Webb

The mainstream Washington news media became so accustomed to the funhouse mirrors that when Gary Webb of the San Jose Mercury News revived the Contra-cocaine story in 1996, the big newspapers the New York Times, the Washington Post and the Los Angeles Times knew exactly what to do: reshape Webb from a respected investigative journalist into a conspiracy nut.

That distortion remained in place despite a CIA inspector general's report that not only confirmed that the Nicaraguan Contras were deeply involved in the

cocaine trade but that the Reagan administration knew about the problem and systematically covered it up. But Webb lost his job at the Mercury News, could not find a decent-paying position anywhere in journalism and, in 2004, committed suicide. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[The Warning in Gary Webb's Death.](#)"]

The funhouse mirror even affects how Official Washington understands historic scandals like the two October Surprise operations the one in 1968 when Richard Nixon's campaign sabotaged President Lyndon Johnson's Vietnam peace talks to give Nixon an edge in that tight election and the one in 1980 when Ronald Reagan's campaign used similar tactics to frustrate President Jimmy Carter's efforts to free 52 American hostages then held in Iran.

Again, no matter how much proof is piled up, Official Washington won't see what's lying there in front of it even though the two October Surprise cases also appear to have been the starting points for the Watergate scandal for Nixon and the Iran-Contra scandal for Reagan, respectively. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Rethinking Watergate/Iran-Contra](#)" or Robert Parry's [America's Stolen Narrative.](#)]

The Right's funhouse mirror also means that tiny or fabricated scandals implicating Democrats and progressives are turned into something huge. When Bill Clinton was in office, it was Whitewater and "Clinton's Mysterious Deaths." After Barack Obama took office, it was "Fast and Furious," the Benghazi talking points and now the Internal Revenue Service asking extra questions to Tea Party groups that wanted to get tax-exempt status.

Yet, even as the Republicans insist that the IRS asking Tea Party groups some extra questions is equal to or worse than Watergate, it's been noted that Republican voiced no such protests in 2004 when George W. Bush's IRS responding to Republican demands instigated a two-year audit of the NAACP and threatened to take away the historic civil rights group's tax-exempt status because NAACP chairman Julian Bond had criticized Bush's Iraq War and his trampling of the Constitution.

In other words, even in parallel cases (although asking a couple of dozen extra questions isn't nearly as intrusive or expensive as a two-year audit), the funhouse mirror makes right-wing political groups the victims of "tyranny" under President Obama while the NAACP was just getting its comeuppance under President Bush.

But the larger question is: Can a democratic Republic long survive with such systematic distortions of reality. What will happen if one side of America's political equation the Right continues to possess a vast and sophisticated media apparatus, a vertically integrated structure meshing newspapers, newsmagazine

and books with radio, TV and the Internet in a synergy that spreads the right-wing message and maximizes profits, while the other side the Left has nothing comparable, just scattered and underfunded outlets that have to fend for themselves?

Compounding this situation is the fact that the careerist mainstream media knows that there's no risk and a great benefit to leap onto the Right's "scandal" bandwagons when they roll by and there's virtually no upside and a big downside to report on real scandals that get in the Right's way.

There have been too many good reporters, like Raymond Bonner and Gary Webb, crushed under the wheels of the right-wing juggernaut. For average Americans, the only advice is that they must realize that they are inside a media funhouse and that the mirrors don't reflect the real story.

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