

In Case You Missed...

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Why FDR Matters Now More Than Ever

On the 133rd anniversary of his birth, Franklin Roosevelt remains a relevant figure for America, the president who gave meaning to the Constitution’s mandate to “provide for the general Welfare” – and who is still a target for those who made “free markets” their god and “gub-mint” their devil, writes Beverly Bandler.

By Beverly Bandler

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was on his way to his first inauguration on March 4, 1933, in the fourth dark winter of the Great Depression. Amid widespread public fear and distress, there were machine-gun nests at the corners of the great government buildings in Washington, a city that hadn’t had such a look of an armed camp since the Civil War.

In the 1932 campaign, FDR had promised Americans a “new deal” and in his Inaugural Address he famously told the nation that “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” But that was only partly true. There were many genuine reasons for Americans to fear the future. There was the possibility of revolution or even a right-wing coup d’etat.

But FDR quickly went to work on an aggressive government campaign to provide relief and recovery. In doing so, as Professor Lawrence Davidson has written, "Roosevelt and the New Deal saved capitalism from itself."

As writer Russell Baker has noted, "Roosevelt and his advisers introduced a new philosophy, one that held that Americans had responsibilities to one another, and that government had a duty to intervene when capitalism failed." In effect, FDR gave meaning to the mandate of the U.S. Constitution for the federal government to "promote" and "provide for the general Welfare."

Herbert Hoover, Roosevelt's predecessor, had said, "The sole function of government is to bring about a condition of affairs favorable to the beneficial development of private enterprise." Roosevelt created what journalist George Packer suggests was a period of the Roosevelt Republic, "a relatively egalitarian, secure, middle-class democracy, with structures in place that supported the aspirations of ordinary people."

Roosevelt created a modern America with institutions that proved both durable and essential, the "bedrock of our nation's economic stability," says economist Paul Krugman.

One hundred thirty-three years since Roosevelt's birth and nearly 82 years since he took office, many Americans have forgotten the lessons of those hard times. They again have come to follow the siren song of unregulated, "free market" capitalism. They have bought into Ronald Reagan's assertion in 1981 that "government is the problem."

Forgetting History

As writer Tariq Ali has commented, "people are taught to forget history" and the history that many Americans have forgotten is how the Great American Middle Class was created. It did not exist before Roosevelt and the New Deal and it has been in rapid decline since Reagan and what might be called the Great Retrenchment.

You might have thought that the fallacy of magical markets with their invisible hands weaving a better life for all worthy citizens as long as "the gov-mint" didn't interfere would have been demonstrated again by the Crash of 2008, after nearly three decades of a bipartisan deregulation frenzy.

By February 2009, the United States was losing over 500,000 jobs a month. Less known among the American people was the fact that there had been zero net job creation during the entire decade of the 2000s, as economics correspondent Neil Irwin reported in 2010. No previous decade since the 1940s had job growth less than 20 percent. Economic output rose at its slowest rate of any decade since

the 1930s as well, Irwin noted.

In 2009, the economic disaster that Bush left behind confronted the new Democratic president, Barack Obama, with the need for unity and urgent action on a large scale, but he was confronted with both Republican obstructionism and an unwillingness of both the mainstream and right-wing media to admit that their devotion to “free market” ideology had proved catastrophic.

Despite an educational effort by some professional economists, historians and journalists to highlight the need for a revival of Roosevelt’s legacy, the anti-government “group think” which had come to dominate opinion circles over the previous three decades proved nearly impossible to shake.

Rather than building on the lessons of the New Deal, the conventional wisdom continued to disparage government intervention to pull the U.S. economy from the abyss. The core neoconservative or neoliberal argument was that the New Deal actually had failed despite the empirical evidence showing the opposite, as well as how a variety of government programs including post-FDR innovations like the GI Bill and Medicare had helped the young enter the middle class and the elderly stay there.

Giving voice to this anti-New Deal “group think,” The Washington Post’s Outlook section on Feb. 1, 2009, featured an article by Amity Shlaes headlined: “FDR Was a Great Leader, But His Economic Plan Isn’t One to Follow.” A second piece was entitled: “FDR’s Plan Failed to Spark.” Yet who was Shlaes and why should her opinion be so respected?

Shlaes is a former member of the editorial board of the *Wall Street Journal*, (the hothouse for anti-New Deal myth promotion). According to various bios, she has written on political economy, economic history and taxes, and taught a MBS course on “The Economics of the Great Depression,” all based, it appears, on a bachelor’s degree in English. She currently chairs the board of trustees of the Calvin Coolidge presidential foundation. Yet, even “Silent Cal” if he were alive today might be surprised that anyone would still be touting his laissez-faire economic nostrums in the Twenty-first Century after they failed so calamitously in the last century.

Dismissing Government

Shlaes has gotten a lot of mileage out her theory that government can do little or no good and that the economy is best left to the businessmen and bankers. She wrote *The Forgotten Man: A New History of the Great Depression* (2007), that former Republican House Speaker Newt Gingrich praised as a blueprint for a return to “Whig-style free-market liberalism,” as Zachary Newkirk reported in

The Nation.

It should be noted that the book appeared the year before the lightly regulated (or self-regulated) “free market” unraveled, spilling pain and chaos not only across America but throughout Europe and much of the developed world. Yet, in 2009 with the economy in freefall, the Washington Post turned to the lightly credentialed Shlaes as an expert on how government intervention wouldn’t work.

The Post made that choice although Shlaes has come under substantive criticism for making claims that are misleading, inaccurate and ideologically driven. Political commentator Jonathan Chait wrote that Shlaes’s book was “extremely strange” in that “it does not really argue that the New Deal failed.” He suggests that the book is novelistic rather than scholarly, a combination of bold claims, “implication,” lack of substantiation and contradictions, and “wild anecdotal selectivity.”

Shlaes, who avoids addressing the basic fact that the Depression came about during the Republican regime of 1929-1932, seems to know little if anything about the human suffering of the Depression. She cherry-picks data from the period, and like her fellow conservatives who create their own reality rejects all empirical evidence that Roosevelt’s programs helped the nation recover from the Depression.

She has been described by Depression historian Robert S. McElvaine as an “unconstructed antisocial Darwinist, the darling of the right for her completely wrong-headed view of the Great Depression.” Journalist Lynn Parramore says: “Amity Shlaes, ever the eager revisionist.”

But Shlaes’s trendy, counter-intuitive message still resonated with the well-paid elites of Washington, who had overwhelmingly bought into neoliberal and neoconservative theories that hold with religious intensity that the market is god. And these “wise” men and women weren’t about to admit such a fundamental mistake.

So, at the gray dawn of the Great Recession, the U.S. mainstream media might have done average Americans a better service by giving more attention to many sounder economists and historians who hold a more favorable view of the New Deal, such as:

Anthony J. Badger, Isaiah Berlin, Ben Bernanke, Alan Brinkley, E. Cary Brown, James MacGregor Burns, Adam Cohen, Lawrence Davidson, J. Bradford DeLong, Barry Eichengreen, Benjamin M. Friedman, Alexander Field, John Kenneth Galbraith, James K. Galbraith, David M. Kennedy, Paul Krugman, William E. Leuchtenburg, Robert D. Leighninger Jr., Jeff Madrick, Robert S. McElvaine, Charles McMillion,

Kim Phillips-Fein, Eric Rauchway, Christina D. Romer, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., and Joseph E. Stiglitz.

But Shlaes and her novelistic perspective on the New Deal bolstered the thinking of many “conservatives” and quite a few “neoliberals” in their resistance to a major federal commitment to new public works projects and other initiatives to put Americans back to work and spur a recovery.

Obama's Initiative

As soon as President Obama took office, he requested an economic recovery plan from Congress. His American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009 was a \$787 billion stimulus measure designed to jump start the economy and to create and save 3.5 million jobs, give 95 percent of American worker a tax cut, and begin to rebuild America's road, rail and water infrastructure.

Many economists believed that the stimulus was far smaller than was needed to meet the economic collapse that followed the Wall Street meltdown in 2008, but the size was mostly dictated by the intense opposition of congressional conservatives who were buoyed by new waves of anti-government propaganda from right-wing and mainstream media.

Still, despite its inadequacies, the stimulus package along with the auto and bank bailouts and other federal interventions was credited by serious economists for stabilizing the economy and saving millions of jobs. David Leonhardt of the *New York Times* reported in February 2010 that research revealed that the government's direct intervention “helped avert a second Depression.”

Yet, that reality didn't fit with “free market” theology, which remains an article of faith among Republicans and conservatives who have denounced the New Deal since the 1930s as if they were fire-and-brimstone ministers decrying the Devil. But what is relatively new is that many members of today's Democratic political elite have joined the “free market” cult by conveniently forgetting the history of the Great Depression and the New Deal. Many of these well-heeled Democrats made fortunes on Wall Street where they learned to embrace the “free market” creed.

Some younger Democrats may have simply not been exposed to the New Deal's history. That would appear to be the case with Barack Obama, who was born in 1961 and came of age around 1980 at the beginning of the so-called Reagan Revolution.

But the “ancient history” of the 1930s is still relevant, especially for families whose great-grandparents were lifted from the Great Depression by the New Deal's jobs programs, whose working-class grandfathers got educated through

the GI Bill and pulled their families into the middle class, and whose mothers and fathers grew up at a time when a strong middle class created unprecedented economic security for many Americans.

One such family the Cheney's was devoted to FDR's New Deal because it saved them from ruin and created such middle-class security for them that, ironically, one of their offspring, Dick Cheney, soon forgot why his father and grandfather were such strong Democrats and set off to Washington to dismantle FDR's legacy. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Dick Cheney: Son of the New Deal](#)."]]

Once again, it's worth remembering FDR's legacy:

The United States, 1797 to 1929

In the first decade of the Republic, President George Washington's Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton offered a vision of an activist federal government that would "promote the general Welfare" through what was called "dirigisme," an economic system in which the government played a strong role in nation-building, from creating a financial system to encouraging manufacturing to road and canal construction.

But Hamilton was sidelined under President John Adams and the Hamiltonian vision was ultimately defeated by the rise of Thomas Jefferson, who saw industrial development as a threat to agricultural interests, including the plantation system and slavery upon which Jefferson's wealth and the economy of the South depended. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Thomas Jefferson: America's Founding Sociopath](#)."]]

Though some of Hamilton's nation-building ideas survived, his political defeat in the 1790s dealt a long-term setback to those who favored an activist federal government building a strong and successful nation. A *laissez-faire* system, albeit with businessmen frequently manipulating the government for economic gain, prevailed.

"In the 132 years between 1797 and 1929, there was no effective regulation of the U.S. economy," writes history professor Lawrence Davidson. "No federal agencies existed to control corruption, fraud and exploitation on the part of the business class. Even during the Civil War, economic management on a national level was minimal and war profiteering common."

"The way capitalism worked over these 132 years was a function of ideology," continues Davidson. "This was (and still is) the so-called free-market ideology which taught that if the government was kept as small as possible (basically having responsibility for internal order, external defense, and the enforcement of contracts), the citizenry would have to pay very low taxes and be left alone

to pursue their own prosperity.”

Between 1797 and 1929, the federal government did little to mitigate the cycles of boom and bust that ruined the lives of many Americans. For the better part of a century, the country suffered a wrenching economic collapse every five to ten years. Bank failures and Wall Street panics were common, and usually led to nationwide meltdowns.

The National Bureau of Economic Research, which tracks U.S. recessions, states that “the country experienced 33 major economic downturns which impacted roughly 60 of the years in question. These included 22 recessions, four depressions, and seven economic ‘panics’ (bank runs and failures),” notes Davidson.

The World FDR Faced

The 1920s, while not considered an exceptional boom period, was what economist John Kenneth Galbraith called a “lively phase” of American capitalism, a continuation of the Gilded Age that is considered to have begun around 1870. For some historians, it closed at the end of the 19th Century, for others it ended in 1929.

The Gilded Age, so named by American humorist Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner in their satirical 1873 book, *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*, was characterized by a greatly expanding economy and the emergence of plutocratic influences in government and society, a post-Civil War America that was “an age of corruption, crooked land speculators, ruthless bankers, and dishonest politicians.”

The generally euphoric economic expansion that followed World War I reflected *laissez-faire* “with a vengeance” and “rugged individualism.” Known as the “Roaring Twenties” or the “Jazz Age,” the 1920s produced flappers in fringes and hair bobs, the Charleston, Ponzi schemes, an explosion of movies and movie palaces.

It was the time of Prohibition (1920-1933), speakeasies, and crime. Americans thought they were in a never-ending “New Era” of low unemployment and general prosperity, but history reveals it was also a time of a “happy daze” that hid hardships and the extreme income inequality portrayed memorably in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. Income inequality reached a peak in 1928. There were warning signs of trouble when an average of 600 banks failed each year during the decade.

Still, the United States got a glimpse of what could become a modern middle-class consumer economy with mass production putting many modern wonders within reach of millions of Americans, such as radios, home appliances and automobiles.

After World War I, the United States became the richest society the world had ever seen. It was probably the first time in history that people were taught to value consumption, being told to consume more and more. Optimism and prosperity were not shared equally, however. The middle class was fledgling and comprised only 15 to 20 percent of Americans.

A system of quotas routinely kept women, blacks, Jews and ethnic whites out of the best jobs, residential areas and schools. In 1935, Yale University's Dean Milton Winteritz's instructions were specific: "Never admit more than five Jews, take only two Italian Catholics, and take no blacks at all."

In many parts of the United States in the first decade of the Twentieth Century, many areas had racially restricted housing covenants written into the title deeds that prohibited selling property to non-whites, a term that could include Jews, Italians, Russians and Latinos, anyone not white, Anglo Christian.

A system of apartheid, rationalized by bad science and enforced by lynching, ruled in the South. More than 4,700 people, mostly African-Americans, were lynched between 1882 and 1968, and that is the number that is documented. Republican Warren Harding was the first president in American history to publicly condemn lynching, in Birmingham, Alabama, no less. The Ku Klux Klan reached the height of its influence in 1924, when it claimed 9 million members.

Racism was not limited to the South. Racial tensions were heightened in areas in which African-Americans would compete for jobs. In Detroit, racial conflicts grew when Henry Ford began hiring African-Americans in large numbers in 1915 and paid them the same wages as his white employees.

Anti-Semitism reached its peak between the First and Second World Wars. Henry Ford may not have been anti-black when it came to hiring assembly-line workers, but he was a virulent anti-Semite. He was an admirer of Adolf Hitler and the Nazis, and one of the major overseas investors in their war machine. His 1921 book, *The International Jew*, still appears on many anti-Semitic and neo-Nazi sites. Ford dealerships across the country and internationally distributed free copies of the book.

Uneven Prosperity

Thus, the notion that the 1920s was an era of unbounded prosperity and gaiety for all is a myth. But times were good generally, except in farming and mining. Jobs were plentiful, prices were stable, and wages were rising. Unemployment during the decade ranged around 5 percent until 1930 (it should be noted that unemployment figures of this period were not gathered based on the systematic processes developed in the post-World War II era).

Most elderly Americans, however, lived in abject poverty. "The courts repeatedly struck down the most basic minimum wage, child labor, consumer protection and worker safety laws," writes historian Kevin Baker.

Despite the emergence of often-embattled unions, Baker reminds us that Americans of 1933 had little say in anything that mattered. Banking and investment were dominated by a small circle of self-interested, often dishonest men. Politics in every large city were usually controlled by corrupt political machines. In the South, millions of blacks and poor whites were kept from the ballot box by poll taxes, literacy tests and force of arms.

Elected in 1928, President Herbert Hoover had been one of the ablest and most widely admired men in America. Kevin Baker reminds us that Hoover was a dynamic figure and "rigorous thinker" who had served as secretary of commerce and had headed relief efforts with his wife in China during the Boxer Rebellion and in Europe at the start of World War I. He tirelessly promoted "new technologies, work-safety rules, and voluntary industry standards supervised relief to Mississippi and Louisiana during the terrible 1927 floods and advocated cooperation between labor and management."

At a time when the idea of "scientific management" was at a height, journalist Anne O'Hare McCormick's comment about Hoover's inauguration was not surprising: The American people "summoned a great engineer to solve our problems for us," she wrote. "Now we sat back comfortably and confidently to watch the problems being solved."

That was in March 1929. The Wall Street Crash that October revealed that even skilled engineers can run off the track. Baker has quoted New Dealer Rexford Tugwell as giving credit to Hoover for some bold ideas that were to get the New Deal label. History has recorded Hoover, however, as the talented engineer who turned out to be a rigid conservative intellectual committed to economic orthodoxy that reflected the 1920s "business progressivism."

As a Republican, Hoover refused to abandon the old-time religion of unbridled market capitalism reflected in his 1931 statement: "The sole function of government is to bring about a condition of affairs favorable to the beneficial development of private enterprise."

The Depression 1929-1941

The Great Depression began in the late 1920s as eight years of uninterrupted prosperity came to a brutal end when the stock market bubble burst in October 1929. Yet, in the crucial early years of the economic collapse of 1929 to 1933, those walking the corridors of power formed a chorus of *liquidationists*, men

who resisted pursuing expansionary monetary and fiscal policies in favor of “natural” market forces. Treasury Secretary Andrew Mellon’s 1930 prescription: “Liquidate labor, liquidate stocks, liquidate real estate.”

The “harsh lantern of history” reveals a rigid commitment to destructive policies in combination with a marked disengagement from human suffering. Millions of businesses and enterprises went bankrupt. Shantytowns, constructed of cardboard, tar paper, glass, lumber, tin, whatever materials people could salvage, cropped up across the country to absorb the millions of unemployed people evicted from their homes. They were called “Hoovervilles.”

Let’s look at the numbers behind the human misery – Industrial production: Between the peak and the trough of the downturn, industrial production in the United States declined 47 percent. Gross Domestic Product (GDP), a measure of the nation’s total economic activity, fell 30 percent.

Unemployment: The reliability of the statistics continues to be debated, but it is widely agreed that unemployment exceeded 20 percent at its highest point, according to economist Christina Romer, though some estimates put it at 33 percent, even 75-80 percent in some cities.

Income: People’s real disposable incomes were estimated to have dropped 28 percent. Farmers had already experienced severe hard times in the 1920s and were further crushed by catastrophic price drops, drought and debt. The value of farmland had fallen between 30 to 40 percent between 1920 and 1929. A thousand homeowners a day lost their homes.

The very future of western civilization was in grave doubt. Some Americans expected Roosevelt to claim the powers of a dictator or close to it. Others, especially rightists in the upper classes and some militarists in the Army, weighed the possibility of a coup. Adolf Hitler had become chancellor of Germany just over one month earlier. Benito Mussolini, Italy’s prime ministerial dictator since 1922, was fairly popular in the United States. Writer Russell Baker quotes Pennsylvanian Republican Sen. David Reed: “If this country ever needed a Mussolini, it needs one now.”

“There is no doubt in my mind that during the spring of 1933, the Army felt that the time was approaching when it might have to ‘take over,” wrote Rex Tugwell, one of FDR’s “brain trusters.” For many, democracy itself seemed exhausted. Historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. describes the period as “a frightened age when the air was filled with the sound of certitudes cracking on every side.”

“The most insistent propaganda in those days,” writes political theorist and historian Isaiah Berlin, “declared that humanitarianism, liberalism and

democratic forces were played out, that the choice now lay between two bleak extremes, communism and fascism." It is important to remember that the Depression was global.

A Campaign of Hope

FDR's campaign in 1932 had offered the desperate nation hope. In his acceptance speech at the Democratic Convention, he declared: "Our Republican leaders tell us economic laws – sacred, inviolable, unchangeable – cause panics, which no one could prevent. But while they prate of economic laws, men and women are starving. We must lay hold of the fact that economic laws are not made by nature. They are made by human beings."

When FDR took the oath of office on that cold day in March 1933, the Depression was grinding into its fourth year. Over 10,000 banks had already collapsed and every bank in the country was in the process of closing its doors. The nation was in the middle of a terrifying fourth bank panic.

The issue in 1933 was not whether the federal government could respond to the economic crisis since it was not designed to do so. The issue was whether officials would be willing to build the institutions needed to handle a challenge as severe as the Depression.

FDR was faced with a stark choice: *recovery or revolution*. He chose recovery through the New Deal, a series of economic reforms passed by the U.S. Congress primarily during FDR's first term, 1933-1937. The reforms were designed to respond to the Great Depression with relief, recovery and reform. Most of the important legislation came in brief spurts in 1933, 1935 and, least important, in 1938.

Not only did New Deal programs put unemployed back to work on road building, conservation and other public works projects, but it created a system of regulation for banks and the stock market. The New Deal also put in place Social Security which gave some financial protection for the elderly and the disabled.

A Whirlwind of Action

On his first day in office, March 4, 1933, FDR called Congress into a special session that began March 8 and did not adjourn until 99 days later on June 16, creating the now-benchmark measure of every president, the first 100 days.

"The volume of important legislation so exceeded any earlier precedents, so overwhelmed the immediate capacity for full comprehension," writes historian Paul K. Conkin, "that even today no one can more than begin to make sense out of the whole."

"As Roosevelt pointed out, the New Deal wasn't so new," writes professor Rauchway. "He claimed inspiration from the progressivism of Woodrow Wilson, under whose administration Congress created the Federal Reserve System, lowered tariffs, and tried to legalize unions."

"Republicans supporting him cited Roosevelt's cousin-uncle Theodore, under whose administration Congress began to regulate corporate accounting and passed truth-in-advertising and pure-food laws. Farm supporters of the New Deal drew on the decades-old tradition of populism, which opposed the gold standard and demanded that government assist rural residents as much as it assisted railroad corporations. What was new in 1932 was a basket case economy."

The first three months of FDR's first term were a frenzied period, described by Arthur Schlesinger Jr. as a "presidential barrage of ideas and programs unlike anything known to American history." The speed was such that humorist Will Rogers quipped: "Congress doesn't pass legislation anymore, they just wave at the bills as they go by."

Historians habitually divide the New Deal in two phases: a "First New Deal" of the first Hundred Days and the following year (1933-34), and a "Second New Deal" (1935-38). FDR's first concerns were the banking crisis and putting people to work, so the first New Deal sought to provide emergency recovery and relief through banking regulations, price stabilization efforts, farm relief programs and numerous emergency organizations.

The Second New Deal continued relief and recovery measures but represented a policy shift toward welfare legislation, what conservatives charge was "more radical, more pro-labor and anti-business" than the first. The second phase included the National Labor Relations Act (Wagner Act, 1935), which revived and strengthened the protections of collective bargaining and the Works Progress Administration (1935), which nationalized unemployment relief and created hundreds of thousands of low-skilled blue-collar jobs for the unemployed between 1935 and 1941.

The Social Security Act was the most important program of 1935, perhaps of the New Deal. It established a system of universal retirement pensions, unemployment insurance, and welfare benefits for poor families and the handicapped. The Revenue Acts of 1935, 1936 and 1937 provided measures to democratize the federal tax structure. The 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act (the 44-hour workweek) was the final major New Deal measure.

The New Deal Worked

"By any normal definition, the Great Depression had ended by late 1936, with all

major indicators surpassing their previous peaks,” says economist McMillion.

In that sense, the conservatives who have fought the New Deal and its legacy for 80 years appear comparable to Holocaust deniers. No amount of factual history satisfies them in the faux reality that they have created, a mix of myth and ideology that is simply not true.

“That it was not the programs of the New Deal, but only the placing of the nation on a wartime footing years later, that restored the health of the nation’s economy” is what McMillion calls a “dangerous popular myth” that “cannot stand up to even the most basic economic analysis.”

It is a myth that is contradicted by the economic facts from the 1930s from *The Historical Statistics of the United States*, Bureau of Economic Analysis, Department of Commerce, the Federal Reserve and other official sources. It is a myth promoted by the Twenty-first Century version of Liberty Leaguers and the mainstream corporate, neoliberal/neoconservative (whatever your preferred term) media, which abound with anti-government ideology.

McMillion points out that Shlaes, who is neither a recognized historian nor an economist, consistently cites only two economic indicators of the 1930s: the falling but persistently high unemployment rate and the length of time required for the stock market to recover after its bubble burst.

“Neither of these is used in any serious economic or policy analysis,” continues McMillion. “Media emphasize the unemployment rate but, because it is known to be lagging and misleading, it is not considered at all by economists in determining the start or end of a recession or depression. Serious analysis, including recession and depression dating, use the separate business reporting of actual jobs added or lost.”

The stock market is one reflection of public confidence, but is not an appropriate statistic for New Deal economic analysis because of the small percentage of the population invested in it. Still, the reason why right-wing media outlets like *The Wall Street Journal* work very hard to try to discredit FDR and the New Deal is that they want more and more Americans to buy into the myth that both FDR and the New Deal failed and accept the follow-on argument that people must trust the magic of the market and despise “gub-mint.”

The Economic Indicators

U.S. Industrial Production, which had collapsed (declined 47 percent) for nearly three years under Hoover, rocketed by 44 percent in the first three months of the New Deal and by December 1936, had completely recovered to surpass its 1929 peak. The 1937-1938 recession dip resulted when FDR, at heart a fiscal

conservative, was persuaded to balance the budget and cut spending in response to fears of inflation when recovery was evident in 1936.

When the economy again contracted sharply in late 1937 and early 1938, FDR quickly reversed course and rapid growth immediately began again. Economist Marshall Auerback suggests: "the relapse of 1938 validates the efficacy of fiscal policy activism."

The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) plunged 25.6 percent from 1929-1932. However, in 1936, real GDP surpassed its 1929 peak and never again fell below it. Between 1933 and 1937, the GDP rose at an average of 9 percent per year, according to economist Christina Romer. It grew at an annual rate around 11 percent after the 1937-39 dip.

Unemployment: As James K. Galbraith notes, "The view that the New Deal was too small and accomplished little, that only WWII ended the Depression, is very widely held. But it is not correct. It is based on a mis-reading of reconstructed unemployment statistics from that time, which treat the workers actually employed by the New Deal as though they were unemployed."

Professor Rauchway notes that although unemployment records show that the unemployment rate didn't return to 1929 levels until 1943, a crucial point is that the unemployment rate fell every year of the New Deal with the exception of the 1938-39 recession, the latter the result of FDR's having been persuaded to change course. Other problems with the data relate to the treatment of many workers as unemployed even though they had jobs with New Deal programs.

As economist Auerback notes, "The key to evaluating Roosevelt's performance in combating the Depression is the statistical treatment of many millions of unemployed engaged in his massive workfare programs. The government hired about 60 per cent of the unemployed in public works and conservation projects that planted a billion trees, saved the whooping crane, modernized rural America, and built such diverse projects as the Cathedral of Learning in Pittsburgh, the Montana state capitol, much of the Chicago lakefront, New York's Lincoln Tunnel and Triborough Bridge complex, the Tennessee Valley Authority and the aircraft carriers *Enterprise* and *Yorktown*."

Auerback adds, the government "also built or renovated 2,500 hospitals, 45,000 schools, 13,000 parks and playgrounds, 7,800 bridges, 700,000 miles of roads, and a thousand airfields. And it employed 50,000 teachers, rebuilt the country's entire rural school system, and hired 3,000 writers, musicians, sculptors and painters, including Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock."

In effect, Auerback writes, the "workfare Americans" employed by the Roosevelt

administration “reduced unemployment from 25 per cent in 1933 to 9 per cent in 1936, up to 13 per cent in 1938, back to less than 10 per cent at the end of 1940, to less than 1 per cent a year later when the U.S. was plunged into the Second World War at the end of 1941.”

Historic Bargain

In other words, Roosevelt rebuilt America at a historic bargain cost. The conservatives who keep attacking FDR and the New Deal are not only small-minded, ideology-based, destructive propagandists, they are wrong. They are wrong about FDR, wrong about the New Deal, wrong about history, wrong about economics, wrong about what is reality.

But these rightists can't let go of their FDR-bashing because the catastrophic Great Depression revealed the serious flaws of a free-market ideology based on beliefs not empirical evidence – and FDR's New Deal showed that government was needed to protect both the American people from unrestrained capitalism and capitalism from itself.

The New Deal did not engineer a full economic recovery during FDR's first two terms, mostly because despite its creative use of government it tended to err on the side of caution and FDR prematurely pulled back from government activism in 1938.

But the most basic economic analysis reveals that the New Deal *worked*. It brought real relief to most Americans and stabilized a collapsed economy. Full economic recovery resulted from the public spending in World War II, which demonstrated further the necessity of providing a greater fiscal stimulus to fully overcome the Depression.

The New Deal was not socialism. It was capitalism with safety nets and subsidies. It is credited with saving capitalism and perhaps western civilization. Its long-lasting institutions have become the bedrock of America's economic stability.

With the Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson administrations building on that bedrock, the Great American Middle Class arose, creating a foundation for the stunning growth that made the American economy the envy of the world from the 1940s through the 1960s, a prosperity that was widely shared.

FDR not only saved capitalism from its own destructive impulses of excessive greed and market manipulation but he broadened the concept of democracy, where average people had a real stake in the society. He had shown that the federal government could “provide for the general Welfare” at a time of grave crisis.

Still, FDR's lasting enemies the true believers in the cult of the "free market" have never given up and they achieved major victories in the 1980s and 1990s with the removal of key regulations, such as the Glass-Steagall law separating commercial banks from stock speculation, and in the 2000s with the dreamy concept of business "self-regulation."

The economic devastation that has followed has reaffirmed the inherent wisdom of what an earlier generation had learned from the Great Depression. But the rich have rarely if ever wielded as much power as they do today – and they can hire armies of think tanks, media outlets and clever commentators to spread their propaganda to a frequently ill-informed and gullible populace.

Lost Legacy

As a result, today's corporatist politicians on both sides of the aisle appear to have no memory of the real history, at least not a clear-eyed view of the pain that average Americans experienced before the New Deal.

Today's politicians (and unfortunately, many mainstream journalists) seem to believe that the lessons of the New Deal have been swept into the historical dustbin marked "Old News, No Longer Relevant." To them, history began with the presidency of Ronald Reagan, who "changed the trajectory of America," as Barack Obama once noted.

While it's true that Reagan did transform the United States, it was not in a good way for the average citizen. Over the past several decades, the United States has changed from a democratic republic based on a strong middle class into a plutocratic "Democracy Inc." with billionaires manipulating a stressed, distracted and cynical population via massive investments in media, propaganda and political advertisements.

The consequences of the Reagan era's heavy dose of "free market" capitalism proved again the point that effective government oversight is necessary to avert new catastrophes like Wall Street's 2008 meltdown which cast millions of Americans out of their jobs and out of their homes.

Even with today's modest recovery, the United States is living with the consequences of a realignment of wealth away from the middle class to the so-called "One Percent." This modern Gilded Age contributed to the imbalance of the U.S. economy heading into the 2008 crash and further explains the wobbly climb out of that abyss.

Thus, this anniversary of FDR's birth is a worthy moment to reflect on what America has learned and what it has forgotten. All Americans, but especially Democrats, need to remember this history.

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

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Is a Clinton Revival Timed-Out?

There may not be a big demand for 1990s nostalgia, but the 2016 presidential

race could offer one more contest involving a Clinton and a Bush. Yet, some Democrats fear Hillary Clinton could ultimately fail because she lacks a vision for addressing today's problems, says Beverly Bandler.

By Beverly Bandler

During the 1992 campaign, while facing criticism for her legal work on behalf of a failed savings and loan, Hillary Clinton remarked: "For goodness' sake, you can't be a lawyer if you don't represent banks."

For goodness' sake, can you be president of the United States if you don't understand the role the banks played in the 2008 Financial Crisis? Can you be president if you are oblivious to the real condition of the nation?

It may be difficult to see just how far the U.S. has fallen if you have two expensive and grand homes in two of the best postal zips to which you are driven in a limousine, dine and dish with multi-millionaires and billionaires, and require presidential suites for high-paying speech events.

Both Clintons give evidence that they have become detached from the realities of most Americans. "We are in the best shape of any big country in the world in the next 20 years," Bill Clinton said recently. Perhaps Bill, who has rightly been called "the architect and primary spokesperson for the corporatist and pro-Wall Street wing of his party," should have said: "We Clintons are in the best shape."

It turns out that some of the primary beneficiaries of Clintonism and the "Third Way" concept of the so-called "pro-growth progressive" movement ended up being the Clintons, their cronies, the financial establishment and the other members of "the 1 percent", including, of course, the Republicans who never pretended to be other than corporatists intent on destroying the parts of government they couldn't own.

New Zeitgeist

"Hillary Clinton is dangerously out of step with 'the new zeitgeist' with her finance-friendly politics that supported her rise to power," says prominent political journalist William Greider.

"Beyond recession and financial crisis," notes Greider, "we are in much deeper trouble than many people suppose or the authorities want to acknowledge."

Despite the recent economic uptick, many Americans subsist on inadequate pay while working long hours, sometimes needing multiple jobs to pay the bills. For the bottom 80 percent, livelihoods are fragile.

“Four out of five Americans will live near poverty, without work, or relying on welfare at least once during their lives, according to a recent survey from the Associated Press,” reports Journalist Jane C. Timm.

The number of Americans living in poverty hovers just below 50 million. According to the latest Census, 46.2 million Americans, 15 percent of the country, are “officially” poor. A supplemental Census estimate that attempts to ascertain poverty levels based on measurements that are considered better than those used for decades, puts the number of Americans in poverty in 2013 at 48.7 million.

But those figures only tell part of the story: “The Associated Press/GFK survey notes that Census figures are a snapshot, they don’t account for those who shift in and out of near-poverty, welfare reliance, or unemployment. When those numbers are accounted for, the number of Americans who face such hardships surges to 79%.”

While most Americans live paycheck to paycheck with fear that the next paycheck might not be coming the relative handful at the top continue to amass wealth beyond the imagination of the vast majority of their countrymen and women.

“America’s wealth distribution now looks like a lopsided ladder: The bottom 40% of the population owns just 0.3% of the nation’s wealth,” writes Timm, “while the top 20% has 84% of the nation’s wealth, according to a 2010 study on wealth distribution and balance.”

Is America ‘Awesome’?

As for America being “awesome,” as a Fox News host gushed recently, historian Lawrence Wittner points out that the United States is now “tops” only in violence and weapons exports. A close look at the social, economic and environmental statistics makes the United States look more like a Third World nation with a classic oligarchy and an endangered middle class, with powerful corporations treated better than people.

Yet, the word “corporation” does not appear in the Constitution. The word “people” does. The government was not designed to serve as the Protector of Wall Street. Government is supposed to serve all the people, to “provide for the general Welfare.” That was the design of the U.S. Constitution when the Framers replaced the non-functional Articles of Confederation.

It was also the idea reflected in the modern Democratic Party that Franklin Delano Roosevelt created in the 1930s. It is a fundamental concept that seems to elude both current main political parties in Gilded Age II.

Hillary Clinton, one half of the Ultimate Power Couple, is on course to run for president of a nation in crisis in 2016. But who is she? What does she believe? What is her worldview? Does she share her husband's perspective that treats the role of government as some kind of Job Mart, lining up compliant workers to benefit the well-heeled and well-connected.

Indeed, what are Hillary Clinton's positions: On the financialization of the economy and the power of the banks? Corporatism? Corporate welfare? Jobs? Poverty? Inequality? Education? Climate change? Environmental quality? On the austerity budget? The Middle Class? Militarism?

What does she believe is the role of government? What does she believe was the legacy of the New Deal? What does she believe the Democratic Party stands for? How does she define Fascism and Democracy? Is she still really a Goldwater Girl in Democratic camouflage? Is she still in the embrace of 1990s Clintonism, "New Democrats" centrism? Not only are her stated positions crucial but the *basis for them*, how she understands the world today and the history that has brought us here.

On foreign policy, is she a Neocon Lite who will support every militaristic call for interventionism around the world? What lessons has she learned, if any, from her vote for the Iraq War and her instigation of the "regime change" in Libya, two decisions that have contributed to chaos across the Middle East and North Africa.

Rebranded and Retrenched

As columnist Doug Henwood notes, "Hillary (and she has clearly rebranded herself as just a first name) embodies the 'New Democrat' politics of the 1990s that now seem hopelessly obsolete, no match for a world of chronic economic stagnation, polarization and climate catastrophe.

"She was very much a partner in inventing that ideology, business-friendly, hawkish, tough on unions and the poor, with her husband. The Clintonites purged the Democrats of their social-democratic wing, consolidating the victories of the Reagan Revolution. At this point, it's hard to say what Hillary or the Democrats stand for, other than being protectors of the status quo.

"What is the case for Hillary? . . . She has experience, she's a woman, and it's her turn. It's hard to find any substantive political argument in her favor. During her career as New York's junior senator and as secretary of state, she has scarcely budged from the centrist sweet spot, and has become increasingly hawkish on foreign policy."

Some Democrats like to compare the Clintons glowingly to Franklin and Eleanor

Roosevelt, but others see the Byzantine power couple Justinian and Theodora, who brutally put down a popular revolt and made senators prostrate themselves when they entered the royal couple's presence.

Yet, as Washington-based writer Rich Yeselson observes, "How you feel about Hillary Clinton's inevitability depends a lot upon how alarmed you are that the GOP, the most radically extreme major party formation since the Southern 'Slave Democrats' of the 1850s, might take full control of the federal government in 2016

"Clinton is exactly the kind of candidate one would expect the Democrats to nominate in 2016. She has the typical political credentials of a modern presidential candidate: eight years in the Senate, followed by a high cabinet post. She has 100 percent name recognition. She has a powerful fundraising apparatus. And her policy positions are broadly aligned with the vast majority of Democratic Party elites and much of its electorate, too. In this, she is the embodiment of what, in a useful phrase, [former] *New Republic's* Noam Scheiber has described as 'boardroom liberalism.'"

The Clinton Years

Hillary's political fortunes are bound up with Bill's eight years in office, since she was an integral part of his administration. And, though the economy performed better than under the two Bushes who sandwiched the Clinton years, Democrats should reflect carefully on those years.

Robert Borosage, co-director of *Campaign for America's Future*, points out that "Democrats understandably feast on the comparison between the salad days of the Clinton presidency and the Bush debacle. Twenty-two million new jobs under Clinton; the worst jobs record since the Great Depression under Bush. The longest period of growth in U.S. history under Clinton; the weakest recovery and biggest bust under Bush. Budget surpluses under Clinton; deficits as far as the eye could see under Bush."

But Borosage, nonetheless, says, "The [Democratic] party must free itself from the legacy of former President Bill Clinton and the centrism of his New Democrats. Clinton's successes in office have little relevance for Democrats today. The 1990s were a very different time both politically and economically. In fact, many of Clinton's policies led to the travails now facing Americans. They are part of the problem, not part of the solution.

"And Clinton's strategy of co-opting conservative themes offers no way out. As leader of the New Democrats, Clinton tacked to the prevailing winds of that conservative time. On the economy, Clinton's New Democrats scorned old 'tax and

spend' liberals. They boasted that they understood markets, were skeptical of big government and disdained the outmoded social welfare policies of the New Deal and Great Society. The promise of America, they argued, was 'equal opportunity, not equal outcomes.'

"After taking office, Clinton shelved most of his populist promises. In today's political environment, Clinton's retreats and concessions on social issues are embarrassing anachronisms."

Borosage continues, "On economic issues, Clinton's Rubinomics contributed directly to digging the hole we are in. Deregulation helped unleash the 'financial wilding' that eventually blew up the economy. The celebration of deficit reduction bolstered the illusory belief in 'expansionary austerity' that has driven Europe back into recession and sabotaged any chance of getting a sufficient stimulus here at home.

"Austerity continues to starve public investments vital to our future. The banks emerged from the crisis bigger and more concentrated than ever

"No matter how repellant Republicans may look to [the young, people of color, single women] voters, they are unlikely to turn out in large numbers for a party whose policies have failed them. Democrats and the country have to move beyond the old economy and the old arguments. Obama had it right: We need a new foundation for growth one that embraces the need for dynamic and activist government."

Yet, it was President Barack Obama who called on Bill Clinton to make the case for his re-election at the 2012 Democratic convention. But what positives remain of the Clinton years?

Fearing the 'Third Way'

In the 1990s, there were many progressive/liberal Democrats who were alarmed by the Clinton policies and what they would portend for the future, particularly the deals he struck once the Republicans gained control of Congress in 1994.

Comparing the Democratic Party's resistance to imposing a work requirement on women with children in the 1970s, lawyer Carol Lipton noted that "no Democrat at the time would have envisioned a Democratic president less than 20 years later, [dismantling] the ideological core of welfare, maintaining and supporting families, and substituting the Clintonian neoliberal vision of the undeserved poor having to make efforts to look for jobs that were menial, low-paying, and engaging in time-sucking job hunting efforts."

It's fair to say that many of us ordinary rank-and-file Democrats were

uncomfortable with some Clinton policies back then, but the economy was relatively strong and thus few could envision the future consequences of Clintonism when the good times stopped rolling.

The last 15 years have revealed the painful downside of those “reforms” as millions of American families fell from their disappearing middle-class jobs through the shredded safety net into poverty. For those reasons, some progressives view Bill Clinton’s legacy as a surrender to the greed of corporatism that felt good at the moment only because of the inflated stock market bubble of the 1990s that burst in the ensuing decade.

Political columnist Matt Bai says, “Clinton tried gamely to leave behind lasting change, and he failed. In many more areas, though, the progress that was made under Clinton, almost 23 million new jobs, reductions in poverty, lower crime and higher wages, [was] reversed or wiped away entirely in a remarkably short time.

“Clinton’s presidency seems now to have been oddly ephemeral, his record etched in chalk and left out in the rain. George W. and his Republican Party [undertook] a ferocious and unbending assault on Clinton’s progressive legacy. As Clinton points out in his speeches, Bush and the Republicans abandoned balanced budgets to fight the war in Iraq, widened income inequality by cutting taxes on the wealthy and scaled back social programs.

“Some Democrats, though, and especially those who are apt to call themselves ‘progressives,’ offer a more complicated and less charitable explanation. In their view, Clinton failed to seize his moment and create a more enduring, more progressive legacy, not just because of the personal travails and Republican attacks that hobbled his presidency, but because his centrist, ‘third way’ political strategy, his strategy of ‘triangulating’ to find some middle point in every argument, sapped the party of its core principles

“They say, he was less a victim of Bush’s radicalism than he was its enabler. Ideologically Clinton’s presidency fit snugly into the era of Reagan and Bush. Faced with ascendant conservatism Clinton saw his job, in a sense, as getting the Democratic Party to adjust to it, rather than to resist it.”

Hillary’s Coronation?

Hillary Clinton’s expected presidential candidacy should be seen in the context of this recent past. She should not presume a “coronation” and a possible rematch with the Bush dynasty, if Jeb Bush wins the Republican nomination.

Americans are angry and a good number of them are “real” Democrats, who have the perception that the charismatic and smart neoliberal Clintons empowered

themselves as they helped to enfeeble the Democratic Party. Unquestionably that was not their intention, but that is what happened.

The Clintonian version of the “Best and the Brightest” told fellow Democrats in the 1990s that they should “do more than just defend old programs.” Yet those sooooo smart, highly educated people failed to do the basic homework to learn the purpose of those programs, the context in which they were initiated, the principles they represented, and the national needs they met.

As professor Lawrence Davidson posits, the Clinton and their fellow corporate Democrats forgot the “why” of the New Deal.

Yet, just as the Clintons’ New Democrats of the 1990s viewed the New Deal Democrats as yesterday’s news, so do many of today’s Democrats view Hillary Clinton as out of touch with this decade’s problems.

As R.J. Eskow from Campaign for America’s Future comments, “‘Clintonism,’ the Wall Street-friendly economic ideology of a bygone era, has passed its sell-by date.”

Today’s America is different from the 1990s politically and economically, and it is also not 2008. In many ways the situation is comparable to the 1920s when another Gilded Age was roaring for the lucky few but not for the fragile middle class and surely not for the struggling working and lower classes. Such imbalanced socio-economic structures are inherently unstable as well as intensely unfair.

Looking out over today’s national landscape of struggling communities, desperate families and decaying infrastructure, Noam Chomsky has commented that America is “not a pretty sight.”

The challenge for Hillary Clinton is whether she can demonstrate that she has a vision big enough to detect ways for addressing the multitude of problems or whether she can only see the comforts of the well-heeled friends who surround her.

Americans deserve clear answers to hard questions, not campaign bromides and reminiscences of a time gone by. Clintonism, however well intentioned it may have been, turns out to have been an illusion cloaked by a brief period of boom that did not survive the inevitable bust.

A Downward Trend

As progressive media critic Jeff Cohen has written, “Despite gains on issues like gay rights and pot legalization, the trend since the 1980s has been

economic/environmental decline alongside the solidification of corporate power and economic inequality a long-term downward trend that has persisted through the Bill Clinton and Obama years, though at a slower rate than with the GOP in the White House.

“The only way to reverse this dangerous trend is to tell the truth about and challenge corporate Democrats. As much as I’d like to see a woman president (I have two daughters), a good place for that challenge to happen would be through a progressive candidate taking on Hillary Clinton in the 2016 Democratic primaries, if she runs. Without that battle and many others, the corporatization of the Democratic Party and our government will continue to threaten all our futures.”

As hard as it may be for some Democrats to accept, the reality is that Clintonism helped Reaganism break the country.

Andrew Levine of the Institute of Policy Studies says: “Bill Clinton was the best Reaganite president ever not the most visionary, not the one with the most competent subordinates, but the most effective. No one, certainly not Reagan himself, did more to privatize and deregulate, and to undo government programs that perform worthwhile functions. Reagan famously proposed ‘starving the monster.’ This is what Bill Clinton did.”

Now the Clintons expect to be further rewarded with the presidency of Hillary Clinton – “Eight years for Bill! Eight years for Hill!”

Should they be rewarded? Can Hillary Clinton be expected to fix what her husband’s presidency helped break? Would she? Would they?

As Slate’s Jamelle Bouie writes, “Hillary Clinton is a triangulating corporate Democrat who forged her political identity against a relentless, ideologically driven GOP and built her core support among the wealthy elites of the Democratic Party. The former makes her suspicious of (if not hostile to) the left on foreign and domestic policy, while the latter, coupled with her time as New York senator, makes her receptive to the failed ideas and expertise of Wall Street.”

Bouie adds, “The task for liberals, and the left more broadly, is to correct that blind spot in the party and, in the process, force [Hillary] Clinton to see that the 1990s are over, and the public is more than primed for a big swing.”

Hillary Clinton is a woman of accomplishment and one has to respect her remarkable political journey, her notable skills, her toughness, and the rich experience upon which she can draw. But if Hillary wants to return to where her husband “left off,” the nation is in for even bigger trouble than we have now. She will offer progressives and Americans with common sense no choice but to try

and stop her.

Perhaps Hillary Clinton can find the imagination, intellectual integrity, political courage and maturity for another option.

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

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In Case You Missed...

Some of our special stories in November focused on the Right’s successful political deceptions, America’s refusal to address its grim history, Israel’s drift toward greater repression, Ray McGovern’s mysterious arrest, and developments in Syria and Ukraine.

["Will the Right's Fake History Prevail"](#) by Robert Parry, Nov. 1, 2014

["Gary Webb and Media Manipulation"](#) by Beverly Bandler, Nov. 2, 2014

["Saudi Arabia's Oil Politics on Syria"](#) by Andres Cala, Nov. 3, 2014

["The Right's Tenth Amendment Myth"](#) by Robert Parry, Nov. 4, 2014

["The Silence of Israel on ISIS"](#) by Stephen J. Sniegoski, Nov. 5, 2014

["Israel's Annexation Plan for Palestine"](#) by John V. Whitbeck, Nov. 6, 2014

["Obama's Last Chance"](#) by Robert Parry, Nov. 6, 2014

["Christians Who Ignore the Real Jesus"](#) by Rev. Howard Bess, Nov. 8, 2014

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["CIA's Torturous Maneuvers on Torture"](#) by Ray McGovern, Nov. 21, 2014

["Why JFK Still Matters"](#) by Beverly Bandler, Nov. 22, 2014

["Filling the Blanks in Snowden's Citizenfour"](#) by James DiEugenio, Nov. 23, 2014

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Why JFK Still Matters

Since John F. Kennedy's death, there's been little presidential rhetoric that was not either bombastic and self-serving Reagan's "tear down this wall" or cringingly dishonest Nixon's "I am not a crook" or Clinton's "I did not have sexual relations with that woman." Which may be why JFK still inspires many, writes Beverly Bandler.

By Beverly Bandler

The special quality of John Fitzgerald Kennedy still defies those who would diminish him. He touched something in the American spirit. It lives on 51 years after his death.

And, in an era when many Democrats shy from a political fight and reject the "liberal" label as somehow too controversial, it is worth recalling the more courageous attitude of John F. Kennedy.



“What do our opponents mean when they apply to us the label ‘Liberal?’” Kennedy asked in accepting the New York Liberal Party’s presidential endorsement in 1960. “If by a ‘Liberal’ they mean someone who looks ahead and not behind, someone who welcomes new ideas without rigid reactions, someone who cares about the welfare of the people, their health, their housing, their schools, their jobs, their civil rights, and their civil liberties, someone who believes we can break through the stalemate and suspicions that grip us in our policies abroad, if that is what they mean by a ‘Liberal,’ then I’m proud to say I’m a ‘Liberal.’”

John Fitzgerald Kennedy also said the essential question everyone wants to know about a president is, “What’s he like?” quotes journalist John Dickerson.

JFK has been described as charming, witty, contradictory, elusive, inspiring. The respected American journalist Hugh Sidey (1927-2005) covered the White House and the American presidency for *Time* Magazine for close to half a century. Said Sidey: “The special quality of John Kennedy that still defies those who would diminish him is that he touched something in the American spirit and it lives on.”

That mix of personal magnetism and practical idealism made Kennedy the iconic leader who inspired millions although his presidency was cut short after less than three years by an assassin’s bullet.

Journalist, friend and neighbor Ben Bradlee (1921-2014) described Kennedy as “graceful, gay, funny, witty, teasing and teatable, forgiving, hungry, incapable of being corny, restless, interesting, interested, exuberant, blunt, profane, and loving. He was all of those and more.”

For those of us who came of age in the repressive 1950s, an era of not only McCarthyism but unabashed hypocrisy, double standards and deadening conformity, the urbane and charismatic Jack Kennedy represented a welcome new generation of youth, vigor, and optimism, one dedicated to public service and to country in the best sense of the word “patriotism.”

The aura of youth and vigor JFK conveyed is even more amazing given the extent of his medical issues, which were hidden from the public. According to one of his doctors, Dr. Jeffrey A. Kelman, “The most remarkable thing was the extent to which Kennedy was in pain every day of his presidency.”

John Kennedy suffered from severe health problems all his life. His childhood in the 1920s was a constant saga of childhood maladies, bronchitis, chicken pox, ear infections, German measles, measles, mumps, whooping cough. He came down with scarlet fever when he was three months shy of three years of age. “His

illnesses filled the family with anxiety about his survival," writes historian Robert Dallek.

At 13, Kennedy was afflicted with an undiagnosed and unsolved illness, suffering from dizziness and weakness, fatigue, and abdominal pains. At 15, he weighed only 117 pounds.

By the end of January 1936 at 19, he was more worried than ever about his health, though he continued to use humor to defend himself against thoughts of dying: "Took a peak [sic] at my chart yesterday and could see that they were mentally measuring me for a coffin. Eat drink & make Olive [his current girlfriend], as tomorrow or next week we attend my funeral. I think the Rockefeller Institute may take my case..."

Reading John F. Kennedy's medical history is reading a profile in constant suffering. Serious back problems added to Kennedy's health miseries from 1940. "For all the accuracy of the popular accounts praising Kennedy's valor on *PT-109*," writes Dallek, "the larger story of his endurance has not been told."

Except for his chronic back pain, which he could not hide, neither his commanding officer nor his crew were aware of the challenge of constant illness and pain. Despite his medical difficulties fatigue, nausea and vomiting "symptoms of the as yet undiagnosed Addison's disease," Kennedy "like a skeleton, thin and drawn" ran successfully for a House seat in 1946.

Kennedy was diagnosed with Addison's disease, a hormonal deficiency that affects the kidneys, while in London in 1947. The doctor predicted that "he hasn't got a year to live." According to Dallek: "On his way home to the United States, on the *Queen Mary*, Kennedy became so sick that upon arrival a priest was brought aboard to give him last rites before he was carried off the ship on a stretcher." By 1950 he was suffering almost constant lower-back aches and spasms.

Dallek continues the litany of John F. Kennedy's medical tribulations: "In 1952, during a successful campaign to replace Henry Cabot Lodge as senator from Massachusetts, Kennedy suffered headaches, upper respiratory infections, stomach aches, urinary-tract discomfort, and nearly unceasing back pain.

"He consulted an ear, nose, and throat specialist about his headaches; took anti-spasmodics and applied heat fifteen minutes a day to ease his stomach troubles; consulted urologists about his bladder and prostate discomfort; had DOCA pellets implanted and took daily oral doses of cortisone to control his Addison's disease; and struggled unsuccessfully to find relief from his back miseries.

"Dave Powers, one of Kennedy's principal aides, remembers that at the end of each day on the road during the [1952] campaign, Kennedy would climb into the back seat of the car, where 'he would lean back ... and close his eyes in pain.' At the hotel he would use crutches to get himself up stairs and then soak in a hot bath for an hour before going to bed. 'The pain,' Powers adds, 'often made him tense and irritable with his fellow travelers.' "

"From May of 1955 until October of 1957," notes the historian, "as he tried to get the 1956 vice-presidential nomination and then began organizing his presidential campaign, Kennedy was hospitalized nine times, for a total of forty-five days, including one nineteen-day stretch and two week-long stays. The record of these two and a half years reads like the ordeal of an old man, not one in his late thirties, in the prime of life."

Dallek quotes Powers's whisper to another Kennedy aide, Kenneth O'Donnell in February of 1960 when, during the presidential campaign, Kennedy stood for hours in the freezing cold shaking hands with workers arriving at a meatpacking plant in Wisconsin: "God, if I had his money, I'd be down there on the patio at Palm Beach."

The full extent of Kennedy's medical maladies was not known until 2002, the result of Dallek's being entrusted with the review of a collection of JFK's papers for the years 1955-1963. The historian writes that after reaching the White House, Kennedy believed it was more essential than ever to hide his afflictions.

That a rumored "legendary love life," "obsessive womanizing," the many tales of sexual "hijinks" or "sexual escapades" were attributed to him (consistently kept alive by the amazingly self-righteous, and perhaps envious, members of the "conservative" Noise Machine) makes JFK more remarkable in the 24 hours a day by which he, like the rest of us, was limited.

There have been many "second assassination" attempts by various right-wing hit men and seekers of quick bucks who seduce the gullible with the salacious and sensational (historian Garry Wills dispatches "investigative reporter" Seymour Hersh's book on "Camelot" in the recommended reading list below).

The sex stories may or may not be true, in part or in whole, but there seem to be far more rumors, gossip and allegations without evidence spun for political purposes than documented history. Wills points out that health, not sex, was the real Kennedy secret.

Dallek makes the assessment that: "There is no evidence that JFK's physical torments played any significant part in shaping the successes or shortcomings of

his public actions, either before or during his presidency. Prescribed medicines and the program of exercises begun in the fall of 1961, combined with his intelligence, knowledge of history, and determination to manage presidential challenges, allowed him to address potentially disastrous problems sensibly.”

The story that the Right does not want Americans to know: “a story of iron-willed fortitude in mastering the difficulties of chronic illness,” Dallek succinctly puts it.

The anti-Kennedy spinning continues more than 50 years since JFK’s assassination in a non-ending effort of the Right to diminish the Kennedy legend. What is important in his painfully aborted presidency: the serious challenges he faced and how he faced them, and indeed, the challenges were serious.

Not open to dispute is John Kennedy’s interest in history and in words. In response to the charge that Barack Obama’s rhetorical skills during his 2008 campaign were “just words,” Ted Sorensen, JFK’s speechwriter, right hand, alter ego and “intellectual blood bank”: told the *Boston Globe*: “‘Just words’ is how a president manages to operate how he engages the spirit of progress for the country.”

To know John Fitzgerald Kennedy is to know his words, and while Sorensen’s wordsmithing brilliance playing a key role in many, if not most of Kennedy’s speeches, as Sorensen himself said, all the words reflected Kennedy’s philosophy and policies.

To count which words originated with Sorensen or which came from Kennedy is not as important as the words used, the ideas conveyed, the messages made effective in his letters, speeches and news conferences. The words he spoke, the words he wrote were John Kennedy’s words.

One of his most memorable speeches, and some consider his “finest moment,” was JFK’s June 11, 1963 televised speech to the nation in which a U.S. president for the first time framed civil rights as a national “moral issue.”

Peniel E. Joseph, founding director of the Center for the Study of Race and Democracy and Tufts University history professor, believes the June 1963 televised speech “might have been the single most important day in civil rights history.”

The President responded to the attempt by Alabama’s Governor George Wallace to block the integration of the University of Alabama with the enrollment of two black students. Joseph reminds us that:

“It seems obvious today that civil rights should be spoken of in universal

terms, but at the time many white Americans still saw it as a regional, largely political question. And yet here was the leader of the country, asking 'every American, regardless of where he lives,' to 'stop and examine his conscience.' "

Just after midnight and a few hours after JFK's speech, Mississippi civil rights activist Medgar Evers, who had fought in World War II from 1943 to 1945 in the European Theater and the Battle of Normandy, was shot in his own driveway in Jackson. NAACP T-shirts that read "Jim Crow Must Go" were in his arms.

Initially refused entry at the local hospital because of his color, he died there 50 minutes later. Arrested for Evers' murder on June 21, 1963, white supremacist Byron De La Beckwith lived as a free man for much of the three decades following the 1963 killing because of failure to reach a verdict in two trials. In 1994, based on new evidence, De La Beckwith was convicted of Evers' murder. He died in prison in 2001.

Civil Rights was just one of the major crises that John F. Kennedy faced in the 1,036 days of his presidency. Others included:

The Berlin Crisis of 1961 (4 June – 9 November) is considered the last major politico-military European incident of the Cold War. The three-year crisis evolved from the 1958 Soviet Union ultimatum that the Western powers withdraw from Berlin. Complex negotiations were made more so by the fallout from Gary Powers's failed U-2 spy flight on May 1, 1960.

Kennedy met with Premier Nikita Khrushchev in Vienna June 4, 1961. The serious confrontation (JFK briefly considered a nuclear first-strike plan in case the crisis turned violent) culminated with the city's *de facto* partition with the East German erection of the Berlin Wall.

Shortly after the wall was erected, a standoff between U.S. and Soviet troops on either side of the checkpoint led to one of the tensest moments in the Cold War in Europe. The standoff ended peacefully when Kennedy made use of back channels to suggest that if Khrushchev removed his tanks, the U.S. army would reciprocate.

The 1962 Clash with Big Steel Kennedy was 44 and had been in office 16 months when he had a confrontation with Big Steel. The President invested a great deal of effort in brokering an unwritten, complex deal between the powerful U.S. steel industry and the United Steelworkers of America on March 31 that called for a modest wage increase as the government sought to hold down inflation.

Ten days later, however, Roger M. Blough, leader of U.S. Steel and Big Steel's principal spokesperson, flew to Washington and handed Kennedy a press release announcing the intention of the U.S. steel industry to unilaterally raise a

basket of steel prices by a scale averaging \$6 a ton. Kennedy was furious and was said to have felt he was doubled-crossed. He denounced the increase as "unjustifiable and irresponsible."

In his nationally televised press conference of April 11, 1962, Kennedy described Blough as one of: "a tiny handful of steel executives whose pursuit of private power and profit exceeds their sense of public responsibility." Seeing the action by Big Steel as not only inflationary but as an effort to challenge his authority and discredit him, Kennedy responded aggressively with a counter attack. Big Steel rolled back the proposed price hike.

The 1961 Bay of Pigs Invasion The Cuban Revolution (1953-1959), led by Fidel Castro, ousted President Fulgencio Batista, a corrupt and brutal anti-communist dictator who had turned Cuba into a police state. Batista had lucrative relationships with the American mafia and large multinational American corporations operating in Cuba, and was supported by the U.S. until 1959.

The U.S. was alarmed by the establishment of the first communist state in the Western Hemisphere. In March 1960, President Dwight Eisenhower approved the top-secret covert action against the Castro regime, known as JMARC, and allocated \$13.1 million to the CIA in March 1960 for the plan, which was supported by the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Kennedy inherited the plan already well developed, and in April 1961, about 1,400 Cuban exiles trained and funded by the CIA landed near the Bay of Pigs with the intent of overthrowing Castro. The invasion ended in disaster, partially because a first wave of U.S. bombers missed their targets and a second air strike was called off.

Reportedly, Kennedy began to suspect that the plan the CIA had promised that would be "both clandestine and successful" was "too large to be clandestine and too small to be successful." The conclusion of historians is that JFK was manipulated, deliberately led into a trap, that the CIA and Joint Chiefs knew that the invasion would falter and Kennedy would be forced to send in U.S. military.

The invasion did falter. The President rejected the proposal to send in U.S. military fearing an ignition of World War III. The invasion failed in less than a day – 114 were killed and over 1,100 were taken prisoner. Kennedy took responsibility for the disaster but was bitter at what he considered a deadly deception: "I want to splinter the CIA into a thousand pieces and scatter it to the winds."

While some believe that Kennedy wanted to oust Castro to prove that he and the

U.S. were serious about winning the Cold War, others believe the President found himself trapped in a CIA-Joint Chiefs of Staff subterfuge. According to the JFK Library, the Bay of Pigs fiasco was the basis for the initiation of Operation Mongoose, a plan to sabotage and destabilize the Cuban government and economy. It has been argued that the Bay of Pigs gave rise to the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Vietnam War, and quite possibly, the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

[]

Operation Northwoods After the 1961 failure of the Bay of Pigs, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (General Lyman Lemnitzer, Chairman) proposed Operation Northwoods to Kennedy in the spring of 1962. Northwoods was a plan to create domestic terrorist events that included shooting down Americans in the streets of Miami and Washington, D.C., stirring up American fear and hatred of Castro sufficient to build support for a war against Cuba. JFK rejected the plan.

The Cuban Missile Crisis The crisis lasted for 13 terrifying days. In October 1962, at the height of Cold War tensions, the United States and the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) came close to nuclear war. Earlier in September, U-2 spy planes discovered that the Soviet Union was building surface-to-air missile (SAM) launch sites and that Soviet ships were arriving in Cuba it was feared carrying weapons.

The SAMs were considered defensive in Cuba. The US considered the SAMs offensive. Oct. 15 photographs revealed that the Soviet Union was placing long-range missiles in Cuba. Politically, Kennedy was burdened with the Bay of Pigs disaster fallout and faced opposition from a combination of Republicans and conservative southern Democrats in Congress who were trying to make Cuba a midterms campaign issue.

Kennedy met with the Executive Committee of the National Security Council. Strategies considered: Do nothing. Negotiation. Invasion. Blockade. Bomb Missile Bases. Use Nuclear Weapons. The CIA and military favored a preemptive attack on the missile sites and tried to pressure Kennedy. The majority gradually began to favor a naval blockade, which he accepted. The President refused to be pushed into bombing Cuba even when a U-2 plane had been shot down over Cuba.

Remarkable and secret correspondence between Soviet premier Khrushchev and Kennedy in which they grew to trust one another (the letters were smuggled) resulted in a deal: the Soviets would remove their missiles in Cuba. The Americans would remove their nuclear bases in Turkey and would promise not to invade Cuba.

It is to the credit of both Kennedy and Khrushchev that the possibility of a nuclear holocaust that would have multiplied the explosive power of the

Hiroshima bomb thousands of times was avoided. The missile crisis is considered probably the most dangerous moment in human history. The peaceful resolution through diplomacy resulted in some constructive developments of the Cold War.

JFK and Vietnam War In its entirety, the Vietnam war lasted from 1946 to 1975. For America, one historian calls it "America's longest war," dating it from 1950, with the fateful U.S. pledge of \$15 million worth of military aid to France to help them fight in Vietnam, to 1975. The official American phase: 1964 (Gulf of Tonkin Incident) to 1973.

This long and costly armed conflict between the communist regime of North Vietnam and its southern allies, the Viet Cong, against the South Vietnamese government and the latter's principal ally, the United States, ended with the withdrawal of U.S. forces in 1973 and the unification of Vietnam under communist control two years later. More than 3 million people, including 58,000 Americans, were killed in the conflict. The monetary cost to the U.S. between 1965 and 1975 is estimated at \$111 billion, around \$800 billion in today's dollars.

Kennedy inherited the legacies of President Eisenhower, and the mindset of advisors who saw Vietnam as a continuation of World War II with the new enemy our old ally, the Soviet Union. This worldview was oblivious to the anti-colonialism forces born in the late 19th century that would flower in force following 1945.

History reveals that Kennedy was the focus of a power struggle within his own administration advisors, who included the CIA and the military that possessed a kind of "Dr. Strangelove" mentality and who consistently conspired to deceive him and push the U.S. into combat (Kennedy criticized Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles for contemplating the use of atomic weapons at Dien Bien Phu to bail out the French in 1954).

Kennedy visited Saigon in 1951 and met with diplomacy expert Edmund Gullion, the U.S. consul, who told him it would be a disaster to follow the French example in Vietnam. Diplomat Gullion is given credit for altering Kennedy's view on the Cold War and the muscular way it was being fought in the Third World. Kennedy subtly changed foreign policy to break the "Eisenhower/Dulles Cold War consensus" after he gained office, not only on Vietnam but in Laos, Indonesia and Congo.

According to one historian: "Ironically, while Eisenhower's supposedly cautious approach in foreign policy had frequently been contrasted with his successors' apparent aggressiveness, Kennedy spent much of his term resisting policies developed and approved under Eisenhower. In spite of some hawkish speeches to the contrary, perhaps for the purpose of showing that he was willing to escalate

American involvement if necessary to placate the politically aggressive hard right, his strategy for Vietnam was really a counter-insurgency strategy in which Americans would act as trainers and supporters of the South Vietnamese. He resisted a full-fledged combat role for the U.S., which in fact, was eventually pursued and that proved disastrous.

That President Kennedy made the decision on Oct. 2, 1963, to begin the withdrawal American forces from Vietnam is thoroughly documented. One historian admitted to his surprise: "What strikes anyone reading the veritable mountain of documents relating to Vietnam, is that the only high official in the Kennedy administration who consistently opposed the commitment of U.S. combat forces was the president."

Ben Bradlee once quoted Kennedy as saying: "The first advice I'm going to give my successor is to watch the generals and to avoid feeling that just because they were military men their opinions on military matters were worth a damn."

That attitude was reinforced by the growing casualty lists among the U.S. military advisers sent to Vietnam. On Nov. 21, 1963, a day before his death, Kennedy was quoted as saying, "I've just been given a list of the most recent casualties in Vietnam. We're losing too damned many people over there. It's time for us to get out. The Vietnamese aren't fighting for themselves. We're the ones who are doing the fighting. After I come back from Texas, that's going to change. There's no reason for us to lose another man over there. Vietnam is not worth another American life."

Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty On Aug. 5, 1963, after more than eight years of difficult negotiations, the United States, the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union signed the limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. It was the first arms control agreement of the Cold War.

The destruction of two Japanese cities, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, by U.S. atomic bombs in August 1945 that killed 70,000 people instantly and another 70,000 in five years, all mostly innocent noncombatants, marked the beginning of the nuclear age. In 1959, radioactive deposits were found in wheat and milk in the northern United States. Scientists and the public gradually became aware of radioactive fallout and began to raise their voices against nuclear testing.

Kennedy had supported a ban on nuclear weapons testing since 1956. He believed a ban would prevent other countries from obtaining nuclear weapons, and took a strong stand on the issue in the 1960 presidential campaign. Kennedy's strong stand that called for a shift in nuclear policy faced strong opposition.

In August, polling showed 80 percent of the public opposed the treaty. Working

with a Citizens Committee, the President succeeded in reversing the public's attitude in little over a month. Although it would be another quarter of a century before the global Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty would end below-ground nuclear tests, the partial test ban was an historic achievement.

In addition, there was the creation in late 1960 of the innovative Peace Corps of "talented men and women" who would dedicate themselves to the progress and peace of developing countries. The Alliance for Progress initiated in 1961 aimed at establishing economic cooperation between the U.S. and Latin America. Kennedy appointed his brother Robert Kennedy as Attorney General who would fight "the enemy within" – organized crime. Organized crime convictions increased from 14 in 1960 to 373 in 1963.

Kennedy told the nation on May 25, 1961, that "this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to earth." Eight years later two American astronauts walked on the Moon.

It is perplexing that so many continue to be cavalierly dismissive of Kennedy's extraordinary accomplishments, and when the latter are seen in the light of his own medical challenges, they become significantly more extraordinary.

Also amazing is how some journalists and historians seem incapable of understanding who Kennedy was and who are determined to re-write history. That he has been characterized as "always hawkish," a "functional representative" of American elites, and that he was not "the ardent liberal hero" his admirers have made of him since 1963 are attacks contradicted by both his words and his actions.

It is clear that Kennedy was consistently on the side of economic, political and social progress. He was a New Dealer who tried to "restart" FDR's New Deal, which had been "betrayed" by Truman and "put on ice" by Eisenhower, moving it further along the path of science and technology. He believed that "if we can't help the poor we can't save the rich."

JFK was not a "free marketer" nor a "Keynesian," but has been described as a "Hamiltonian *dirigiste*" who supported the nation-state's role in maximizing economic progress, producing full employment, rising standards of living, and scientific and technological innovation. He was a man of enormous political courage on the side of peace, his own "portrait in courage."

Kennedy was a threat to powerful forces, especially the military/industrial complex, Big Business, social conservatives, all determined to eliminate government, determined to kill liberalism, progressivism and the New Deal, the

“invisible hands” identified by historian Kim Phillips-Fein. “Invisible hands” of right-wing extremism were Kennedy’s and progressivism’s implacable enemies.

“To the Establishment, JFK was a *threat*. He *did* represent change, right up until the moment the shots rang out in Dealey Plaza,” wrote author and JFK assassination expert Gary L. Aguilar. Indeed, there is evidence that suggests his murder November 22, 1963, was connected to these reactionary “will to power” pro-war forces. The same reactionary forces continue to be Kennedy’s enemies today, the enemies of progress and peace, of democracy itself.

American journalist and political commentator E.J. Dionne Jr. quoted journalist and historian Theodore H. White:

“The dogmas of his antagonists made clear the quality of the protagonist. For John F. Kennedy, above all, was a man of reason, and the thrust he brought to American and world affairs was the thrust of reason. Not that he had a blueprint of the future, ever, in his mind. Rather his was the reason of the explorer, the man who probes to learn, the man who reaches and must go farther to find out. ... He was always learning; his curiosity was total; no one could come out of his presence without coming away combed of every shred of information or impression the President found interesting.”

Kennedy’s own words, spoken in his famous address at American University on June 10, 1963: “I have chosen this time and this place to discuss a topic on which ignorance too often bounds and the truth is too rarely perceived, yet it is the most important topic on earth: world peace. What kind of peace do I mean? What kind of peace do we seek? Not a *Pax Americana* enforced on the world by American weapons of war. Not the peace of the grave or the security of the slave.

“I am talking about genuine peace, the kind of peace that makes life on earth worth living, the kind that enables men and nations to grow and to hope and to build a better life for their children, not merely peace for Americans but peace for all men and women, not merely peace in our time but peace for all time.

“I am not referring to the absolute, infinite concept of peace and good will of which some fantasies and fanatics dream. Let us focus instead on a more practical, more attainable peace based not on a sudden revolution in human nature but on a gradual evolution in human institutions on a series of concrete actions and effective agreements which are in the interest of all concerned.

“There is no single, simple key to this peace no grand or magic formula to be adopted by one or two powers. Genuine peace must be the product of many nations, the sum of many acts. It must be dynamic, not static, changing to meet the challenge of each new generation. For peace is a process a way of solving

problems.

“Our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children’s future. And we are all mortal.”

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

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Gary Webb and Media Manipulation

Many Americans still count on the mainstream media to define reality for them, but too often the MSM spins false narratives that protect the powerful and diminish democracy, as happened in the long-running denial of cocaine trafficking by President Reagan's beloved Nicaraguan Contra rebels, writes Beverly Bandler.

By Beverly Bandler

The sad tale of the mainstream U.S. media's destruction of journalist Gary Webb for reviving the Contra-cocaine scandal in the 1990s a story recounted in the movie "Kill the Messenger" is important not only because of Webb's tragic demise but because the case goes to the central question of whether the American people are getting information and facts to which we are entitled in a free society, or whether we are being manipulated with half-truths, propaganda and straight-out lies.

What is ironic about the recent patronizing anti-Webb commentary by the *Washington Post's* Jeff Leen claiming that "an extraordinary claim requires extraordinary proof" is that the *Post* was a prime salesman for the Iraq War in 2002 and 2003. And just what "proof" did the *Post* require for the "extraordinary claim" about Iraq hiding stockpiles of WMD, the chief selling point to the American people? Apparently nothing more than "jingoism," the beating of war drums and empty assurances from the Bush administration's neocons.

As journalist Michael Massing pointed out in February 2004 after the U.S. invasion force failed to find the promised stockpiles "'Iraq's Arsenal Was Only on Paper,' declared a recent headline in *The Washington Post*."

But Leen's commentary in response to "Kill the Messenger" was just the latest example of the mainstream press covering its own tracks for its failure to pursue the Contra-cocaine scandal and for its complicity in destroying Gary Webb.

It's now clear that the CIA has long been trying to fend off the reality of the Contra-cocaine scandal, often with the help of what a newly released CIA report described as its "productive relations with journalists."

Americans need to know about such "dark alliances," the title that Webb gave his original series at the *San Jose Mercury News* and later his book. This posting is about two such "dark alliances": 1) The Contra-cocaine scandal that surfaced in 1985 when then Associated Press colleagues Robert Parry and Brian Barger first broke the news. 2) The concerted effort by U.S. major news media, specifically,

the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times* and *Washington Post* to not only disparage the scandal but also discredit investigative reporter Gary Webb who, in 1996, revived the story by explaining the Contra cocaine's impact on U.S. cities in the 1980s.

'Just Say No'

Webb's revelations, of course, flew in the face of the conventional wisdom that President Ronald Reagan was a stern enemy of drugs and a fierce threat to drug traffickers. On Oct. 27, 1986, Reagan budgeted \$1.7 billion for the drug war and federalized Rockefeller law-style mandatory-minimum sentences. The message was: "Just say no."

It also turned out that the CIA's "productive relations with journalists" proved so strong that it didn't even seem to matter when official government investigations confirmed key facts about the Contra-cocaine scandal.

For instance, Sen. John Kerry chaired a 2 ½-year investigation of the Senate Subcommittee on Terrorism, Narcotics, and International Operations that reported in 1989: "It is clear that individuals who provided support for the Contras were involved in drug trafficking ... and elements of the Contras themselves knowingly received financial and material assistance from drug traffickers."

Commenting on Kerry's investigation and the major U.S. media's response, journalism professor Jeff Cohen wrote: "Contra drug dealing was tolerated in the U.S. frenzy to overthrow Nicaragua's leftwing Sandinista government. Kerry's work was ignored or attacked in big media – *Newsweek* labeled him a 'randy conspiracy buff.' "

With Kerry and his investigation dismissed as irrelevant by the big newspapers, the scandal remained largely suppressed for the next seven years until Webb revived it in 1996.

Webb (1955-2004) was an investigative journalist whose awards included a Pulitzer in 1990, as part of a team at the *San Jose Mercury News*, and at least four other major prizes for his solo work. Webb tried to reveal the impact that some of the cocaine that came through the Nicaraguan Contra pipeline had on American cities, saying:

"It's not a situation where the government or the CIA sat down and said okay, let's invent crack and sell it in black neighborhoods and let's decimate black America. It was a situation where we need money for a covert operation. The quickest way to raise it is to sell cocaine and you guys go sell it somewhere. We don't want to know anything about it. And you had this bad luck of them doing it right around the time people were figuring out how to make crack."

A Sad But True Tale

“This, sadly, is a true story,” Webb wrote in his 1999 book, *Dark Alliance*. It is a story now told in the Hollywood film, “Kill the Messenger,” based on the book of the same name by Nick Schou and Webb’s *Dark Alliance*.

The story begins with Webb’s 1996 series “Dark Alliance” in California’s *San Jose Mercury News*. Webb investigated and told how for a better part of a decade, in a “wildly successful conspiracy,” a San Francisco Bay area drug ring sold tons of cocaine to Los Angeles street gangs and funneled millions of dollars in drug profits from those sales to the CIA-backed Nicaraguan Contras.

For his investigation, Webb drew from newly declassified documents, newly released undercover DEA audio and videotapes, federal court testimony, and interviews, and he demonstrated how the federal government knowingly allowed massive amounts of drugs and money to change hands at the expense of U.S. communities.

The “Dark Alliance” *Mercury News* series “might have vanished without a trace had the paper not chosen this story to create a splash for its website, complete with graphics and links to original source documents,” wrote Dan Simon, editor of Webb’s book and publisher of Seven Stories Press.

“It became, arguably, the first big Internet news story, with as many as 1.3 million hits on a single day. Talk radio picked it up off the Internet, and citizens’ groups and media watchdogs soon followed. The CIA launched its own internal investigation. Gary’s star had never shone more brightly

“The mainstream print media was ominously silent until October and November 1996,” Simon continued, “when *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times* all finally picked up the story. But instead of launching their own investigations into whether the CIA had shielded drug traffickers, these papers went after Gary’s reporting, although they ‘could not find a single significant factual error,’ as Gary’s then-editor at *The Mercury News*, Jerry Ceppos, would write in an internal memo.

“But after that, the series was described frequently as ‘discredited.’ Soon the story and Gary himself were spoiled goods. Gary’s editor switched sides and penned an apologia distancing the paper from the series. Gary was forced out of his job, even though the body of evidence supporting Gary’s account was actually growing. Two years later, the CIA’s internal investigation would prove to be a vindication of Gary’s work.”

African-American Outrage

There was also an important social and political dimension to Webb's revelations. "The investigative series sparked protests in African-American and congressional probes," noted *Democracy Now!* "It also provoked a fierce reaction from the media establishment, which denounced the series. The *Los Angeles Times* alone assigned 17 reporters to probe Webb's report and his personal life.

"Recently declassified CIA files show the agency used a 'a ground base of already productive relations with journalists [at other newspapers]' to counter what it called 'a genuine public relations crisis.'

"Following the controversy, the *San Jose Mercury News* demoted Webb. He then resigned and pushed his investigation even further in his book, *Dark Alliance: The CIA, the Contras, and the Crack Cocaine Explosion*.

"The CIA's inspector general later corroborated Webb's key findings, but, by then, his career was wrecked. The newspapers that denounced Webb largely ignored the CIA's own report, it was released in 1998 amid the scandal over President Bill Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky."

"The second CIA report not only vindicates me," wrote Gary Webb to a fellow journalist in July 24, 1998, "but all the other reporters and activists who have been trying to bring this to the public's attention for the last 13 years. It also proves that, once again, the CIA lied to the American public and was assisted in this effort by our national news media, which denigrated anyone who challenged the official denials."

Rep. Maxine Waters, D-California, an outspoken member of the Congressional Black Caucus, recalled that "The night that I read [Webb's] 'Dark Alliance' series, I was so alarmed, that I literally sat straight up in bed, poring over every word. I reflected on the many meetings I attended throughout South Central Los Angeles during the 1980s, when I constantly asked, 'Where are all the drugs coming from?' I asked myself that night whether it was possible for such a vast amount of drugs to be smuggled into any district under the noses of the community leaders, police, sheriff's department, FBI, DEA and other law enforcement agencies

"The time I spent investigating the allegations of the 'Dark Alliance' series led me to the undeniable conclusion that the CIA, DEA, DIA, and FBI knew about drug trafficking in South Central Los Angeles. They were either part of the trafficking or turned a blind eye to it, an effort to fund the Contra war and that the drug money was used by both sides

"It may take time, but I am convinced that history is going to record that Gary Webb wrote the truth. The establishment refused to give Gary Webb the credit

that he deserved. They teamed up in an effort to destroy the story, and very nearly succeeded. We will not let this story end until the naysayers and opponents are forced to apologize for their reckless and irresponsible attacks on Gary Webb.”

A Disgraceful Episode

Charles P. Pierce, a political writer for Esquire.com, said: “Of all the disgraceful episodes regarding the press and the Reagan administration, the discrediting of Gary Webb was probably the worst, given the fact that so much of the elite press was complicit in what was done to him.”

But Webb’s brave reporting had a lasting historical impact because it finally forced the Central Intelligence Agency to conduct a serious investigation of the Contra-cocaine problem and what the CIA knew about the scandal and what actions the agency took or didn’t take.

“[CIA Inspector General Frederick] Hitz completed his investigation in mid-1998 and the second volume of his two-volume investigation was published on Oct. 8, 1998. In the report, Hitz identified more than 50 Contras and Contra-related entities implicated in the drug trade. He also detailed how the Reagan administration had protected these drug operations and frustrated federal investigations throughout the 1980s,” reported journalist Robert Parry.

Andrew Hehir of Salon.com wrote: “Here’s the important thing to say about Webb’s big story: In general terms, and in most of its specifics, it was true. Virtually no one would deny that today; congressional commissions, internal CIA investigations and scholarly articles by historians have reached similar conclusions, shrouded in more lawyerly or diplomatic language.

“You can say that the CIA was apparently complicit in drug-dealing but not directly involved; you can say that the agency ‘turned a blind eye’ to evidence that smuggling revenue was being used to fund the Contras; you can say that ‘the CIA knew or should have known that some of its allies were accused of being in the drug business,’ in the exceedingly careful phrasing of *New York Times* media reporter David Carr.

“If the tone of Webb’s reporting was sometimes inflammatory, what he said happened pretty much happened. Webb never stated or implied that the CIA had deliberately imported crack cocaine into African-American neighborhoods; that construction or interpretation came later, from other people.”

Filmmaker Marc Levin noted at HuffingtonPost, “The idea that the CIA works with drug traffickers and other criminals and sometimes facilitates their operations and protects them as assets in return for their help in defeating our enemies

(i.e. Communists during the Cold War and now Islamic fundamentalists) is not 'an extraordinary claim.' It's a fact."

See the Movie

I believe each one of us can do something of value: we can go see the film, "Kill the Messenger," encourage others to do so, read and share the references in the "recommended reading" list below among others and come to our own conclusions.

This issue is not only about a movie and what it reveals, but it is about what *Alternet's* Don Hazen states has become a basic tenet of American politics: "that corporate power rules the roost. Nothing significant that will become law in America if corporate power, profits, global competitive advantage, military might, national security and privatization are in any significant way threatened."

DemocracyNow's Amy Goodman added: "That's really what will save us, is when we really know what's going on, not filtered through the lens or the microphone of the corporation."

In 2004, rejected by his profession, essentially unemployable, impoverished, divorced, alone, and facing eviction, the 49-year-old Webb prepared for his own cremation and sent suicide notes to family members. He was found dead at his Sacramento County, California home with two gunshot wounds to his head, an apparent suicide.

"Now when I reread the opening sentence of the 'Dark Alliance' series," writes book editor Dan Simon, "I realize Gary had found the big story, the one about the betrayal of a people by its own government. A monumental sadness remains."

Simon added, "The alternative media, to its credit, honored Gary. But the community of his peers in corporate journalism never again embraced him. He could never quite get over their betrayal. When you are an investigative reporter armed with the truth, the gun often fires backwards."

America is not what we think it is.

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

VIDEOS

"Kill the Messenger" Resurrects Gary Webb, Journalist Maligned for Exposing CIA

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Washington Post ombudsman, criticized Pincus and other reporters working for the newspaper: 'A principal responsibility of the press is to protect the people from government excesses. The Washington Post (among others) showed more energy for protecting the CIA from someone else's journalistic excesses.' "When Gary Webb committed suicide, French journalist, Paul Moreira, made a television documentary for France's Canal Plus. He interviewed Pincus and asked him why in October, 1998, he had not reported on the CIA's inspector general report admitting the agency worked with drug dealers throughout the 1980s. Pincus was unable to explain why he and other mainstream journalists completely ignored this report that helped to support Webb's case against the CIA."

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In Case You Missed...

Some of our special stories from March focused on the crisis in Ukraine, U.S. hypocrisy over international law, and what the neocons hope to accomplish from more regime change.

["Ukraine: One Regime Change to Many"](#) by Ray McGovern, March 1, 2014

["What Neocons Want from Ukraine Crisis"](#) by Robert Parry, March 2, 2014

["America's Staggering Hypocrisy"](#) by Robert Parry, March 4, 2014

["Putin or Kerry: Who's Delusional"](#) by Robert Parry, March 5, 2014

["The 'We-Hate-Putin' Group Think"](#) by Robert Parry, March 7, 2014

["Crimea's Case for Leaving Ukraine"](#) by Robert Parry, March 9, 2014

["The Flaw in 'Cornering' Russia"](#) by Melvin A. Goodman, March 10, 2014

["The West's War on Democracy"](#) by Annie Machon, March 11, 2014

["How Reagan Enforced US Hypocrisy"](#) by Robert Parry, March 11, 2014

["How Looking Forward Tripped Up Obama"](#) by Robert Parry, March 12, 2014

["Neocons Have Weathered the Storm"](#) by Robert Parry, March 14, 2014

["Can Obama Speak Strongly for Peace?"](#) by Robert Parry, March 15, 2014

["Corporate Interests Behind Ukraine Putsch"](#) by JP Sottile, March 16, 2014

["Mainstream US Media Is Lost in Ukraine"](#) by Robert Parry, March 16, 2014

["Letting Egypt Abuse Code Pink Leader"](#) by Lawrence Davidson, March 17, 2014

["Europe's Not-So-Shiny Recovery"](#) by Andres Cala, March 17, 2014

["Neocons' Ukraine-Syria-Iran Gambit"](#) by Robert Parry, March 19, 2014

["WPost's Anti-Putin 'Group Think'"](#) by Robert Parry, March 20, 2014

["Robert Strauss's Watergate Secret"](#) by Robert Parry, March 20, 2014

["Crimea and Punishment"](#) by Lorraine Barlett, March 21, 2014

["Obama Ensnared in Bush's Abuses"](#) by Coleen Rowley, March 24, 2014

["Why Europe Shies from Ukraine Showdown"](#) by Andres Cala, March 26, 2014

["GOP Looks to Take the Senate"](#) by Beverly Bandler, March 26, 2014

["The Danger of False Narrative"](#) by Robert Parry, March 27, 2014

["Finding a Way to Execute"](#) by Richard L. Fricker, March 28, 2014

["Ukraine's Inconvenient Neo-Nazis"](#) by Robert Parry, March 30, 2014

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GOP Looks to Take the Senate

Leading political prognosticators see the Republicans winning total control of the U.S. Congress this fall, meaning that President Obama's political agenda would be effectively finished. But will this bleak prospect finally force Democrats to fight back, wonders Beverly Bandler.

By Beverly Bandler

The Democrats are facing a tough political map in their fight to keep control of the U.S. Senate in 2014. Most of the states that will be casting ballots for the Senate in 2014 are Republican leaning; seven of the 21 Democratic-held seats are in states carried by Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney in 2012, while just one of the 15 contested Republican seats is in a state won by President Barack Obama.

Also, with the exception of three Senate races to replace senators who died or resigned, the seats in play this year were last contested in 2008, "an extraordinarily strong year for Democrats," notes the respected political prognosticator Nate Silver.

In July 2013, Silver forecast that the race for Senate control was a toss-up, but his most recent forecast on March 23 stated, "We think the Republicans are now slight favorites to win at least six seats and capture the chamber."

The Democrats' position has deteriorated somewhat since last summer, with President Obama's approval ratings down to 42 or 43 percent from an average of about 45 percent before, Silver said. Furthermore, as compared with 2010 or 2012, it has been suggested that the GOP has done a better job of recruiting credible candidates.

Silver said Democrat-held seats likely to be picked up by Republicans are in West Virginia, South Dakota, Montana and Arkansas, with Republicans then having to win just two toss-up races in Alaska, North Carolina or Michigan, or pull off a modest upset in a state like New Hampshire. They'll also have to avoid losses in Georgia and Kentucky, he said.

Democrats have challenged Silver's prediction. Guy Cecil, the executive director of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, issued a rebuttal on Monday, saying: "Silver was wrong in 2012" when he also projected a likely Republican Senate takeover.

"In fact, in August of 2012 Silver forecast a 61 percent likelihood that Republicans would pick up enough seats to claim the majority," Cecil said.

“Three months later, Democrats went on to win 55 seats.”

But Silver is not alone in seeing the GOP advantage. “Senate Republicans seem to have a strong chance at gaining the six seats they need for a majority in the chamber,” according to political professor John J. Pitney Jr., “but their task will be tougher if they drop any of the seats that they already have.”

Late last year, political analyst Charlie Cook said “Democrats need to win 3 of the 7 most competitive Senate races to hold the chamber,” while “Republicans would need to win 5 of these 7 seats including unseating 3 Democrats to win a 51 seat majority on the Senate. Six of these seven states were won by Romney in 2012 (AK, AR, LA, NC, GA, KY), and one was won by Obama (MI).”

But control of the Senate would likely be in play again in 2016, a presidential election year, Cook and other observers believe.

The Senate “will be very closely divided after the 2014 election and could swing to the other side in 2014 and again in 2016.” Cook concluded this March. “It’s hard to see how the GOP doesn’t score a net gain of at least four seats, shaving the Democratic majority to 51 seats. At the other extreme, it would not be impossible for Republicans to score a net gain of seven or eight seats, giving the GOP a 52-48 majority, or even one of 53-47.”

Cook believes, “The odds are high after this election that the majority party will have 53 seats or less, but it is important to remember that in 2016, the shoe will be on the other foot in terms of seat exposure. This year, Democrats have 21 seats up, compared with 15 for Republicans; in 2016, the GOP will have 24 seats up, while Democrats will only have 10. It’s not implausible that Republicans could pick up a majority in 2014 only to lose it again in 2016, with the Senate teetering on the edge for the foreseeable future.”

The view of Kyle Kondik of *Sabato’s Crystal Ball* is that 16 races are potentially competitive at the moment. “Of those races, 14 are currently held by Democrats, and just two are held by Republicans,” Kondik said. “Nearly all the competitive seats this cycle are in places where Democrats are playing defense.”

The chief Republican worry is that some of the GOP primaries will produce Tea Party nominees who could be weak general election candidates, as has happened in the past two election cycles. These GOP primaries have been identified as key to watch: Georgia, Iowa, Colorado, Kentucky, Mississippi, Texas, Tennessee and South Carolina.

But it appears safe to say even months before the midterm elections that for Americans the days a half century ago when political scientist Clinton Rossiter could boast that America’s party system reflected genius and that U.S. political

parties were “creatures of compromise, coalitions of interest in which principle is muted and often even silenced” are long gone.

Congressional scholars Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein offered a worrisome assessment in 2012: “One of these parties has taken on the role of insurgent outlier; the Republicans have become ideologically extreme, scornful of compromise, and ardently opposed to the established social and economic policy regime.”

Journalist Robert Parry, the editor of *ConsortiumNews*, has suggested that: “We’ve allowed the madness to dominate for three decades. Now, it may be impossible to govern responsibly with such a huge apparatus behind the madness.”

Perhaps the only way to reverse the current trends is for Democrats to get out of their defensive crouch and stop being so averse to confrontation. Yet, even if they go on the offensive and marshal the evidence to support their positions, the odds may be against them, given the vast sums of money available to Republicans and the Right.

Political observer Bill Moyers calls the current struggle against extremist authoritarians masquerading as conservatives “the fight of our lives.” But informed and decent American voters still have an opportunity to make a difference a vote is a voice.

The hard reality is that we are in a fight to save our representative democracy and we must face battle after battle, with 2014 midterms the next one looming.

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

In Case You Missed...

Some of our special stories in February focused on the good and the bad of past U.S. presidents – and on the resurgence of the neocons as they seek new wars in the Middle East and provoked a U.S.-Russia confrontation over Ukraine.

[“Neocons Seek New Ultimatum on Syria”](#) by Robert Parry, Feb. 2, 2014.

[“Hugo Chavez’s Legacy at Risk”](#) by Andres Cala, Feb. 4, 2014.

"Fear Itself: Democrats Duck FDR's Lessons" by Beverly Bandler, Feb. 4, 2014.

"Big Media Again Pumps for Mideast Wars" by Robert Parry, Feb. 4, 2014.

"When the CIA's Empire Struck Back" by Lisa Pease, Feb. 6, 2014.

"Shameful History of Jeff Davis Highway" by Robert Parry, Feb. 7, 2014.

"Israeli Rabbis Warn Kerry of God's Wrath" by Robert Parry, Feb. 7, 2014.

"Is Hillary Clinton a Neocon-Lite?" by Robert Parry, Feb. 10, 2014.

"Hectoring Obama Over Syria" by Paul R. Pillar, Feb. 13, 2014.

"Tea Party and Thomas Jefferson" by Robert Parry, Feb. 13, 2014.

"Obama Deflects Neocon Pressure on Syria" by Robert Parry, Feb. 14, 2014.

"Syria at the Edge of 'Shock Doctrine'" by Rob Prince, Feb. 15, 2014.

"Does Nixon's 'Treason' Boost LBJ's Legacy" by Robert Parry, Feb. 16, 2014.

"Cuba Inches Toward New Future" by Andres Cala, Feb. 17, 2014.

"The Best and Worst US Presidents" by Robert Parry, Feb. 18, 2014.

"How GOP Sabotaged a Union Vote" by Stephen Crockett, Feb. 20, 2014.

"Hillary Clinton's Unlearned Lessons" by Robert Parry, Feb. 20, 2014.

"Oklahoma as Vanguard of the Right" by Richard L. Fricker, Feb. 21, 2014.

"Seeing Evil in the New Russia" by Danny Schechter, Feb. 23, 2014.

"Neocons and the Ukraine Coup" by Robert Parry, Feb. 23, 2014.

"Six Decades of H-Bomb Cover-ups" by Beverly Deepe Kever, Feb. 24, 2014.

"A New Neocon Push for Syrian War" by Coleen Rowley, Feb. 24, 2014.

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"A Shadow US Foreign Policy" by Robert Parry, Feb. 27, 2014.

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["Forgetting Why Al-Qaeda Spread"](#) by Robert Parry, Jan. 5, 2014.

["NSA Insider Reveal What Went Wrong,"](#) Jan. 7, 2014.

["The War on Poverty at 50"](#) by Alice O'Connor, Jan. 7, 2014.

["Colombia's Battered Rebels Seek Peace"](#) by Andres Cala, Jan. 7, 2014.

["Robert Gates Double-Crosses Obama"](#) by Robert Parry, Jan. 8, 2014.

["Robert Gates's Narcissistic 'Duty'"](#) by Melvin A. Goodman, Jan. 9, 2014.

["US Foreign Policy if Obama Had Lost"](#) by Adil E. Shamoo, Jan. 9, 2014.

["Robert Gates's Blame-shifting Memoir"](#) by Paul R. Pillar, Jan. 10, 2014.

["How GOP Gerrymanders Away Democracy"](#) by Beverly Bandler, Jan. 10, 2014.

["The Weapons of the Poor"](#) by Rev. Howard Bess, Jan. 11, 2014.

["NSA's Preference for Metadata"](#) by Kirk Wiebe, Jan. 13, 2014.

["Buying a Seat at Surveillance State's Table"](#) by Norman Solomon, Jan. 13, 2014.

["Condemning a Boycott of Israeli Abuses"](#) by Lawrence Davidson, Jan. 13, 2014.

["If Gov. Christie Had NSA's Metadata"](#) by Robert Parry, Jan. 14, 2014.

["When Protesting Bush's Wars Was a Crime"](#) by Nat Parry, Jan. 17, 2014.

["How NSA Invites Totalitarianism"](#) by Arjen Kamphuis, Jan. 17, 2014.

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["J Street's Dead End"](#) by Abba A. Solomon and Norman Solomon, Jan. 22, 2014.

"Neocons Take Aim at Syrian Peace Talks" by Robert Parry, Jan. 23, 2014.

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"The Crumbling Lockerbie Case" by John Ashton, Jan. 26, 2014.

"No Tears for the Real Robert Gates" by Ray McGovern, Jan. 27, 2014.

"Red State Blues: Trouble in Oklahoma" by Richard L. Fricker, Jan. 28, 2014.

"FDR's Legacy of Can-Do Government" by Beverly Bandler, Jan. 30, 2014.

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