

America's Unpredictable Imbalance

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

By Lawrence Davidson

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

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

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United States, a Pew Research Center study announced on Dec. 9 that the "middle class" has shrunk to the point that it no longer represents a majority of the American people.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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Role Model Demagogue

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Cycles of Fear

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lawrence Davidson is a history professor at West Chester University in Pennsylvania. He is the author of *Foreign Policy Inc.: Privatizing America’s National Interest*; *America’s Palestine: Popular and Official Perceptions from Balfour to Israeli Statehood*; and *Islamic Fundamentalism*.

Hitting Saudi Arabia Where It Hurts

Exclusive: Though faced with a global terrorism crisis, Official Washington can’t get beyond its neocon-led “tough-guy-gal” rhetoric. But another option financial sanctions on Saudi Arabia might help finally shut down the covert supply of money and arms to Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

As the Islamic State and Al Qaeda enter a grim competition to see who can kill more civilians around the world, the fate of Western Civilization as we’ve known it arguably hangs in the balance. It will not take much more terror for the

European Union to begin cracking up and for the United States to transform itself into a full-scale surveillance state.

Yet, in the face of this crisis, many of the same people who set us on this road to destruction continue to dominate and indeed frame the public debate. For instance, Official Washington's neocons still insist on their recipe for "regime change" in countries that they targeted 20 years ago. They also demand a new Cold War with Russia in defense of a corrupt right-wing regime in Ukraine, further destabilizing Europe and disrupting U.S.-Russian cooperation in Syria.

Given the stakes, you might think that someone in a position of power or one of the many candidates for U.S. president would offer some pragmatic and realistic ideas for addressing this extraordinary threat. But most Republicans from Marco Rubio to Carly Fiorina to Ted Cruz only offer more of "more of the same," i.e. neocon belligerence on steroids. Arguably, Donald Trump and Rand Paul are exceptions to this particular hysteria, but neither has offered a coherent and comprehensive counter-analysis.

On the Democratic side, frontrunner Hillary Clinton wins praise from the neocon editors of The Washington Post for breaking with President Barack Obama's hesitancy to fully invade Syria. Former Secretary of State Clinton wants an invasion to occupy parts of Syria as a "safe area" and to destroy Syrian (and presumably Russian) planes if they violate her "no-fly zone."

Much like the disastrous U.S. invasions of Iraq and Libya, Clinton and her neocon allies are pitching the invasion of Syria as a humanitarian venture to remove a "brutal dictator" in this case, President Bashar al-Assad as well as to "destroy" the Islamic State, which Assad's army and its Iranian-Russian allies have also been fighting. Assad's military, Iranian troops and Russian planes have hit other jihadist groups, too, such as Al Qaeda's Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham, which receives U.S. weapons as it fights side-by-side with Nusra in the Army of Conquest.

Clinton's strategy likely would protect jihadists except for the Islamic State – and thus keep hope alive for "regime change" – explaining why the Post's neocon editors, who were enthusiastic boosters of the Iraq War in 2003, hailed her hawkish approach toward Syria as "laudable."

To Clinton's left, Sen. Bernie Sanders has punted on the issue of what to do in either Syria or the Middle East, failing to offer any thoughtful ideas about what can be done to stabilize the region. He opted instead for a clever but vacuous talking point, arguing that the Saudis and other rich oil sheiks of the Persian Gulf should use their wealth and militaries to bring order to the region, to "get their hands dirty."

The problem is that the Saudis, the Qataris and the Kuwaitis along with the Turks are a big part of the problem. They have used their considerable wealth to finance and arm Al Qaeda and its various allies and spinoffs, including the Islamic State. Their hands are already very dirty.

Saudi 'Hard Power'

What we have seen in the Middle East since the 1980s is Saudi Arabia and other Sunni states creating "hard power" for their regional ambitions by assembling paramilitary forces that are willing and even eager to lash out at "enemies," whether against Shiite rivals or Western powers.

While the wealthy Saudis, Qataris and other pampered princes don't want to become soldiers themselves, they're more than happy to exploit disaffected young Sunnis, turn them into jihadists and unleash them. Al Qaeda (dating back to the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s) and the Islamic State (emerging in resistance to the U.S.-installed Shiite regime in Iraq after 2003) are Saudi Arabia's foot soldiers.

This reality is similar to how the Reagan administration supported right-wing paramilitary forces in Central America during the 1980s, including "death squads" in El Salvador and Guatemala and the drug-tainted "Contras" in Nicaragua. These extremists were willing to do the "dirty work" that Reagan's CIA considered necessary to reverse the tide of leftist revolution in the region, but with "deniability" built in so Official Washington couldn't be directly blamed for the slaughters.

Also, in the 1980s, the Reagan administration's hardliners, including CIA Director William J. Casey, saw the value of using Islamic extremism to undermine the Soviet Union, with its official position of atheism. The CIA and the Saudis worked hand in hand in building the Afghan mujahedeen an Islamic fundamentalist movement to overthrow the Soviet-backed secular government in Kabul.

The "success" of that strategy included severe harm dealt to the struggling Soviet economy and the eventual ouster (and murder) of the Moscow-backed president, Najibullah. But the strategy also gave rise to the Taliban, which took power and installed a medieval regime, and Al Qaeda, which evolved from the Saudi and other foreign fighters (including Saudi Osama bin Laden) who had flocked to the Afghan jihad.

In effect, the Afghan experience created the modern jihadist movement and the Saudis, in particular, understood the value of this paramilitary force to punish governments and political groups that the Saudis and their oil-rich friends considered threats. Officially, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other Sunni oil states

could claim that they weren't behind the terrorists while letting money and arms slip through.

Though Al Qaeda and the other jihadists had their own agendas and could take independent action the Saudis and other sheiks could direct these paramilitary forces against the so-called "Shiite crescent," from Iran through Syria to Lebanon (and after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, against Iraq's Shiite government as well).

At times, the jihadists also proved useful for the United States and Israel, striking at Hezbollah in Lebanon, fighting for "regime change" in Syria, collaborating in the 2011 ouster (and murder) of Libya's Muammar Gaddafi, even joining forces with the U.S.-backed Ukrainian government to kill ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine.

Israeli Role

Since these Sunni jihadists were most adept at killing Shiites, they endeared themselves not only to their Saudi, Qatari and Kuwaiti benefactors, but also to Israel, which has identified Shiite-ruled Iran as its greatest strategic threat. Thus, the American neocons, who collaborate closely with Israel's right-wing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, had mixed attitudes toward the Sunni jihadists, too.

Plus, high-profile terrorism, including the 9/11 attacks, enabled the tough-talking neocons to consolidate their control over U.S. foreign policy, diverting American fury over Al Qaeda's killing nearly 3,000 people in New York and Washington to implement the neocons' "regime change" agenda, first in Iraq though it had nothing to do with 9/11, with plans to move on to Syria and Iran.

As the Military-Industrial Complex made out like bandits with billions upon billions of dollars thrown at the "War on Terror," grateful military contractors kicked back some profits to major think tanks where neocon thinkers were employed to develop more militaristic plans. [See Consortiumnews.com's "A Family Business of Perpetual War."]

But the downside of this coziness with the Sunni jihadists has been that Al Qaeda and its spinoff, the Islamic State, perceive the West as their ultimate enemy, drawing from both historic and current injustices inflicted on the Islamic world by Europe and the United States. The terrorist leaders cite this mistreatment to recruit young people from impoverished areas of the Middle East and the urban slums of Europe and get them to strap on suicide-belts.

Thus, Al Qaeda and now the Islamic State not only advance the neocon/Israeli/Saudi agenda by launching terror attacks in Syria against Assad's

government and in Lebanon against Hezbollah, but they strike out on their own against U.S. and European targets, even in Africa where Al Qaeda claimed responsibility for last week's murderous assault on an upscale Radisson Blu hotel in Bamako, Mali.

It also appears that Al Qaeda and the Islamic State have entered into a competition over who can stage the bloodiest attacks against Westerners as a way to bolster recruitment. The Bamako attack was an attempt by Al Qaeda to regain the spotlight from the Islamic State which boasted of a vicious string of attacks on Paris, Beirut and a Russian tourist flight in the Sinai.

The consequence of these murderous rampages has been to threaten the political and economic cohesion of Europe and to increase pressures for a strengthened surveillance state inside the United States. In other words, some of the most treasured features of Western civilization personal liberty and relative affluence are being endangered.

Yet, rather than explain the real reasons for this crisis and what the possible solutions might be no one in the U.S. mainstream political world or the major media seems able or willing to talk straight to the American people about how we got here.

Sanders's Lost Opportunity

While you might have expected as much from most Republicans (who have surrounded themselves with neocon advisers) and from Hillary Clinton (who has cultivated her own ties to the neocons and their liberal interventionist sidekicks), you might have hoped that Sanders would have adopted a thoughtful critique of Official Washington's neocon-dominated "group think."

But instead he offers a simplistic and nonsensical prescription of demanding the Saudis do more when that would only inflict more death and destruction on the region and beyond. Arguably, the opposite would make much more sense impose tough financial sanctions against Saudi Arabia as punishment for its continued support for Al Qaeda and the Islamic State.

Freezing or confiscating Saudi bank accounts around the world might finally impress on the spoiled princes of the Persian Gulf oil states that there is a real price to pay for dabbling in terrorism. Such an action against Saudi Arabia also would send a message to smaller Sunni sheikdoms that they could be next. Other pressures, including possible expulsion from NATO, could be brought to bear on Turkey.

If the West finally got serious about stopping this financial and military support for Al Qaeda, the Islamic State and their jihadist allies in Syria, the

violence might finally abate. And, if the United States and Europe put pressure on the “moderate” Syrian opposition whatever there is of it to compromise, a political solution might be possible, too.

Right now, the biggest obstacle to a political agreement appears to be the U.S. insistence that President Assad be barred from elections once Syria achieves some stability. Yet, if President Obama is so certain that the Syrian people hate Assad, it seems crazy to let Assad’s presumed defeat at the polls obstruct such a crucial deal.

The only explanation for this U.S. stubbornness is that the neocons and the liberal hawks have made “regime change” in Syria such a key part of their agenda that they would lose face if Assad’s departure was not mandated. However, with the future of Western civilization in the balance, such obstinate behavior seems not only feckless but reckless.

From understanding how this mess was made, some U.S. politician could fashion an appeal that might have broad popular support across the political spectrum. If Sanders took up this torch for a rational plan for bringing relative peace to the Middle East, he also might shift the dynamics of the Democratic race.

Of course, to challenge Official Washington’s “group think” is always dangerous. If compromise and cooperation suddenly replaced “regime change” as the U.S. goal, the neocons and liberal hawks would flip out. But the stakes are extremely high for the planet’s future. Maybe saving Western civilization is worth the risk of facing down a neocon/liberal-hawk temper tantrum.

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](#).

Ducking the Issue of ‘Perpetual War’

During last week’s Democratic presidential debate, Sen. Bernie Sanders had an opening to reshape the campaign by offering a thoughtful critique of “perpetual war” and its consequences, but like the other major candidates of both parties ducked this crucial issue, writes Sam Hussein.

By Sam Hussein

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, some of us tried to raise questions about how U.S. foreign policy was a contributing factor. I got my mic cut off on Bill O'Reilly's show. Others got far worse – a friend basically felt he had to move out of his neighborhood because he was so reviled for criticizing U.S. militarism.

So, the root causes of the 9/11 attacks were hardly discussed – unless it was televangelists Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell blaming gay folks and getting derided for such nonsense. With minimal debate, the United States rushed off to war and hundreds of thousands of people got killed in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere without solving the problem of terrorism.

Today, even as the violence spreads, there's no meaningful peace movement. Partly as a result of that, we're not having the serious discussion that we should about what to do after the Paris attacks, including a serious assessment of how U.S. – and Western – foreign policy manifests the hatred that contributes to these homicidal suicide attacks.

In the case of the Paris terror attacks, one might have thought that an intelligent discussion would have been possible – the target, after all, was not the U.S. though it could be next on the list. But, still, there was some breathing room that might have allowed for a measure of serious examination and reflection about the effects of perpetual war.

But the two-party establishment with no significant exceptions agrees on the need for perpetual war. So there is almost no serious critique. For instance, top Democrats and Republicans show virtually no remorse for having pushed for "regime change" in Syria and Libya. Nor do they see a connection between those policies and the enormous human suffering that followed.

If there is criticism, it is aimed mostly at President Barack Obama for not doing more militarily. He's called weak and feckless although he's bombed country after country.

So, amid a broad pro-war consensus on the campaign trail, the major policy debate has turned to Syrian refugees and whether they should be allowed into the United States, a point where there is more disagreement. The trouble is that sometimes what the two sides agree on (perpetual war) is what causes the point that they disagree on (what to do with refugees that perpetual war creates).

Democratic Party politicians talk about the humanity of Syrian refugees and the ideal of the U.S. offering them sanctuary. Republican politicians talk about alleged security concerns from letting refugees in. (While I personally think we

should let in more than a mere 10,000 refugees, which is what the Obama administration is talking about, I don't think that's the issue we really need to be addressing.)

The real issue is the results of perpetual war and the continued backing for it among those politicians. The Democratic Party participates in perpetual war policies that lead to Syrians becoming refugees and the Republican Party participates in perpetual war policies that lead to greater insecurity for people in the U.S.

Meanwhile, the refugee issue is made into a wedge issue that keeps the Democratic base and the Republican base shouting at each other rather than examining the underlying cause: perpetual war and the problematic "allies" that U.S. officials have embraced in the Mideast. For instance, there is a conspiracy of silence about causal factors, such as the U.S. government's backing of the authoritarian Saudi regime that has fostered Wahhabism, an extremist form of Islam used by Al Qaeda and ISIS.

Even the most progressive Democrats are silent on this touchy topic. Just this week, Rep. Barbara Lee – possibly the most left-wing member of Congress – was asked on "Democracy Now" about U.S. arms to Saudi Arabia. She didn't condemn it.

In the presidential race, Sen. Bernie Sanders, the progressive alternative to hawkish former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, can bring a lump to every throat in the hall when talking about economic inequality, but his solution to the threat from Al Qaeda and ISIS is for the Saudis to "get their hands dirty."

Sorry, Bernie, but the Saudis hands are dirty enough. The Saudis fostered jihadis like ISIS and Al Qaeda to tear apart Syria, and the Saudis are now bombing Yemen as part of their sectarian war against "the Shiite crescent" slaughtering large numbers of Yemeni civilians (while enabling Al Qaeda's affiliate in Yemen to capture more territory)

At the CBS-sponsored Democratic debate the day after the Paris attacks, Sanders didn't even want to talk about foreign policy. It was tragic really. He could have laid into the misguided foreign policy that Clinton has embraced and has helped shape. Sanders could have noted that by backing the Saudis the U.S. has worsened the threat from such groups as ISIS in the Middle East and now Europe and possibly America in the near future. He could have jolted the campaign and sparked a meaningful public debate.

But he didn't. The most he did was criticize the invasion of Iraq, which is valid, but that was a dozen years ago. In my view, no one who voted for the Iraq War (including Hillary Clinton) is qualified to hold any official position let

alone President of the United States, but Sanders flinched at the need for a more substantive critique of what's happened since the Iraq War.

He relied on his nonsensical and counterproductive talking point about the supposed need for the Saudis and other rich Gulf states to intervene more aggressively in regional conflicts, which in real terms would mean more weapons and money going to their paramilitary proxies: Al Qaeda, ISIS and other jihadists. The Saudis are a big part of the problem, not the solution.

Whatever Sanders has to say about the economy and the need to invest heavily in American infrastructure, education and health care those plans are not feasible unless Sanders also can articulate a path out of perpetual war.

The Vietnam War helped undermine the war on poverty, as Martin Luther King Jr. noted, calling it a "demonic suction tube" diverting tax dollars from programs to alleviate suffering in the United State to inflict suffering in Indochina. Today's perpetual war is gobbling up so much money that there won't be any left for building infrastructure and financing other plans that Sanders may have.

Plus, if you don't explain how and why you would end perpetual war, the voters are going to pick someone who vows to continue perpetual war, only do it better. And there will be no end in sight. Perpetual war will mean more generations of Muslim youth driven to madness against the U.S. and the West.

Beyond the fiscal cost, perpetual war will mean an even more militarized police force at home and a more repressive security state. Perpetual war will mean more refugees who will be treated as the newest scapegoats so the U.S. public will never focus on the U.S. war policies themselves.

Plus, perpetual war will make nuclear war more likely. Even now, we're hearing cavalier talk on the campaign trail with presidential candidates eager to challenge Russian planes over Syria, including Clinton's scheme for a "no-fly zone."

Yet, there's a hunger among many Americans for another course and a revulsion against what the U.S. foreign policy establishment has been selling. The Republican candidates leading in the polls are those who – whatever their other faults – are viewed as being the furthest away from this establishment.

Grassroots groups, like [Come Home America](#), have tried to bring the left and right together against never-ending imperial wars. But elections undercut such movements, with people constantly pushed to focus on symptoms of policies gone wrong, like the Syrian refugee crisis, without looking at the underlying disease, perpetual war.

Sam Husseini is communications director for the Institute for Public Accuracy. Follow him on twitter: [@samhusseini](https://twitter.com/samhusseini).

Sanders and the Denmark Model

Denmark prides itself on the happiness of its people who benefit from generous government social programs ensuring access to quality health care and education. But the country also has become an issue in Campaign 2016, whether it can be model for the U.S., writes Josh Hoxie.

By Josh Hoxie

If you ask Bernie Sanders about his version of socialism, you'll probably hear a lot about the small Scandinavian country perhaps best known for [inventing Legos](#).

Anderson Cooper experienced this firsthand when he asked about the Vermont senator's embrace of democratic socialism during the first Democratic presidential debate. That prompted the full Sanders rap on the wonders of Denmark, including the Nordic country's strong safety net and egalitarian ethic.

As a longtime fan of all things Danish, from their bike lanes to their Viking hats, I'm excited to see this northern nation enter the spotlight here at home. While studying abroad in Denmark as a college student, I compared its universal health care system to our own, and found Denmark's far superior.

This was in 2009, a time when this was anything but an academic exercise. Back home, Congress and the Obama administration were brushing off the table the so-called "public option," which would have given all Americans a chance to steer clear of private insurers. Progressives were outraged when they realized that the Affordable Care Act wouldn't bring on anything remotely like Denmark's single-payer health care system.

Upon returning to the States, I interned for a year at Sanders's district office in Vermont. After I graduated, I moved to Washington and worked in his Capitol Hill office for three more. I got to hear Sanders talk about Denmark a lot. I watched as he fought to bring a Danish-style democratic socialism to bear in Congress, admittedly a hard sell.

The Scandinavian nation has long served as a model for Sanders's political ambitions, and for good reason. Not only are Danes among the [happiest people on earth](#), but the country also consistently ranks near the top of *Forbes'* list of the world's [best business environments](#).

It earns this distinction despite a progressive tax code in which the highest rate tops 60 percent, and a robust welfare state that ensures access to child care, health care, parental leave, high quality education, and senior care. College students not only get a tuition-free higher education, they get a stipend to cover their living expenses and books. In contrast, American college students get the privilege of \$35,000 in average debt.

If you were looking for a place where democratic socialism appears to be working, you'd be hard pressed to find a better example than Denmark. Compared to our country, Denmark has higher wages, less poverty, less inequality, shorter work hours, lower carbon emissions, longer life expectancy, lower infant mortality rates, less unemployment, less depression, less crime, and less suicide. And the list goes on.

Columnist and Nobel winning economist Paul Krugman summed it up the best: "Danes get a lot of things right," he wrote, "and in so doing refute just about everything U.S. conservatives say about economics."

Of course, no country is perfect, and policies that work in one place may not prevail in another. Conservative pundits, along with Hillary Clinton, have harped especially on Denmark's small and largely homogenous population. It's intrinsically different from the United States, they say.

But I think there's plenty that we can learn from seeing Denmark as a model. That's why it's exciting to see our country's newfound interest in Denmark. *The Boston Globe* published competing columns praising and criticizing the country, and *The New York Times* held the Danish system up to scrutiny in its popular Room For Debate section.

So far, no one's saying much about Danish cuisine, but they should. Think ball-shaped pancakes called *aebleskiver* that could be the next cronut.

While I doubt Americans will embrace the Danes' love for pickled fish, I'm hopeful we might connect the dots between their successful social outcomes and their progressive public policies. Perhaps, as Bernie Sanders has been advocating for decades, we might even decide to put some of those lessons into practice.

Josh Hoxie is the director of the Project on Opportunity and Taxation at the Institute for Policy Studies. IPS-dc.org. Distributed by OtherWords.org.

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

Needling Obama for More Wars

Exclusive: Rather than encourage a healthy, wide-ranging debate on world affairs, the mainstream U.S. news media prevents any serious deviation from Official Washington’s war-loving “group thinks,” a task undertaken by CBS’ Steve Kroft in a hostile interview with President Obama, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

As demonstrated by Steve Kroft of CBS’ “60 Minutes” in his contentious interview with President Barack Obama, a key role for the mainstream news media is to enforce whatever warmongering “group think” dominates Official Washington, such as today’s perceived need to escalate U.S. military involvement in Syria and hit back against Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Not to excuse Obama or any other politician for caving into this kind of pressure, but it is daunting to confront a solid wall of “conventional wisdom” posed as hostile questions that almost always favors militaristic solutions to international problems. On the other hand, a politician can almost never go wrong by adopting the most belligerent positions, by posing as the “tough guy” or “tough gal,” by making sure not to get labeled “weak.”

In that way, the mainstream media reflects the views of what some analysts call

the “deep state,” i.e., the underlying assumptions of the ruling elite that are profoundly influenced by decades of massive investments in what President Dwight Eisenhower famously termed “the military-industrial complex.” Also shaping the “group think” is the pressure from well-entrenched lobbies, such as those representing Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Thus, on Sunday evening, Kroft castigated Obama on behalf of those interests, badgering the President of the United States to intervene more aggressively in the Syrian conflict in line with the desires of the Saudis and the Israelis who have both adopted an intensely hostile position vis a vis the so-called “Shiite crescent,” the string of Shiite-led governments and political movements from Iran through Iraq to Syria and southern Lebanon.

On “60 Minutes,” there was no debate as to why the United States should jump in on one side of a sectarian conflict between Sunnis and Shiites dating back to the Seventh Century – or whether U.S. national interests ally with either Saudi support for the Wahhabi fundamentalist form of Sunni Islam or Israel’s opportunistic teaming-up with Saudi Arabia. In Kroft’s world, it is just taken as a given that Obama should do what the Saudis and Israelis want.

Kroft also baited Obama over not confronting Putin more aggressively in Syria, even deploying the dreaded “w”-word, “weakness.”

“He’s moved troops into Syria,” Kroft said about Putin. “He’s got people on the ground. Two, the Russians are conducting military operations in the Middle East for the first time since World War II. [He’s] bombing the people that we are supporting. He’s challenging your leadership, Mr. President. He’s challenging your leadership.”

Kroft continued, “There is a perception in the Middle East among our adversaries, certainly and even among some of our allies that the United States is in retreat, that we pulled our troops out of Iraq and ISIS has moved in and taken over much of that territory. The situation in Afghanistan is very precarious and the Taliban is on the march again. And ISIS controls a large part of Syria. They say you’re projecting a weakness, not a strength.”

When Obama interrupted to ask, “You’re saying ‘they’ but you’re not citing too many folks,” Kroft replied, “I’ll cite if you want me to. I’d say the Saudis. I’d say the Israelis. I’d say a lot of our friends in the Middle East.”

The ‘Weakness’ Charge

To deflect the politically damaging depiction of “projecting a weakness,” Obama talked tough, lashing out at Putin as the one supposedly lacking leadership. But in defense of not recommitting a large U.S. combat force into Mideast conflicts,

Obama did note that some of his Republican critics favor sending “endless numbers of troops into the Middle East.”

But there was another way to address these issues without simply Kroft channeling the attitudes of the Saudis, Israelis and U.S. neoconservatives. For instance, he could have asked about possible areas where the United States and Russia could cooperate to restore peace to the region.

Or, if Kroft wanted the drama of an argument, he could have pressed Obama on his decision to provide TOW anti-tank missiles and other sophisticated military hardware to Syrian rebels fighting the Syrian army.

The Washington Post’s Liz Sly on Monday reported that the CIA has been supplying TOWs to the Free Syrian Army, a relatively moderate Syrian rebel group whose success with the missiles may have forced Putin’s hand regarding intervention to prevent the collapse of Syria’s military. She reported that only a small number of TOWs have apparently fallen into the hands of Islamist extremists.

While Sly’s story raises a valid question about the possible unintended consequence of Obama’s decision to introduce TOW missiles into the Syrian conflict – prompting the Russian intervention – I’m told that the CIA’s TOWs also include about 500 missiles going to Ahrah ash-Sham, an Islamist force founded, in part, by Al Qaeda veterans. That raises an additional question about Obama playing a risky game of collusion with jihadists.

Ahrah ash-Sham collaborates with Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front as the two leading militias in the Saudi-backed Army of Conquest but maintains at least some formal separation from Al Qaeda, all the better to qualify for U.S. weapons.

Under pressure to “do something” in Syria, Obama apparently bought into the dangerous idea that by ratcheting up the military pressure on Syria’s President Bashar al-Assad by giving TOWs to groups like Ahrah ash-Sham that the jihadists would inflict enough damage on the Syrian military to force Assad to accept “regime change” in Damascus.

The risk in this calculation is that such political-military calibrations are never perfect because a little too much pressure could lead to the collapse of the Syrian army and a victory for the Army of Conquest and/or the Islamic State. Once in Damascus, who’s to say that Ahrah ash-Sham won’t return to its Al Qaeda roots or won’t share power with its allies, Al Qaeda’s Nusra?

And, it deserves remembering that the Islamic State (also known as ISIS, ISIL or Daesh) was originally “Al Qaeda in Iraq” and broke off from Al Qaeda Central over the tactical question of whether it makes sense to start the Islamist caliphate now (the ISIS position) or focus instead on mounting terrorist attacks

against the West (Al Qaeda's position).

Kroft may not have known how entwined Obama, the Saudis and the Israelis are in assisting these Al Qaeda-connected movements (Israel has helped the Nusra Front near the Golan Heights), but he could have raised the question about exactly whom the Obama administration is assisting. Instead, he chose to lament that Putin is "bombing the people that we are supporting."

Kroft could have provided an important service to the American people if he had drawn Obama into his thoughts about the complexity of the Syrian thicket and asked whether the President thinks that except for ISIS Al Qaeda's other affiliates and spinoffs are no longer "terrorists."

Or, Kroft could have pressed Obama on whether the U.S. government or the Syrian people should get to decide whether "Assad must go!" Obama insists that the vast majority of Syrians are joining him in that demand but why not test it in an election.

If Obama and Putin could cooperate on bringing Assad's representatives together with U.S.-backed "moderate" Sunni politicians with a stern mandate to work out a power-sharing unity government then a stabilized Syria could hold elections for leaders who reflect the public will. If such difficult arrangements were possible in Lebanon to resolve the sectarian conflict there, why couldn't a similar approach work in Syria?

The Narrow Frame

But these questions don't get asked in the narrow frame permitted by the mainstream media, which has presented a remarkably one-sided account of the Syrian conflict as well as other international crises, including the New Cold War hotspot, Ukraine. As much as American leaders boast about the diversity and pluralism in the U.S. media, there is little room for genuine independence and dissent at least from the side seeking compromise and peace.

Indeed, suppressing such alternative analyses has become a prime purpose of the mainstream media. Remember how skeptics of the Iraq War were treated in 2002-03, either ignored or browbeaten by the likes of CNN's Wolf Blitzer and other media stars. Not even someone like former Vice President Al Gore, who defeated George W. Bush in the national popular vote in 2000, was allowed to make the case against the Iraq War to the broad TV public.

Then, during Campaign 2008, Sen. Barack Obama was pummeled over his opposition to the Iraq War "surge," which according to the then-popular "group think" had achieved "victory at last." Media stars, such as CBS News' Katie Couric and ABC News' George Stephanopoulos, demanded that Obama admit he was wrong to oppose

the “surge” and that his Republican rival, Sen. John McCain, was right to support it.

Obama’s more nuanced explanation that a number of developments had temporarily brought the Iraq casualty rates down was correct, but he eventually caved in and confessed to his heresy in an interview with Fox News’ Bill O’Reilly. A chastened Obama gushed that the “surge” had “succeeded beyond our wildest dreams.” [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“Reviving the Successful Surge Myth.”](#)]

In a way, Kroft’s interview was a bookend to that earlier experience for Obama getting schooled in the ways of Official Washington: a “group think” takes shape and the mainstream media enforces it with the intellectual standards of a junior-high in-crowd making fun of the poor kids’ clothing.

Americans can expect something similar when CNN hosts the first Democratic presidential debate. The network has assigned four mainstream CNN correspondents to do the questioning while excluding any progressive voice [in contrast to CNN’s inclusion](#) of a right-wing representative for its Republican debate.

If there were some gutsy, independent-minded progressive on the panel, he or she might ask some difficult questions to candidates who talk tough about the Middle East. For instance, some pointed foreign policy questions could be asked to the two frontrunners, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Sen. Bernie Sanders:

–Secretary Clinton, what have you learned from your misguided support for the Iraq War that has spread violent disorder across the region and now into Europe? Do you think someone who showed such poor judgment in supporting a war that was illegal under international law and involved massive human rights violations should be rewarded with the Presidency of the United States? Do you regret your enthusiasm for regime change in Libya that contributed to more death and destruction and to the spread of ISIS into northern Africa? Considering everything – including the torture of Muammar Gaddafi – do you regret [your joke](#), “we came, we saw, he died”?

–Sen. Sanders, you did oppose the Iraq War, but do you really believe that the problems of the Middle East can be solved by [the Saudis intervening more](#) in the region and getting “their hands dirty”? Do you support Saudi Arabia and its Sunni allies arming of Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front and the Islamic State in Syria, as [acknowledged](#) by Vice President Joe Biden and the Defense Intelligence Agency? Do you favor the Saudi bombing campaign inside Yemen that has [slaughtered thousands of civilians](#), including the celebrants at two weddings?

–Both of them: Are you so set on demonizing Putin and Assad that you’d prefer

Damascus to fall to Al Qaeda and/or ISIS? Instead of tough talk, isn't this the time to work constructively with Russia to achieve a negotiated peace in Syria and – once security is restored – democratic elections that leave Assad's future up to the Syrian people, not decided by the U.S. government?

But don't worry, folks, the candidates won't be tested in that way. They'll just be urged to growl about the need to stand up to Putin and get rid of Assad – and to criticize Obama for displaying “weakness” that has alienated America's Mideast “friends.”

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](#).

How CNN Shapes Political Debate

Exclusive: CNN was happy to add a right-wing questioner for the Republican debate but won't add a progressive for the Democratic debate, another sign of how the “mainstream media” shapes what's acceptable in political discussion, a lesson that ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern has learned from personal experience.

By Ray McGovern

CNN, the sponsor of Tuesday's debate among Democratic presidential candidates, has gone to extraordinary lengths to avoid being sullied with the stigma of “liberal bias.” The four CNN journalists handpicked to do the questioning have carefully protected themselves from such a charge.

As Jeff Cohen noted Friday in [“CNN's Double Standards on Debates,”](#) CNN made a point of including a bona fide right-winger in the Republican debate but “is not planning to include a single progressive advocate among its panel of four questioners ... CNN presents as neutral: CNN's [Dana] Bash and three CNN anchors (Anderson Cooper, Don Lemon, and Juan Carlos Lopez of CNN en Español.)”

The significance is that while a person from the Right or Left might break out of the usual frame of these debates, “mainstream” panelists can be counted on to ask predictable queries with maybe a “gotcha” question or two tossed in to show

how “tough” the reporter can be. CNN’s line-up fits that description to a tee.

Dana Bash, who was also a panelist at last month’s debate among Republican candidates, has been a godsend to me as I hunted for examples to illustrate what has become of the so-called “mainstream media.” Speaking to college and other audiences, I often show this short but [revealing video clip](#) of Bash plying her “neutral” trade.

Perhaps you will agree that, although less than a minute long, this clip is worth far more than a thousand words in making clear how CNN crackerjack reporters like Dana Bash and CNN senior statesman Wolf Blitzer apply their peculiar brand of “fair and balanced.”

What leaps out is how they, and their acutely attentive technical support, were prepared at a second’s notice to nip in the bud any favorable (or merely “neutral”) allusion to Iran, on the one hand, and any possibly negative reference to Israel, on the other.

In Iowa, reporting on the Republican caucus 3 1/2 years ago, Bash singled out Army Cpl. Jesse Thorsen for an interview. The young soldier sported on his neck a large tattoo of the Twin Towers with the words “9/11 Remember” making Thorsen seem an ideal candidate for the kind of “neutral” super-patriotic interview that Bash had in mind.

Although he supported libertarian Ron Paul, this young corporal on his way to his third deployment to Afghanistan looked like an easy mark for a fast-talking reporter whose “neutrality” was infused with Official Washington’s disdain for Paul’s anti-interventionist stance on foreign policy.

Pointing to the tattoo, Bash closed in for the kill, suggesting Ron Paul would endanger U.S. security if he pulled troops out of conflict areas like Afghanistan. Alas, Thorsen had not been briefed on the intended script, and the encounter did not work out the way Bash expected. The young soldier went off message into dangerous territory, mentioning or, rather, trying to mention Iran and Israel in ways that didn’t mesh with what all the Important People know to be true: Iran always bad, Israel always good.

Just in the nick of time, there was fortunate glitch cutting off the discordant message. Or as Blitzer explained, “we just lost our technical connection, unfortunately.”

Personal Experience

For good or ill, I have had some rather instructive personal experience with two of the other three panelists on CNN’s all-star team for Tuesday evening Anderson

Cooper and Don Lemon. Those experiences might help potential viewers know what to expect as the Democrats go under their magnifying glasses.

Minutes after the impromptu four-minute Q & A debate I had with then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld on May 4, 2006 in Atlanta in which I challenged Rumsfeld about his false pre-war claims about Iraqi links to Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein's possession of WMD I got a call on my cell phone from CNN star Anderson Cooper. He noted that I had been causing "quite a stir here in Atlanta," adding that he wanted to interview me that evening.

"But first," he said in an awkwardly halting way, "I need to ask you a question. "Er ... weren't you afraid?"

Not really, I replied. The experience was, rather, a real high. I went on to suggest that Cooper could experience the same high, were he to do a little homework and ask folks like Rumsfeld pointed questions quoting them back to themselves, whenever possible.

The Rumsfeld speech and Q &A that followed took place in the early afternoon of May 4, 2006, and was broadcast live. So, in a sense, it fit with the perfect storm for that night's evening news. It was early enough to fit the evening TV "news" cycle; there was time to check facts; it was a live exchange of a citizen confronting a powerful official, something that is disturbingly rare in modern America; and it happened on a slow news day when there wasn't some other story that dominated public attention.

As it turned out, MSNBC's Keith Olbermann exhibited none of the self-censoring inhibitions that seemed to worry Anderson Cooper earlier that day. Olbermann decided to feature the story that evening, as he put it, "with fact-check." And for that and no doubt countless other violations of "mainstream media" etiquette Olbermann did not endear himself to his corporate TV brass. (Where is Olbermann now?)

The lesson here seems to be that, if you elect to give priority to having your comely face on the tube rather than speak truth to power, you forfeit the high that can come of being a serious journalist. You get to keep both your fame and your six- or seven-figure fortune for a Faustian bargain.

The issue at the Rumsfeld talk in Atlanta was no trifling matter. During the Q & A, it was easy to use his own past words together with his disingenuous responses to show that the Defense Secretary had lied through his teeth to help get the U.S. into what the post-WWII Nuremberg Tribunal called the "supreme international crime" a "war of aggression."

Worth emphasizing, though, is the unfortunate reality that – malnourished as

most Americans have become on accurate information from the media only those TV viewers who were offered an Olbermann-type fact-check would have gotten anything approaching the full story that evening. Otherwise, it would remain the proverbial whom-to-believe kind of puzzle: "Former CIA analyst said 'Rumsfeld lied' ... but Rumsfeld said, 'I didn't lie.'"

Last But Not Least

Then, we have Don Lemon. After the publication by WikiLeaks of thousands of official cables many of them highly embarrassing to the U.S. which Bradley/Chelsea Manning gave to WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, the Fawning Corporate Media eagerly joined an intense campaign by the Establishment to make Assange the *bête noire* of 2010, painting him the same deep black regularly used for the likes of Russian President Vladimir Putin and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

"Expert" after "expert" on CNN tore into Assange. It was such a one-sided spectacle, that someone must have suggested that CNN invite some dope who might try to defend Assange (ha, ha; good luck) and deny that he was what Vice President Joe Biden called him "a high-tech terrorist." I was to be the victim.

CNN introduced Lemon's five-minute interview of me with a very violent clip from *Bonnie and Clyde* and additional footage showing other terrorist miscreants at work. (In retrospect, I was glad that CNN barred me from seeing that introduction before my interview; seeing it might have strained my Irish temper beyond the breaking point.)

Don Lemon was loaded for bear, since one of the jobs of mainstream journalists is to prove their "objectivity" by getting tough with anyone who deviates from the conventional wisdom. You have to see it to believe it: You Say Julian Assange Is a Journalist? Wattayou Crazy?

After Lemon's lemon of an interview, I seem to have ended up on CNN's "no-fly" list for me, a small price to pay. I would prefer to be in the company of the gutsy Olbermanns of this world rather than the timorous Coopers.

Let me add here that, in my view, Anderson Cooper is by no means the worst of the bought-and-sold pundits. He *is*, however, perhaps the wealthiest, as heir to the Vanderbilt fortune. So, with all due respect, he would not face the prospect of life on the streets with hat in hand, were he to decide to go for the high of committing real journalism rather than acquiesce in the customary low of showing deference when interviewing powerful war criminals like Rumsfeld.

So as not to raise unrealistic expectations about Tuesday's debate, Cooper has said that there will be no "gotcha" questions. "As a moderator, it's not my job

in this kind of debate to try and force anything,” he said. “I don’t go into this with some strategy for getting people going in one way or another. Even if I did have that strategy, or a strategy, I wouldn’t necessarily telegraph that.”

But one can expect a focus on many of the usual mainstream topics, framed in the typical mainstream way: What can be done to stop Putin? Why didn’t President Obama do more to achieve “regime change” in Syria? If the ongoing catastrophe in Libya is mentioned, it is likely to be in the narrow context of the Benghazi investigation and Hillary Clinton’s emails as Secretary of State.

It’s not likely that Clinton will be pressed on her disastrous history as a liberal war hawk: supporting the Iraq War, pushing for a pointless “surge” in Afghanistan, orchestrating a “regime change” war in Libya that has left the country ungovernable and opened the door to inroads by Islamic State terrorists. She is not likely to be asked whether she thinks “American exceptionalism” exempts U.S. officials from the constraints of international law.

The reason why she won’t be pressed on such questions is that CNN and the rest of the mainstream media accept the same premises that Clinton does. They frame the public debate with an implicit embrace of the U.S. right to invade countries and topple governments. The debate is only focused on whether the tactics worked, whether mistakes were made, not whether the decisions were wise or legal.

Other debate participants, such as Sen. Bernie Sanders, also will be expected to squeeze their comments into the acceptable mainstream frame. That is why it would have been a good idea – or at least a novel one – to invite at least one out-of-the-box progressive to join the panel and possibly shatter the frame.

Ray McGovern works with Tell the Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. He was a CIA analyst for more than 27 years after serving as an Army Infantry/Intelligence officer. He now serves on the Steering Group of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS).

Obama’s Two-Faced Foreign Policy

Exclusive: President Obama’s Syrian strategy is getting roundly denounced as incoherent, which while true is really a reflection of his failure to fully break with neocon-style interventionism even when he realizes the futility of the strategy, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The mystery of the Obama administration's foreign policy has always been whether President Barack Obama has two separate strategies: one "above the table" waving his arms and talking tough like Official Washington's arm-chair warriors do and another "below the table" where he behaves as a pragmatic realist, playing footsy with foreign adversaries.

From the start, Obama surrounded himself with many hawkish advisers such as Defense Secretary Robert Gates, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Gen. David Petraeus, National Security Council aide Samantha Power, etc. and mostly read the scripts that they wrote for him. But then he tended to drag his feet or fold his arms when it came to acting on their warmongering ideas.

Friday's decision to tank the hapless \$500 million training program for "moderate" Syrian rebels is a case in point. Obama joined in the hyperbolic rhetoric against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, lining up with the neocons and liberal interventionists demanding "Assad must go," but Obama has remained unenthusiastic about their various wacky schemes for overthrowing Assad.

In 2012, Obama resisted plans from Petraeus, Clinton and other hawks to invest significantly in a program for training and arming rebels and to impose a no-fly zone over rebel-controlled territory inside Syria, which would require destroying Syria's air defenses and much of its air force. In other words, it would have been a major act of war with the prospect of the kind of bloody chaos that a similar "responsibility to protect" strategy – pushed by Clinton and Power – unleashed on Libya in 2011 and that continues to the present.

Among other problems of the Petraeus-Clinton scheme for Syria such as being a gross violation of international law the plan would have amounted to support for international terrorism given the thorough terrorist infiltration of the Syrian rebel movement. And it almost certainly would not have achieved the goal of a moderate "regime change." The far more likely outcome would have been even worse sectarian bloodshed and quite possibly a victory for Al Qaeda or a related terrorist band.

In one candid moment, Obama [told](#) New York Times columnist Thomas L. Friedman that it was "a fantasy" to think that such a U.S.-backed "moderate" rebel force could do much good. Nevertheless, Obama eventually caved in to political/media pressure and agreed to a "covert" CIA training mission and later to the \$500 million program which, the Pentagon says, put about "four or five" fighters into the field in Syria.

Besides the obvious failure to field a significant Pentagon-trained "moderate" force, there was the additional problem that the "moderate" CIA-trained rebels kept sharing their military skills and weapons with coalitions of Syrian rebels,

such as the Army of Conquest dominated by Al Qaeda's Nusra Front, and/or the Islamic State. Many U.S.-supplied weapons ended up in the hands of the Army of Conquest, which used U.S. TOW anti-tank missiles against the Syrian army around the city of Idlib.

Whether intentionally or not, the U.S. policy was advancing the prospects of a Sunni terrorist victory in Syria, which could lead to a bloodbath of Christians, Alawites, Shiites and other "infidels" as well as driving millions more Syrian refugees into Turkey and Europe, thus spreading the destabilization of the Middle East into the middle of Europe.

So, by pulling the plug on the \$500 million training program, Obama was finally facing up to reality that it would be a humanitarian and strategic disaster if Al Qaeda and/or the Islamic State defeated Assad's Syrian army. At his press conference on Oct. 2, Obama even blurted out that most of the "half-baked ideas" for intervening in Syria were just "a bunch of mumbo jumbo."

But Obama could not fully bring himself to repudiate the U.S. military interference, replacing the failed training program with another scheme that would simply give weapons and ammunition to some rebel leaders considered reliable in the battle against the Islamic State a compromise approach that even the hawkish New York Times editorial page deemed "hallucinatory."

A Schizophrenic Approach

In essence, these inconsistencies between Obama's words and deeds reflect the schizophrenic nature of Obama's "above-the-table" and "below-the-table" split personality.

While the "above-the-table" Obama continues to rant against Assad and Russia's decision to step up its support for his government, the "under-the-table" Obama appears to recognize that the Russian entrance into the war is not the catastrophe that Official Washington, including Obama and his advisers, have made it out to be. Indeed, despite the fiery rhetoric from Obama and his aides, there is a logical correlation between Obama's core interests in Syria and those of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Obama has resisted the idea of committing hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops to another full-scale war in the Middle East, which might well be the inevitable result of a victorious Islamic State engaging in mass executions of "infidels" in Damascus or of Al Qaeda transforming Syria into a new more central location to plot terror attacks on the West.

The prospects for a terrorist victory are diminished if the Russian air support and Iranian ground assistance can help the Syrian military roll back the gains

of the Islamic State and the Army of Conquest, which is dominated by Al Qaeda's Nusra Front.

So, the logical move for the "under-the-table" Obama would be to cooperate with Putin on a peace initiative that shelves the "Assad must go" rhetoric in favor of practical cooperation with Russia in arranging a political power-sharing government between Assad and the "moderate" Sunni politicians who have lived off U.S. largesse and thus are susceptible to American pressure.

Even more importantly, Obama could finally get serious about clamping down on Saudi, Qatari, Turkish and Israeli support for the extremist Syrian rebels, finally putting some teeth into the theory that support for terrorism is indistinguishable from acts of terrorism.

But the "above-the-table" Obama seems frightened by the domestic political repercussions if he were to make such rational moves, so he continues to rant about Assad as "a brutal, ruthless dictator" who "drops barrel bombs to massacre innocent children" as if these crude bombs are some uniquely diabolical weapons and as if Assad were targeting "innocent children" when there is no evidence of that. Such crude propaganda is then used to justify Obama repeating his dubious mantra: "Assad must go!"

Obama also fears neocon Sen. John McCain, the former Republican presidential nominee whom Obama defeated in 2008 but who is still invited onto all the U.S. news shows to berate the President for not escalating the Syrian, Ukrainian and other conflicts around the globe.

Plus, Obama sees himself surrounded by his own neocons like Defense Secretary Ashton Carter and liberal interventionists like Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power. He must realize that such ideologues won't shake their commitment to "regime change" in Syria.

Fear of 'Softness'

Clearly, Obama is to blame for his administration's appointees, whether it was the misguided "Team of Rivals" at the start of his presidency or the current mix of mostly non-entities and neocon-lites in his second term. But the low quality of these officials is also a comment on how thin the Democratic foreign-policy bench is after three-and-a-half decades of cowering before Republican and media accusations about the Democrats showing "un-American" softness.

Today's Democrats are not able to formulate a foreign policy argument that separates enlightened American interests from imperialist adventures. They generally accept the neocon narratives about "bad guys" and then either acquiesce to another "regime change" operation, as Obama and others did in Libya

in 2011, or they drag their heels to slow or obstruct the most dangerous schemes.

The vast majority of the Democratic foreign policy “experts” who have survived politically either have become “me-too” echoes of the Republican neocons (the likes of Hillary Clinton) or have adopted a militant “humanitarianism” favoring either coups or war in the name of “human rights” (the likes of Samantha Power).

You do have some establishment Democrats, such as Vice President Joe Biden and Secretary of State John Kerry, who probably know better but have grown accustomed to accommodating to neocon and liberal-hawk pressures. Biden and Kerry both overrode their better judgments to vote for the Iraq War in 2002 and they have echoed the neocon tough talk about Syria and Ukraine.

But Biden and Kerry probably represent the most realistic of the mainstream Democrats, the most in line with the “under-the-table” Obama. Biden opposed the pointless but bloody Afghan War “surge” in 2009; he also battled Secretary of State Clinton over her desires for military intervention in Libya and Syria. For his part, Kerry as Secretary of State executed Obama’s negotiation of a nuclear deal with Iran, an approach that Clinton had resisted.

Still, the foreign policy realism of Biden and Kerry is spotty at best. Both have run with the neocon/liberal-hawk pack in escalating tensions with Russia over Ukraine, and Kerry rushed to dangerous judgments blaming Assad for the Aug. 21, 2013 sarin gas attack outside Damascus and Russia for the July 17, 2014 shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over eastern Ukraine.

Not even a progressive like Sen. Bernie Sanders articulates sensible alternatives to the neocon/liberal-hawk narratives, though he did vote against the Iraq War and generally has favored less aggressive actions overseas. Still, no one of prominence in the Democratic Party has charted a comprehensive strategy for a non-imperialist U.S. foreign policy, an incoherence that helps explain the contradictory aspects of Obama’s approach to the world.

Whereas the dominant ideology among the Republicans remains neoconservatism, the primary approach of the Democrats is “liberal interventionism,” but there really isn’t much difference between the two in practical terms. Indeed, arch-neocon Robert Kagan has said he is comfortable calling himself a “liberal interventionist.”

Loving ‘Stratcom’

Both neocons and liberal interventionists favor “regime change” strategies as a principal feature of U.S. foreign policy, whether through “color revolutions” or “responsibility to protect” military invasions. They also rely heavily on

“strategic communications” or “Stratcom,” a blend of psy-ops, propaganda and P.R., to bring both the American people and the global public into line.

That’s why once a propaganda theme is developed such as blaming Assad for the sarin attack and Russia for the MH-17 shoot-down there are no revisions or corrections even when the evidence leads in a different direction. The false narrative must be maintained because it is useful as a Stratcom weapon to discredit and damage an adversary in the eyes of the public.

Even when Obama knows better, he sticks with the Stratcom, too, all the better to beat up “an enemy.” Obama may drop the false allegations from future speeches, but he won’t retract what he has said before. Note that he has said little or nothing about either the sarin case or the MH-17 incident after initially wielding them as propaganda clubs against Assad and Putin, respectively.

So, instead of telling the whole truth to the American people, Obama just replaces the old attack lines with new ones. Obama’s latest comments about the Russians in Syria sounded like premature gloating over the prospect of a Russian “quagmire” in Syria, staking out an early “I-told-you-so” position as if being proved right were more important than resolving the crisis.

But does Obama really want the Russian-backed offensive against Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front and the Islamic State to fail and for the terrorists to win?

That outcome might make for a great talking point at the think tanks and on the op-ed pages, but a terrorist victory would be a humanitarian catastrophe for the people of Syria and a strategic disaster for the West, where Europe is already under strain from the flood of Syrian refugees.

One might think that a more mature and responsible approach would be for the United States and the European Union to do all they could to help the Russians succeed by cracking down on countries aiding Al Qaeda and the Islamic State and by facilitating serious peace talks between Assad and “moderate” Sunni politicians.

Perhaps the “under-the-table” Obama will move in that direction in the weeks ahead, but the “above-the-table” Obama seems more afraid of committing a social faux pas that will offend Official Washington. He seems to fear that criticism more than he cares about saving lives and bringing peace to Syria.

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](#).

A Challenge to Neoliberal Orthodoxy

Conventional thinkers say Jeremy Corbyn's election to head Britain's opposition Labour Party and Bernie Sanders's surge against Hillary Clinton are passing fancies that will fade as the summer ends, but Nicolas J S Davies sees the hope for an inspiring new politics.

By Nicolas J S Davies

[Jeremy Corbyn](#), the chairman of the U.K.'s [Stop the War Coalition](#), is now also the leader of the U.K.'s main opposition [Labour Party](#). [Bernie Sanders](#), the independent socialist Senator from Vermont, is leading in the polls for the Democratic Party [primary in New Hampshire](#) and the latest poll for the [Iowa caucuses](#).

As [Corbyn told the BBC](#), "politics can change, and we have changed it."

American socialist [Michael Harrington](#) coined the phrase "on the left wing of the possible" to define the most effective position that people of conscience could take amid the corruption of capitalist politics. Harrington had a way with words – he is also credited with coining the term "neoconservative." But the challenge on the left of U.S. politics has always been to define just what is "possible."

The Sanders campaign's failure to stake out strong progressive positions on foreign policy and militarism (in contrast with Corbyn in the U.K.) risks squandering a historic opportunity to build a united front for ["a new kind of politics"](#) in the United States, but it is not too late for him to do so.

The rise of [neoliberalism](#) in the 1970s and 1980s succeeded in marginalizing progressive politics for a generation in the U.S. and U.K., reducing most political activists' view of "the possible" to focusing on single-issue advocacy or supporting the "lesser evil" in actually existing politics – or some ill-fitting combination of the two.

Rationalizations abound to excuse the outrages of the Clinton and Obama administrations. Many Democrats now subscribe to a myth of the Presidency as a powerless office where a fine speech from the "bully pulpit" counts for more than actual policy decisions that bring death or misery to millions –

and yet the same people still hold President George W. Bush responsible for his actions!

Such cognitive dissonance is an essential, paralyzing element in the marginalization of participatory democracy under neoliberalism. People consider themselves sophisticated for accepting the glaring contradictions and compartmentalizations of a “political reality” that is really based on the endless and uncritical repetition of myths and misinformation, much of it deliberately crafted by corporate-funded think tanks and PR firms.

Political philosopher Sheldon Wolin coined the term “inverted totalitarianism” to describe this political system in which traditional tools of democracy like elections and the press have not been abolished but simply co-opted. Wolin explains how this has led to a more effective and sustainable concentration of wealth and political power than “classical totalitarianism” could ever achieve.

But the ability of the wealthy and powerful to define the limits of what is possible in our society is finally being challenged by political developments in the U.S. and Europe.

I had the privilege of working with Tim Carpenter during the final years of his life. After playing a leading role in Harrington’s Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and serving as Deputy Campaign Manager in Dennis Kucinich’s presidential campaign, Carpenter founded Progressive Democrats of America (PDA) in 2004. His vision of being “on the left wing of the possible” was always expansive and creative, opening up possibilities for constructive action where others saw only irreconcilable differences and insoluble problems.

For example, after PDA endorsed Elizabeth Warren for the Senate, she posted a threatening, misinformed position statement about Iran on her campaign web site. PDA members were divided between peace activists who wanted to withdraw the endorsement, something PDA had never done before, and many members in Massachusetts who loved Warren regardless.

As always, Carpenter listened to everybody’s point of view, and then he united PDA in a campaign to educate Warren on Iran and urge her to change her position, which she eventually did. By the time she came to consider the agreement with Iran as a U.S. Senator, she was a firm vote for diplomacy on every whip list.

Tim Carpenter and PDA may have been the first national group to ask Bernie Sanders to run for President as a Democrat, with a “Run, Bernie, Run” campaign that began in 2013. I remember making the case for this campaign to a skeptical PDA steering committee in Miami. The Democrats were putting all their eggs in

one basket with Hillary Clinton.

If and when her campaign would implode from the cynicism of her neoconservative foreign policy record, the corruption of the Clinton Foundation or a dozen other liabilities, Bernie Sanders could be left standing as the *de facto* front-runner for the nomination. Neoliberal power-brokers would scramble to draft somebody else – as they are now doing – but anyone acceptable to them risks taking more votes from Clinton than from Sanders.

Tim Carpenter tragically died of cancer in April 2014 after a long and characteristically courageous struggle. But today's headlines vindicate his principled and expansive view of what is "possible" in politics: a nuclear agreement to avert war on Iran; the rise of Corbyn, Sanders and like-minded new political leaders in Spain, Greece and elsewhere; a new ceasefire in Ukraine brokered by France, Germany and Russia; huge rallies all over Europe to welcome refugees fleeing U.S.-backed wars; and a world starting to wake up to what is "possible" beyond the injustice, violence and chaos conjured up by the neoliberal wizards of Washington and Wall Street.

Nicolas J S Davies is the author of *Blood On Our Hands: the American Invasion and Destruction of Iraq*. He also wrote the chapters on "Obama at War" in *Grading the 44th President: a Report Card on Barack Obama's First Term as a Progressive Leader*.

Will Peace Find a 2016 Advocate?

Exclusive: Campaign 2016 has offered few useful ideas about worsening global crises. On the Republican side, it's been mostly the same-old tough talk while Democrats Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders have said little. Is there a way to break through the frozen thinking about world conflicts, asks Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

At least since the 1980s when Ronald Reagan made war seem like fun again and the modern mainstream media took shape the Democratic Party has lacked a coherent foreign policy, highlighted today by the fact that its top 2016 presidential candidates have largely evaded the topic in favor almost exclusively of domestic issues.

Part of the problem is that Democratic frontrunner Hillary Clinton has a record of pandering to the neoconservatives during her time as a U.S. senator from New York and as Secretary of State. She voted for the Iraq War in 2002 and, while

President Barack Obama's top diplomat, supported what some call "liberal interventionism," which is barely distinguishable from neoconservatism.

Indeed, arch-neocon Robert Kagan, a co-founder of the infamous Project for the New American Century, said in his praise of Clinton's aggressive foreign policy that he was ready to jettison the term "neoconservative" in favor of the phrase "liberal interventionist."

Kagan, who was made an adviser to Clinton's State Department, said in 2014: "If she pursues a policy which we think she will pursue it's something that might have been called neocon, but clearly her supporters are not going to call it that; they are going to call it something else." [For more, see Consortiumnews.com's ["Is Hillary Clinton a Neocon-Lite?"](#)]

So, it's understandable why Hillary Clinton's campaign has downplayed the details of how she would conduct foreign policy. Many Democrats, who opposed the Iraq War and are uncomfortable with the hawkishness that Clinton displayed as Secretary of State, would recoil at the prospect of her being a Trojan Horse for Kagan and the neocons to sneak inside another Democratic administration to continue their bloody strategies.

Though Sen. Bernie Sanders, her principal challenger, also has chosen to downplay foreign policy issues in favor of economic ones, the Vermont "democratic socialist" can at least point to his prescient opposition to the Iraq War in 2002.

In a [Senate floor speech](#), Sanders cited five reasons for voting against President George W. Bush's war resolution: the death and destruction that would result, the dangerous precedent of "a unilateral invasion," the damage to the war on terror, the "extremely expensive" price tag of "a war and a long-term American occupation," and the "unintended consequences."

On the last point, Sanders asked: "Who will govern Iraq when Saddam Hussein is removed and what role will the U.S. play in [an] ensuing civil war that could develop in that country? Will moderate governments in the region who have large Islamic fundamentalist populations be overthrown and replaced by extremists? Will the bloody conflict between Israel and the Palestinian Authority be exacerbated? And these are just a few of the questions that remain unanswered."

Back-burner Issues

Though right about Iraq, Sanders is unwilling to put forward a comprehensive strategy for dealing with today's Mideast chaos and other international tensions, including the Ukraine crisis which was partly fomented by Kagan's neocon wife, Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland,

who rose to prominence under the protective wing of Secretary of State Clinton.

When Sanders has spoken about the Mideast, he has framed his comments in ways that make them acceptable to Official Washington but that ultimately make little sense. For instance, in an interview with CNN's Wolf Blitzer, Sanders suggested that Saudi Arabia and other oil-rich sheikdoms replace the United States as the region's policeman in the fight against Sunni terrorists in the Islamic State (also called ISIS).

"Saudi Arabia is the third largest military budget in the world," Sanders said. "They're going to have to get their hands dirty in this fight. We should be supporting, but at the end of the day this is fight over what Islam is about, the soul of Islam, we should support those countries taking on ISIS." [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Sanders's Screwed Mideast Strategy](#)."]]

Frankly, it's hard to believe that Sanders is that naive. A core reality of the Mideast crisis is that Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other Sunni Gulf states have been the principal funders and ideological supporters of the Sunni extremists who have organized into violent jihadist movements, including Al Qaeda, its Syrian affiliate Al Nusra Front, and a hyper-violent spinoff, the Islamic State.

Vice President Joe Biden blurted out this reality at Harvard's Kennedy School last October, when he said: "Our allies in the region were our largest problem in Syria the Saudis, the emirates, etc., what were they doing? They were so determined to take down [President Bashar al-] Assad and essentially have a proxy Sunni-Shia war, what did they do? They poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of thousands of tons of military weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad, except the people who were being supplied were Al Nusra and Al Qaeda and the extremist elements of jihadis coming from other parts of the world." [Quote at 53:20 of [clip](#).]

Biden had confirmed something that was well-known in the region and inside the U.S. intelligence community, that many of these terrorist groups were supported, directly and indirectly, by elements of Saudi Arabia's royal family and by oil-rich sheiks around the Persian Gulf who see themselves fighting a sectarian war against Iran and the Shiites. The Vice President later apologized for speaking the truth, but the cat was out of the bag. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Why Islamic State Is Winning](#)."]]

Saudi Arabia's Dirty Hands

The Saudi role in this regional chaos dates back to its financing of fundamentalist Wahabbi teachings and its encouragement of Iraq's invasion of Iran in 1980. Later that decade, the Saudis co-sponsored with the CIA the Afghan

mujahedeen who fought a Soviet-backed secular government in Kabul. The Afghan conflict poured billions of dollars in weapons into the hands of Islamic extremists, including a Saudi named Osama bin Laden, and created the basis for an international jihadist terror movement called Al Qaeda.

Even after Al Qaeda's 9/11 attacks, U.S. officials shielded the Saudis from the wrath of the American people. After consulting with Saudi Ambassador Bandar bin-Sultan, Bush agreed to let bin Laden's family members in the United States board the first planes let back into the air, with only perfunctory FBI questioning. Later, Bush suppressed a 28-page section of the congressional 9/11 report about Saudi support for the 19 hijackers, 15 of whom were identified as Saudi nationals. (Obama has continued to withhold those 28 pages.)

But the Saudis were not always happy with Bush's actions. In 2003, when Bush's invasion of Iraq had the unintended consequence of replacing a Sunni autocrat, Saddam Hussein, with Shiite autocrats, the Saudis saw the regional balance of power tilt toward Shiite-ruled Iran, which suddenly had allies in power in Baghdad.

In response, the Saudis stepped up their support of Sunni militant movements in Iraq and then Syria with the goal of frustrating Iraq's government and removing Syria's Assad, an Alawite (a Shiite spinoff sect), and replacing him with a Sunni.

As Saudi Arabia intervened more aggressively in this regional fight against Iran, the Saudi royals reached out to Israel, which shared Riyadh's hostility toward Iran. Israel also favored "regime change" in Syria and saw the war there as a way also to undermine Lebanon's Hezbollah movement, a Shiite force on Israel's northern border. This de facto Saudi-Israeli alliance guaranteed strong support within the U.S. government and media for the effort to remove Assad from power. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Did Money Seal Israeli-Saudi Alliance?](#)"]

The Gulf states also recognized that the most effective fighters against Assad were the Sunni jihadists, especially Al Qaeda's Nusra Front and the Islamic State. Thus, much of the Gulf money and weapons flowed in those directions, as Biden revealed.

So, in regards to Sanders's lament about the need for the super-rich Saudis to "get their hands dirty," the truth is that the Saudis have long been getting their hands not only dirty but bloody.

A Looming Genocide

The Sunni terror groups operating in Iraq and Syria have served essentially as Saudi Arabia's irregular forces fighting a sectarian war against the Shiites. In

Syria, these Sunni extremists also have targeted the Christians, Alawites and other minorities for possible extermination if Assad's military collapses.

Besides these proxy forces, the Saudis have intervened directly in Yemen with an indiscriminate bombing campaign against Houthi rebels who follow a version of Shiite Islam. The Saudi attacks have not only killed thousands of civilians but created a humanitarian crisis in the poverty-stricken country on Saudi Arabia's southern border.

Thus, Sanders's idea that just because the Saudis are rich they should expand their military operations throughout the region is as dangerous as it is ludicrous. It would guarantee a major escalation of the bloodletting and the chaos. The proposal only serves to underscore how bereft the Democrats are when it comes to expressing a coherent alternative foreign policy as a challenge to the dominance of the neocons and their liberal-interventionist cohorts.

So, what could be an alternative that would allow Democratic candidates to make sense and avoid being dismissed as unrealistic pacifists or foolhardy isolationists? And no progressive should underestimate the political risk that goes with any deviation from the "tough-guy/gal-ism" of Official Washington. The easiest attack line against anyone advocating restraint and negotiations is a reference to Neville Chamberlain's "appeasement" of Adolf Hitler at Munich before World War II.

But there are politically savvy ways to counter the power of the neocons and the liberal hawks:

–Stand for transparency in foreign policy. Instead of letting neocons and liberal hawks shape the narratives of foreign crises by demonizing foes and hiding inconvenient truths, demand as much disclosure as possible especially regarding pivotal events. Over the past several decades, the neocons and liberal hawks have monopolized the information flows, allowing them to exaggerate threats beyond what the actual intelligence supports. We have seen this pattern in every crisis, from Iraq's bogus WMD threat in 2003 to the mystery of who shot down Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over Ukraine in 2014. American voters would not punish a candidate for insisting that more information be shared with the people.

–On a related point, repudiate the notion that information should be shaped into a strategic weapon of propaganda warfare. It is now a trendy concept inside the State Department and Washington think tanks that clever propaganda can be used as a "soft power" weapon to weaken an adversary. Some liberal interventionists think this "soft power" manipulation of facts is preferable to "hard power" military action, but that misses the point, since deceiving the public, which

must include the American people as well as a foreign target audience, is an assault on democracy. Also, as we have seen, propaganda can be a gateway drug to full-scale war.

No Entangling Alliances

–Remind voters about the wisdom of the early U.S. presidents who warned repeatedly against foreign entangling alliances. Endless warfare against exaggerated bogeymen around the world may sound tough during a debate or a talking-head moment on TV but such belligerence inevitably destroys the Republic. A more recent example of how foolhardy hasty interventionism can be is the Iraq War, which was embraced by not only neocons but many liberals who fancied themselves as doves until they realized that their careers might suffer so they reinvented themselves as hawks. As an opponent of the Iraq War, Sanders, in particular, is in a very strong position to hammer away at the “geniuses” who gave us the disastrous Iraq War.

–This is harder but be prepared to stand in the way of the next propaganda-driven stampede against some demonized foreign “enemy.” To do so requires some political courage. You will surely be called a “(fill-in-the-blank) apologist,” but respond by noting the much greater danger of another “group think.” Remind people how other Orwellian “five minutes hate” sessions against various foreign leaders led the United States into terrible mistakes and bloody misjudgments.

–Sometimes, non-governmental organizations with labels asserting their commitment to “human rights” or “democracy promotion” can be very successful in focusing attention on some offensive act in a target country (while ignoring similar or worse offenses in “friendly” countries). Remember, this is how propaganda works by using selective outrage. Not all NGOs are fair-minded observers. Some are fronts for governments and special interests.

–Stress the value of “realism” in foreign policy, i.e., the concept of weighing the cons as well as the pros of some intervention. Just because taking action at some passion-filled moment may feel good, it doesn’t necessarily do good.

–Reflect on how America does best, both economically and geopolitically, when countries are at relative peace and have achieved some prosperity. America’s greatest “soft power” is its ability to sell its products to the world and to benefit from the symbiosis that comes when people around the world appreciate U.S. inventiveness and innovation. By destabilizing entire regions and promiscuously imposing economic sanctions, the U.S. government disrupts these positive relationships. Perhaps a new slogan could be: “Make money, not war.”

Just as police domestically should work on conflict resolution rather than

pulling out their tasers and guns, U.S. diplomats should concentrate on deescalating crises rather than swaggering in with harsh rhetoric, sanction threats and “regime change” strategies.

–Though this point is risky, suggest that America might benefit from rearranging its alliances in the Middle East, confronting Saudi Arabia over its covert support of terrorism and demanding that Israel finally resolve its disruptive conflict with the Palestinians. As part of this shift, the United States could encourage Iran to play a stabilizing role in Iraq and Syria and push both governments to share power more equitably with Sunnis, thus undercutting jihadist violence. Russia, with its influence in Iran and Syria, could be helpful, too.

What’s Possible?

But can an alternative foreign policy really be built around truth-telling, resistance to “perception management” and respectful diplomacy even toward adversarial governments? Obviously, a big problem is the U.S. news media which tends to hype whatever propaganda is being spread about some designated villain and then berates anyone who dares suggest that there might be two sides to the story.

Building a more independent and fair-minded media will be a long-term project. Right now, challenges to the latest “group think” are confined mostly to some Internet sites and small-audience radio shows. And there’s the additional confusion because some hip Internet sites are simply the latest fad in propaganda, essentially fronts for the same misinformation that gets spread by the mainstream media except operating behind the façade of “civic journalism” or some innocent-sounding goals like “fighting corruption” and “protecting human rights.”

Yet, despite all the difficulties that a politician would confront if he or she chose to strike out in a more peaceful and more truthful direction, there is urgency to undertake this mission.

For one, continued U.S. confusion over the civil war in Syria whether it be Hillary Clinton’s fanciful notions about arming the non-existent “moderate” rebels or Bernie Sanders’s silly idea about demanding that Saudi Arabia subdue the Mideast by force could lead to a genuine catastrophe if the black flag of Al Qaeda and/or the Islamic State is raised over Damascus.

Between Al Qaeda plotting new terror attacks on the West and the Islamic State chopping off the heads of Christians, Alawites, Shiites and other “heretics,” there might be little choice for the U.S. president whoever he or she is to

intervene on a massive scale, launching a new hopeless war that could well be the final death blow to the American Republic.

Even more dangerous is the showdown with nuclear-armed Russia over Ukraine. Since February 2014 when Assistant Secretary of State Nuland plotted “regime change” in Kiev, the American public has been fed a steady diet of anti-Russian propaganda with the special demonization of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Though a resolution to the Ukrainian civil war should have been relatively simple autonomy for ethnic Russians in the east and respect for Crimea’s secession referendum from Ukraine the extreme rhetoric about “Russian aggression” and the West’s imposition of economically disruptive sanctions have ratcheted up tensions and raised the possibility of a nuclear war.

Though all might hope that cooler heads will prevail before the nuclear codes come out, the West’s “tough-guy/gal-ism” over Ukraine already has contributed to less existential though still serious problems, including the risk of another global financial meltdown because the sanctions have helped stall Europe’s already sluggish recovery from the Wall Street crash of 2008.

At this moment when the world’s economy needs more commerce and more consumer buying power, the Ukraine crisis has contributed to less business and less spending, dragging down the economies of China and the United States as well as Europe.

Meanwhile, the neocon-liberal-hawk-driven chaos of the Middle East has added to Europe’s budgetary and political pressures by flooding the Continent with refugees and migrants from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Africa. Not only is this humanitarian crisis deepening Europe’s economic woes, it is threatening to splinter the Continent’s fragile unity with many countries refusing to open their borders to these waves of humanity.

Given these cascading dangers, it is well past time for American politicians of both parties to get serious about practical ways to ease geopolitical tensions, not exacerbate them. Instead, pretty much all we’re getting from Republicans and Democrats is more unrealistic tough talk.

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](#).

