

# NYT's 'Really Weird' Russiagate Story

Exclusive: The Russiagate narrative has taken a turn toward the surreal with a report in the *New York Times* alleging that U.S. spies paid a “shadowy Russian” \$100,000 for dirt on the president, explains Daniel Lazare.

By Daniel Lazare

A Russian national with ties to cybercrime and Russian intelligence snookered U.S. spooks out of \$100,000 by promising them fresh dirt on Donald Trump.

That's the takeaway from a strange front-page article that ran in last weekend's *New York Times*, “U.S. Spies, Seeking to Retrieve Cyberweapons, Paid Russian Peddling Trump Secrets.” That's not all the article said, but the rest was so convoluted and implausible that it can be safely discounted.



Even Matthew Rosenberg, the *Times* reporter who wrote the story, described it as “a really weird one” in an interview with Slate. More than merely weird, however, the piece offers valuable insight into the parallel universe that is Russiagate, one in which logic is absent, neo-McCarthyism is rampant, and evidence means whatever the corporate press wants it to mean.

The article says that the U.S. spies were seeking cyberweapons stolen from the National Security Agency by a group calling itself the Shadow Brokers in 2016, but that a “shadowy Russian” kept pushing instead evidence buttressing the “golden showers” episode in the Christopher Steele dossier. The spooks were not interested because they didn't want to soil their hands with “the stuff of tabloid gossip pages” and because they feared that the Russian was trying to drive a wedge between the intelligence agencies and the White House. As the article puts it:

“The United States intelligence officials ... were wary of being entangled in a Russian operation to create discord inside the American government. They were also fearful of political fallout in Washington if they were seen to be buying scurrilous information on the president.”

But Rosenberg's account raises a number of questions. One is why the spooks were “desperately” trying to retrieve stolen NSA hacking tools in the first place when, as cyber-security experts have warned, stolen malware is essentially

irretrievable for the simple reason that it can be copied endlessly in an instant. Once a secret is out, the damage is done – there's no getting it back.

Another concerns why U.S. agents would continue taking “multiple deliveries” of anti-Trump data beginning last October that “they made clear that they did not want.” Was the Russian unusually insistent? Or were the Americans less adamant than Rosenberg would have us believe?

Indeed, the article says that “at least four Russians with espionage and underworld connections have appeared in Central and Eastern Europe, offering to sell *kompromat* [i.e. compromising material] to American political operatives, private investigators and spies that would corroborate the [Steele] dossier.”

So it seems that demand for kompromat is as strong as it was in October 2016 when former FBI Director James Comey used the same unsubstantiated gossip to obtain a secret warrant to eavesdrop on an ex-Trump campaign aide named Carter Page.

Since the story about buying back malware doesn't make sense, could it be that kompromat is what the Americans were seeking all along? This is not the sort of thing that Trump would like to hear. The article says that Russia is out to spread material that will “cast doubt on the federal and congressional investigations into the Russian meddling” even though kompromat buttressing the Steele dossier would do the opposite. It says that the negotiations “ended this year with American spies chasing the Russian out of Western Europe, warning him not to return if he valued his freedom,” and that the anti-Trump material remains in the hands of an American go-between “who has secured it in Europe.”

Which raises more questions still. Can U.S. spies really lock up anyone they wish? And where, precisely, did the American stash the *kompromat* – and to what end? Rosenberg indicates that he also interviewed the purported Russian agent. But nowhere do we get his side of the story concerning what the Americans were really after.

The results are incoherent even by *Times* standards. One reason may be that Rosenberg dashed the story off at breakneck speed after long-time intelligence writer and former *Times*-man James Risen published [a similar piece](#) a few hours earlier in *The Intercept*. But another is that the Russiagate narrative that the *Times* is pushing is itself incoherent and that Rosenberg is guilty of nothing more than toeing the company line.

He let the cat out of the bag in the *Slate* interview, which ran shortly after the story appeared on the *Times* website:

“Spy games happen all the time, but you need a confluence of circumstances [for

this]: You need an election with Russian interference. You then need a president to win and deny interference ever happened and say there is no collusion. You need the Russians to say, 'Oh, wow, let's take advantage of this. This really worked out. Let's make it worse and start selling this stuff off.'"

Rosenberg continued: "What the Russians were committed to – what we really know – is that they were committed to messing with American democracy. ... If their goal here is messing with American democracy, then getting some of this stuff out on Donald Trump, if it's real, that's worse, weakens him further, intensifies the political mess we are in. So there are reasons to do that. Plus, if you can get this into American consciousness through American spy agencies or law enforcement, you will have set off the White House versus its own spies in a way that if you are a Russian spy, that's great. Disorder and dissension in the ranks of your enemies."

This is a reporter's mind on drugs, specifically the drug of boundless anti-Russian paranoia. But no matter how often the *Times* assures its readers that the Russians are out to get us, that they're messing with our democracy, that they sow "disorder and dissension" wherever they can because that's what Russians do – actual evidence, the stuff that sober minds require before making a judgment, remains remarkably thin.

Take Russian manipulation of social media, the subject of last November's bizarre Moscow-style "show trial" in which attorneys for Facebook, Twitter, and Google were hauled before a congressional panel to confess their sins in allowing the Kremlin to use their platforms to subvert the state. But the subversive Facebook ads that the alleged Kremlin-linked St. Petersburg "troll factory" known as the Internet Research Agency purchased added up to just \$46,000 worth by Election Day, a drop in the bucket compared to the \$81 million spent by the Trump and Clinton campaigns.

Politically, moreover, the ads were all over the map, some leaning right, some leaning left, and in one case, a page featuring photos of cute puppies, leaning in no apparent direction at all. Last September, *The Atlantic* tried to figure out what the Internet Research Agency was up to. But after some 1,200 words of huffing and puffing, the best the magazine could come up with was that the ad campaign "was too small to seriously influence the election, but too big to be an afterthought."

In other words, no one knows. In a rare moment of journalistic sanity, *Washington Post* reporter Philip Bump observed that the ad buys were "often modest, heavily dissociated from the campaign itself and minute in the context of election social media efforts."

As for Twitter, Bump notes that the 2,700-plus accounts believed to be Russian-linked generated just 202,000 tweets between January 2011 and August 2017, a no-less-negligible sum next to the one billion election-related tweets sent out during the fourteen months prior to Election Day.

Even if all this shows the secret hand of the Kremlin at work, the effort pales in comparison to that of Israel (AIPAC, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, is among the most powerful lobbies in Washington); the Arab gulf states (which finance virtually every major think tank in DC); Ukraine (which has proved surprisingly effective in swinging official opinion), and so forth.

It barely merits a four-graph story on page A16. Then there is the alleged Kremlin hack of the Democratic National Committee, the ur-crime that triggered the anti-Russian storm in the first place.

The January 2017 formal assessment by Director of National Intelligence James Clapper contained nothing by way of evidence that a break-in had occurred or that Russian intelligence was responsible. (WikiLeaks, the recipient of the purloined emails, continues to insist that it was an inside leak.) Even the *Times* conceded that the report was “unlikely to convince skeptics.”

Since the FBI never inspected the DNC’s computers first-hand, the only evidence comes from an Irvine, California, cyber-security firm known as CrowdStrike whose chief technical officer, Dmitri Alperovitch, a well-known Putin-phobe, is a fellow at the Atlantic Council, a Washington think tank that is also vehemently anti-Russian as well as a close Hillary Clinton ally.

Thus, Putin-basher Clinton hired Putin-basher Alperovitch to investigate an alleged electronic heist, and to absolutely no one’s surprise, his company concluded that guilty party was ... Vladimir Putin. Amazing! Since then, a small army of internet critics has chipped away at CrowdStrike for praising the hackers as among the best in the business yet declaring in the same breath that they gave themselves away by uploading a document in the name of “Felix Edmundovich,” i.e. Felix E. Dzerzhinsky, founder of the Soviet secret police.

As noted cyber-security expert Jeffrey Carr observed with regard to Russia’s two main intelligence agencies: “Raise your hand if you think that a GRU or FSB officer would add Iron Felix’s name to the metadata of a stolen document before he released it to the world while pretending to be a Romanian hacker. Someone clearly had a wicked sense of humor.”

None of this proves that Russian intelligence didn’t hack the DNC, merely that a lot more evidence is needed before accepting the word of professional CIA disinformation experts. But the *Times* lives in an evidence-free world in which

Russians are guilty regardless of what they do. Whether they're pro-Trump or anti, out to discredit the Mueller investigation or bolster it, the only thing that matters is that they're intent on sowing discord – and that U.S. intelligence agencies are blameless upholders of the rule of law.

The reduction ad absurdum occurred a few days later when CIA Director Mike Pompeo, FBI Director Christopher Wray, Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats, and other heavyweights testified before Congress that Russian interference in the 2018 midterm elections is already underway.

“Throughout the entire [intelligence] community,” declared Coats, “we have not seen any evidence of any significant change from last year” – which, loosely translated, means that evidence that Russia is on the warpath is as sparse today as it was previously. Since “President Trump continues to refuse to even acknowledge the malevolent Russian role,” a *Times* editorial concluded, the possibility that “he is giving Russia a green light to tamper with the 2018 elections ... can no longer be dismissed out of hand.”

All that was needed was for Editorial Page Editor James Bennet to hold up a list of 205 known Communists toiling away in the State Department. Trump is a reactionary, a con man, a bully, and much else besides. But with remarkable accuracy, liberals are obsessively zeroing in on the one thing he's not: a Russian agent.

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## No Time for Complacency over Korea War Threat

Exclusive: Although the North Korea crisis has largely faded from the headlines, the chances of war breaking out are still unacceptably high – requiring greater attention from both the peace movement and Congress, notes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

Like the proverbial calm before the storm, war scares on the Korean peninsula have temporarily gone quiet while its two governments make nice over the 2018 Winter Olympics. But when the games end, count on the Trump administration reviving its ultimatum to North Korea: Stop all nuclear and missile testing and begin to denuclearize, or face a devastating, preemptive attack.

Given the sheer number of leaks from the Trump White House, we would almost certainly know by now if the President were simply bluffing about his intent to

pursue a “military option”—otherwise known as war—to stop North Korea’s nuclear program. Instead, we’ve heard nothing but confirmation from his senior advisers, within and without the administration, about Trump’s commitment to use deadly force if Pyongyang does not yield.

Millions may die if the White House launches such a war. Given the huge stakes, Americans should be protesting in the streets, and members of Congress should be threatening to shut down the government, until the administration commits to peaceful resolution of the Korea issue. Instead, like anesthetized animals awaiting slaughter, most of us seem to be passively accepting our fate.

The U.S. military is certainly preparing to carry out a presidential order for war. Besides undertaking a host of war games with South Korea over the past year, it has moved long-range B-52, B-1, and “stealth” B-2 bombers to Guam, from which they can strike North Korea with nuclear or conventional bombs. The Defense Department has also been testing the world’s most powerful non-nuclear bomb, the 30,000-pound GBU-57, which has the capacity to plow through hundreds of feet of earth to destroy “hardened” weapons silos.

As George W. Bush did in the run-up to his invasion of Iraq, Trump has also been building a public case for bringing “fire and fury” to North Korea, most recently in his State of the Union Address.

Echoing Bush’s rhetoric about not waiting for a “mushroom cloud,” Trump warned that “North Korea’s reckless pursuit of nuclear missiles could very soon threaten our homeland.” Without mentioning the power of America’s vast nuclear deterrent to keep us safe, he again echoed Bush’s rhetoric about Saddam’s regime: “We need only look at the depraved character of the North Korean regime to understand the nature of the nuclear threat it could pose to America and to our allies.”

Staying on message to prevent the Olympics from diminishing Americans’ fear and loathing of Pyongyang, Trump is sending Vice President Pence to the games with the father of Otto Warmbier, an American college student who died after being imprisoned in North Korea.

### **The Cost of ‘Preventive’ War**

Another recent signal of the White House’s intent was its decision to rescind its planned nomination of Victor Cha, a Georgetown University scholar who served in the George W. Bush administration, to be ambassador to South Korea. That position remains embarrassingly vacant more than a year into the Trump presidency.

Despite Cha’s hardline stance against North Korea’s nuclear program, he raised

questions within the administration about the wisdom of a preventive military strike. Even a small attack, meant to give North Korea a “bloody nose” without escalating to all-out war, “would likely kill tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of Americans,” he wrote in an op-ed column published after his nomination was dropped.

Cha added that even a large-scale attack “would only delay North Korea’s missile-building and nuclear programs, which are buried in deep, unknown places impenetrable to bunker-busting bombs. A strike also would not stem the threat of proliferation but rather exacerbate it, [creating] a vengeful effort intended to equip other bad actors against us.”

Meanwhile, a third of a million Americans resident in South Korea and Japan—not to mention millions of Koreans and Japanese—would be vulnerable to North Korean counterattack by artillery, missiles, and biochemical weapons, not to mention any remaining nukes.

“To be clear,” Cha wrote, “the president would be putting at risk an American population the size of a medium-size U.S. city—Pittsburgh, say, or Cincinnati.”

Cha’s casualty estimates aren’t seriously in question. Even Defense Secretary James Mattis said last summer that a war with North Korea would be “catastrophic.”

What’s more significant is the fact that, having spoken in confidence with all the relevant administration insiders, Cha evidently believes they remain committed to the option of preventive war. Trump has long vowed that he will never permit North Korea to develop nuclear missiles capable of reaching the United States—a feat that U.S. intelligence analysts say may be only months away.

The greatest immediate threat to U.S. national security, however, is not North Korean missiles per se, but the fact that the Trump White House faces so little push-back from outside the administration to its fast-approaching “military option.”

Indeed, the president’s golfing partner and foreign policy adviser Sen. Lindsey Graham, the South Carolina Republican, has been whispering in his ear for nearly a year about the pressing need to wipe out North Korea’s nuclear forces before they can reach the United States.

And just last week, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger told a hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee that the temptation to launch a preemptive attack on North Korea is “strong and the argument rational.”

No wonder, then, the respected International Crisis Group warned recently that “The threat of nightmarish war on the Korean peninsula is higher than at any time in recent history.” A national poll released in mid-January found 71 percent Americans surveyed were concerned about war breaking out with North Korea.

### **Where is the Peace Movement—and Congress?**

Yet the public has been strangely quiescent. Besides a handful of demonstrations around the country, the peace movement, such as it is, has been largely AWOL on the issue. Current campaigns of antiwar groups focus on “divestment from the war machine” and protests against the U.S. base in Guantanamo, but few have Korea as their focus.

The grassroots organization Peace Action is, however, helping to organize individual and group support for an “Olympic Truce” to promote a nonviolent settlement of issues on the Korean peninsula.

“The peace movement somewhat mirrors the public in concern regarding tensions with North Korea, but not being clear on what to do about it,” Peace Action’s President Kevin Martin told me. “That is beginning to change with our campaign around the Olympic Truce, which 128 organizations, including many Korean-American groups, have now endorsed.”

A few members of Congress have spoken out strongly about the need to “avoid a costly and catastrophic war on the Korean Peninsula,” as Virginia Sen. Tim Kaine put it recently. Two bills introduced in Congress, H.R. 4837 and S. 2016, call for “no unconstitutional strike against North Korea” without explicit authorization from Congress. But they have little Republican support and no immediate chance of passage.

In a letter sent to President Trump on Monday, 18 Democratic senators said they are “deeply concerned about the potential consequences of a preemptive military strike on North Korea and the risks of miscalculation and retaliation.”

But even they seem to accept the administration’s framing of the issue. Warning that “it would be extremely irresponsible to instigate military conflict *prior to exhausting every diplomatic option*” (my emphasis), they ignore the success the United States has had deterring every other hostile nuclear power, including Stalin’s USSR and Mao’s China. CIA intelligence analysts have concluded that Kim Jong-un’s regime is both rational and deterrable, meaning that there is no cause for preemptive war, whatever the outcome of diplomacy.

Time is fast running out for Americans and their representatives in Congress to wake up and put handcuffs on the Trump administration before it triggers mass



murder in North Asia, and possibly much closer to home. It will take an Olympic-sized campaign, but the stakes could not be higher.

Jonathan Marshall is author or co-author of five books on international relations and history. His articles on Korea include [“America Isn’t on the Brink of Nuclear War–It Just Looks That Way,”](#) [“What’s Wrong with Talking to North Korea?”](#) [“Trump’s North Korea Delusions,”](#) [“The New Trump: War President,”](#) [“Hurtling Toward Fire and Fury,”](#) [“Risk to US from War on North Korea,”](#) [“North Korea Fears ‘Regime Change’ Strike,”](#) [“The Negotiation Option With North Korea,”](#) and [“Behind the North Korean Nuke Crisis.”](#)

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## Did Al Qaeda Dupe Trump on Syrian Attack?

**From the Archive:** As the U.S. [blames Damascus and Moscow](#) for recent chlorine gas attacks in Syria, we re-publish a report by Robert Parry providing useful context regarding a chemical attack last April.

By Robert Parry ([first published Nov. 9, 2017](#))

A new United Nations-sponsored [report](#) on the April 4 sarin incident in an Al Qaeda-controlled town in Syria blames Bashar al-Assad’s government for the atrocity, but the report contains evidence deep inside its “Annex II” that would prove Assad’s innocence.

If you read that far, you would find that more than 100 victims of sarin exposure were taken to several area hospitals *before* the alleged Syrian warplane could have struck the town of Khan Sheikhoun.

Still, the Joint Investigative Mechanism [JIM], a joint project of the U.N. and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons [OPCW], brushed aside this startling evidence and delivered the Assad guilty verdict that the United States and its allies wanted.

The JIM consigned the evidence of a staged atrocity, in which Al Qaeda operatives would have used sarin to kill innocent civilians and pin the blame on Assad, to a spot 14 pages into the report’s Annex II. The sensitivity of this evidence of a staged “attack” is heightened by the fact that President Trump rushed to judgment and ordered a “retaliatory” strike with 59 Tomahawk missiles on a Syrian airbase on the night of April 6-7. That U.S. attack reportedly killed several soldiers at the base and nine civilians, including four children,

in nearby neighborhoods.

So, if it becomes clear that Al Qaeda tricked President Trump not only would he be responsible for violating international law and killing innocent people, but he and virtually the entire Western political establishment along with the major news media would look like Al Qaeda's "useful idiots."

Currently, the West and its mainstream media are lambasting the Russians for not accepting the JIM's "assessment," which blames Assad for the sarin attack. Russia is also taking flak for questioning continuation of the JIM's mandate. There has been virtually no mainstream skepticism about the JIM's report and almost no mention in the mainstream of the hospital-timing discrepancy.

### **Timing Troubles**

To establish when the supposed sarin attack occurred on April 4, the JIM report relied on witnesses in the Al Qaeda-controlled town and a curious video showing three plumes of smoke but no airplanes. Based on the video's metadata, the JIM said the scene was recorded between 0642 and 0652 hours. The JIM thus puts the timing of the sarin release at between 0630 and 0700 hours.

But the first admissions of victims to area hospitals began as early as 0600 hours, the JIM found, meaning that these victims could not have been poisoned by the alleged aerial bombing (even if the airstrike really did occur).

According to the report's Annex II, "The admission times of the records range between 0600 and 1600 hours." And these early cases – arriving *before* the alleged airstrike – were not isolated ones.

"Analysis of the ... medical records revealed that in 57 cases, patients were admitted in five hospitals before the incident in Khan Shaykhun," Annex II said.

Plus, this timing discrepancy was not limited to a few hospitals in and around Khan Sheikhoun, but was recorded as well at hospitals that were scattered across the area and included one hospital that would have taken an hour or so to reach.

Annex II stated: "In 10 such cases, patients appear to have been admitted to a hospital 125 km away from Khan Shaykhun at 0700 hours while another 42 patients appear to have been admitted to a hospital 30 km away at 0700 hours."

In other words, more than 100 patients would appear to have been exposed to sarin *before* the alleged Syrian warplane could have dropped the alleged bomb and the victims could be evacuated, a finding that alone would have destroyed the JIM's case against the Syrian government.

But the JIM seemed more interested in burying this evidence of Al Qaeda staging

the incident – and killing some expendable civilians – than in following up this timing problem.

“The [JIM] did not investigate these discrepancies and cannot determine whether they are linked to any possible staging scenario, or to poor record-keeping in chaotic conditions,” the report said. But the proffered excuse about poor record-keeping would have to apply to multiple hospitals over a wide area all falsely recording the arrival time of more than 100 patients.

The video of the plumes of smoke also has come under skepticism from Theodore Postol, a weapons expert at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who noted that none of the three plumes matched up with damage to buildings (as viewed from satellite images) that would have resulted from aerial bombs of that power.

Postol’s finding suggests that the smoke could have been another part of a staging event rather than debris kicked up by aerial bombs.

The JIM also could find no conclusive evidence that a Syrian warplane was over Khan Sheikhouh at the time of the video although the report claims that a plane could have come within about 5 kilometers of the town.

### **A History of Deception**

Perhaps even more significantly, the JIM report ignored the context of the April 4 case and the past history of Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front staging chemical weapons attacks with the goal of foisting blame on the Syrian government and tricking the U.S. military into an intervention on the side of Nusra and its Islamic-militant allies.

On April 4, there was a strong motive for Al Qaeda and its regional allies to mount a staged event. Just days earlier, President Trump’s administration had shocked the Syrian rebels and their backers by declaring “regime change” was no longer the U.S. goal in Syria.

So, Al Qaeda and its regional enablers were frantic to reverse Trump’s decision, which was accomplished by his emotional reaction to videos on cable news showing children and other civilians suffering and dying in Khan Sheikhouh.

On the night of April 6-7, before any thorough investigation could be conducted, Trump ordered 59 Tomahawk missiles fired at the Syrian air base that supposedly had launched the sarin attack.

At the time, I was told by an intelligence source that at least some CIA analysts believed that the sarin incident indeed had been staged with sarin possibly flown in by drone from a Saudi-Israeli special operations base in

Jordan.

This source said the on-the-ground staging for the incident had been hasty because of the surprise announcement that the Trump administration was no longer seeking regime change in Damascus. The haste led to some sloppiness in tying down all the necessary details to pin the atrocity on Assad, the source said.

But the few slip-ups, such as the apparent failure to coordinate the timing of the hospital admissions to *after* the purported airstrike, didn't deter the JIM investigators from backing the West's desire to blame Assad and also create another attack line against the Russians.

Similarly, other U.N.-connected investigators downplayed earlier evidence that Al Qaeda's Nusra was staging chemical weapons incidents after President Obama laid down his "red line" on chemical weapons. The militants apparently hoped that the U.S. military would take out the Syrian military and pave the way for an Al Qaeda victory.

For instance, U.N. investigators learned from a number of townspeople of Al-Tamanah about how the rebels and allied "activists" staged a chlorine gas attack on the night of April 29-30, 2014, and then sold the false story to a credulous Western media and, initially, to a U.N. investigative team.

"Seven witnesses stated that frequent alerts [about an imminent chlorine weapons attack by the government] had been issued, but in fact no incidents with chemicals took place," the U.N. report said. "While people sought safety after the warnings, their homes were looted and rumours spread that the events were being staged. ... [T]hey [these witnesses] had come forward to contest the wide-spread false media reports."

### **Dubious Evidence**

Other people, who did allege that there had been a government chemical attack on Al-Tamanah, provided suspect evidence, including data from questionable sources, according to the report.

The report said, "Three witnesses, who did not give any description of the incident on 29-30 April 2014, provided material of unknown source. One witness had second-hand knowledge of two of the five incidents in Al-Tamanah, but did not remember the exact dates. Later that witness provided a USB-stick with information of unknown origin, which was saved in separate folders according to the dates of all the five incidents mentioned by the FFM [the U.N.'s Fact-Finding Mission].

"Another witness provided the dates of all five incidents reading it from a

piece of paper, but did not provide any testimony on the incident on 29-30 April 2014. The latter also provided a video titled 'site where second barrel containing toxic chlorine gas was dropped tamanaa 30 April 14''

Some other witnesses alleging a Syrian government attack offered curious claims about detecting the chlorine-infused "barrel bombs" based on how the device sounded in its descent.

The U.N. report said, "The eyewitness, who stated to have been on the roof, said to have heard a helicopter and the 'very loud' sound of a falling barrel. Some interviewees had referred to a distinct whistling sound of barrels that contain chlorine as they fall. The witness statement could not be corroborated with any further information."

However, the claim itself is absurd since it is inconceivable that anyone could detect a chlorine canister inside a "barrel bomb" by "a distinct whistling sound."

The larger point, however, is that the jihadist rebels in Al-Tamanah and their propaganda teams, including relief workers and activists, appear to have organized a coordinated effort at deception complete with a fake video supplied to U.N. investigators and Western media outlets.

For instance, the Telegraph in London reported that "Videos allegedly taken in Al-Tamanah ... purport to show the impact sites of two chemical bombs. Activists said that one person had been killed and another 70 injured."

The Telegraph quoted supposed weapons expert Eliot Higgins, the founder of Bellingcat and a senior fellow at the fiercely anti-Russian Atlantic Council, as endorsing the Al-Tamanah claims.

"Witnesses have consistently reported the use of helicopters to drop the chemical barrel bombs used," said Higgins. "As it stands, around a dozen chemical barrel bomb attacks have been alleged in that region in the last three weeks."

The Al-Tamanah debunking in the U.N. report received no mainstream media attention when the U.N. findings were issued in September 2016 because the U.N. report relied on rebel information to blame two other alleged chlorine attacks on the government and that got all the coverage. But the case should have raised red flags given the extent of the apparent deception.

If the seven townspeople were telling the truth, that would mean that the rebels and their allies issued fake attack warnings, produced propaganda videos to fool the West, and prepped "witnesses" with "evidence" to deceive investigators. Yet,

no alarms went off about other rebel claims.

## **The Ghouta Incident**

A more famous attack – with sarin gas on the Damascus suburb of Ghouta on Aug. 21, 2013, killing hundreds – was also eagerly blamed on the Assad regime, as The New York Times, Human Rights Watch, Higgins’s Bellingcat and many other Western outlets jumped to that conclusion despite the unlikely circumstances. Assad had just welcomed U.N. investigators to Damascus to examine chemical attacks that he was blaming on the rebels.

Assad also was facing the “red line” threat from President Obama warning him of possible U.S. military intervention if the Syrian government deployed chemical weapons. Why Assad and his military would choose such a moment to launch a deadly sarin attack outside Damascus, killing mostly civilians, made little sense.

But this became another rush to judgment in the West that brought the Obama administration to the verge of launching a devastating air attack on the Syrian military that might have helped Al Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate and/or the Islamic State win the war.

Eventually, however, the case blaming Assad for the 2013 sarin attack collapsed.

An analysis by genuine weapons experts – such as Theodore Postol, an MIT professor of science, technology and national security policy, and Richard M. Lloyd, an analyst at the military contractor Tesla Laboratories – found that the missile that delivered the sarin had a very short range placing its likely firing position in rebel territory.

Later, reporting by journalist Seymour Hersh implicated Turkish intelligence working with jihadist rebels as the likely source of the sarin.

We also learned in 2016 that a message from the U.S. intelligence community had warned Obama how weak the evidence against Assad was. There was no “slam-dunk” proof, said Director of National Intelligence James Clapper. And Obama cited his rejection of the Washington militaristic “playbook” to bomb Syria as one of his proudest moments as President.

With this background, there should have been extreme skepticism when jihadists and their allies made new claims about the Syrian government engaging in chemical weapons attacks. But there wasn’t.

The broader context for these biased investigations is that U.N. and OPCW investigators have been under intense pressure to confirm accusations against

Syria and other targeted states.

Right now, the West is blaming Russia for the collapsing consensus behind U.N. investigations, but the problem really comes from Washington's longtime strategy of coercing U.N. organizations into becoming propaganda arms for U.S. geopolitical strategies.

The U.N.'s relative independence in its investigative efforts was decisively broken early this century when President George W. Bush's administration purged U.N. agencies that were not onboard with U.S. hegemony, especially on interventions in the Middle East.

Through manipulation of funding and selection of key staff members, the Bush administration engineered the takeover or at least the neutralizing of one U.N.-affiliated organization after another.

For instance, in 2002, Bush's Deputy Under-Secretary of State John Bolton spearheaded the takeover of the OPCW as Bush planned to cite chemical weapons as a principal excuse for invading Iraq.

OPCW Director General Jose Mauricio Bustani was viewed as an obstacle because he was pressing Iraq to accept OPCW's conventions for eliminating chemical weapons, which could have undermined Bush's WMD rationale for war.

Though Bustani was just reelected to a new term, the Brazilian diplomat was forced out, to be followed in that job by more pliable bureaucrats, including the current Director General Ahmet Uzumcu of Turkey, who not only comes from a NATO country but served as Turkey's ambassador to NATO and to Israel. [For details, see Consortiumnews.com's "[U.N. Enablers of 'Aggressive War.'](#)"]

Since those days of the Iraq invasion, the game hasn't changed. U.S. and other Western officials expect the U.N. and related agencies to accept or at least not object to Washington's geopolitical interventions.

The only difference now is that Russia, one of the five veto-wielding members of the Security Council, is saying enough is enough – and Russia's opposition to these biased inquiries is emerging as one more dangerous hot spot in the New Cold War.

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

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# U.S. Media's Objectivity Questioned Abroad

Exclusive: The mainstream media's nonstop Russiagate coverage and its embrace of #TheResistance has undermined its reputation for objectivity in Europe, reports Andrew Spannaus.

By Andrew Spannaus

Pick up a major newspaper or watch the television news in a European country, and it's more likely than not you'll quickly find a reference to the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, or CNN in reporting about the United States. In the era of Donald Trump, this mainstream media "Triad" continues to set the agenda for many foreign news organizations following events in the U.S., providing them with a viewpoint that is promptly transmitted to their readers and viewers as the authoritative interpretation of what's going on in America.



A funny thing is starting to happen though: well-known public figures and journalists are beginning to point out the obvious, that these important news outlets no longer look objective. Rather, it seems they see themselves as part of the "resistance" against the President.

In just the past month, this writer has heard radio hosts, political analysts and even diplomatic personnel in Italy and Switzerland couch their public remarks about Trump with the observation that the U.S. mainstream media can no longer be considered objective. This is a notable shift, because even among those who are decidedly anti-Trump, the Triad is increasingly seen as representing the voice of a certain "establishment," a grouping that does not speak for the majority of the American people.

Across Europe, many follow U.S. politics closely, due to a mix of cultural fascination and the fact that decisions in America continue to have a major impact around the world, of course. People look to the United States as an example and an indicator of economic and social trends, whether they approve of



them or not. And in terms of news, they look in particular to the newspapers “of record”, long considered to provide quality and influential reporting and opinions on both domestic and foreign affairs.

Some news organizations take this veneration for the Triad to extreme lengths. In Italy, where I live, the references to the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and CNN are constant, often presented as key interventions likely to shift the political situation in the U.S. A new revelation in one of those outlets regarding Russiagate, for example, might be considered a game changer, bringing us closer to impeachment.

The concentration on these publications has gotten to the point that it heavily limits the perception of what’s going on in the country. In the past, this distortion was harder to detect; getting direct news meant reading a few major newspapers – often delivered late in the day – without having many points of comparison. Yet now, in the era of the internet, an American abroad can follow whatever news and events he or she wants, without suffering from a limitation on direct sources or the filters of a foreign press organization.

This new situation led me to the following realization some years ago: many foreign news outlets get much of their news from the Triad, rather than from their own direct reporting. Often I could read the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* online, and already know what would be reported to Italians on the major evening news programs.

For journalists it is course essential to be aware of how the news is reported in the country they are covering; but if one does only that, information becomes limited by what certain outlets report, and also by their editorial line. There appear to be two different kinds of foreign correspondents covering the United States: those who spend their time in New York or Washington and dedicate most of their attention to establishment sources and events, and those who attempt to get a fuller sense of what’s going on outside of those venues as well.

By way of example, consider the difference between a correspondent from the major television networks whose contacts are mostly other journalists and opinion leaders in the principal power centers, and a correspondent who periodically takes trips to other areas of the country.

I saw a positive example recently when a journalist from RSI (Swiss Italian Radio and Television) spent several days in the former steel town of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania; the opinions he gathered from residents of that area gave a different view than the more common interviews of Fifth Avenue shoppers or financial analysts in New York. Everyone’s opinion counts, of course, but if you never get out of the bubble, you tend to miss what’s going on in the rest of

society.

This blindness was the dominating characteristic of the 2016 election campaign, when major media outlets around the world failed to recognize the deep currents that led to the strong support for Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders in the primaries, and ultimately carried the former to the White House. The same inability to grasp the depth of the revolt of the voters against the political and financial elites expressed by pro-establishment media outlets was almost automatically transferred abroad, due to the slavish imitation of the Triad by foreign news outlets.

The 2016 presidential election was a jolt to the system. Suddenly everyone was forced to confront the fact that almost all of the respected media and commentators had gotten it wrong, clearly failing to understand how so many could vote for a candidate considered dangerously unprepared and offensive.

Outside of the United States, people were forced to reassess whose news and opinions they could trust, leading to a period of more serious discussion of the economic and social dynamics in the United States and beyond. If half of the voters – combining the support for Gary Johnson, Jill Stein and others with that for Trump – were willing to give their vote to outsiders promising deep changes in the system, then clearly things must not be going as well as the media had been saying.

Never fear, the same media outlets and commentators quickly came up with a new narrative that papered over their previous mistakes: the Russians did it. Thus, in addition to the allegedly racist and ignorant voters outside of urban areas, the fault for Hillary Clinton's embarrassing loss was pinned on Vladimir Putin. A convenient way to forget the reasons why so many Americans rejected the political establishment.

So rather than a discussion of decades of favoring finance over the real economy, and how "free trade" policies have caused a race to the bottom, the debate focuses on the perils of protectionism, and how important it is to defend globalization. And instead of stigmatizing the disastrous policies of continuous war, we are treated to a steady stream of neocon narratives, including from the numerous representatives of the interventionist camp who have found their way into the Trump administration.

The most recent example of this phenomenon is the sudden return to essentially the same economic narrative heard before the elections. In recent weeks media outlets and experts in Europe have begun to once again sing the praises of the U.S. economy. The stock market is doing great, and unemployment is low, so boom times must be back.

The coverage seems eerily familiar to that during the end of the Obama administration, which of course many people didn't believe. It's easy to imagine how Americans who rejected such talk before will react if they don't see a tangible improvement in their lives in the coming months and years. A low official unemployment rate and modest wage growth is better than the alternative, but far from sufficient to deal with structural problems such as harsh inequality, unstable employment, the lack of social welfare protections and low purchasing power.

The White House is now complicit in this narrative, of course, as Trump wants to believe, and declare, that his policies are making things better. The mainstream media's obfuscation of the truth should be a lesson to the President, lest he find himself on the wrong end of the revolt before long.

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## How Trump and the GOP Exploit Israel

**Exclusive:** Donald Trump's Israel policies may have more to do with outmaneuvering Democrats than they do with any concern for Middle East peace, argues Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

Vice President Mike Pence's trip to Israel last week revived warnings by foreign policy experts over the Trump administration's controversial announcement that it will break with past policy and relocate the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem.

"It's still mysterious just how Mr. Trump believes he has advanced the cause of peace, or fortified America's standing in the world, with that decision," the *New York Times* editorialized. "Its costs in terms of American isolation, on the other hand, were evident throughout [Pence's] trip."

Henry Siegman, former executive director of the American Jewish Congress, earlier derided the "stunning level of ignorance" displayed by Trump's decision. The *Washington Post* called it a "big risk," predicting rightly that it would inflame opposition in the Arab world and give new ammunition to extremists in

the region. Senator Bernie Sanders tweeted that the president's move would "undermine the prospects for an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement and severely, perhaps irreparably, damage our ability to broker it."

All these and myriad similar comments were valid, but they missed the point. Trump doesn't care a whit about peace in the Middle East, or who he alienates abroad: He cares about winning votes at home. Equally important, he cares about splitting the Democratic Party off from its funding base. To that end, Trump and his crew have a pretty good idea what they're doing.

### **Defunding the Democrats**

For years now, GOP has executed a successful plan to undermine major financial and organizational pillars of the Democratic Party by demonizing once popular groups like plaintiff lawyers ("tort reform"), unions ("right to work"), public employees ("privatization"), and especially public school teachers ("school choice").

Exploiting the issue of Israel in much the same way, Republican strategists have aimed at neutralizing the Democratic Party's largest individual donors, who are overwhelmingly Jewish.

Many of those donors also have a long history of financial support for Israel, and of discouraging public debates in the United States over its policies. Raising doubts about the Democratic Party's commitment to Israel thus became a GOP ploy to dry up portions of that traditional funding base.

In 2003, just before the start of the Iraq war, House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, R-Tex., had exactly that strategy in mind when he denounced the Democratic Party to a group of 150 Orthodox Jewish leaders.

"DeLay has been the driving force in the Republican effort to capitalize on President Bush's strong support of Israel and his leadership in the war on terrorism to weaken Democratic support and financial backing from Jews," wrote political analysts Thomas Edsall and Alan Cooperman.

A GOP strategist told them, "There are only a few key pillars left holding up the Democratic coalition, especially financial pillars, and if we can fracture one of them, they [Democrats] are going to go into 2004 in big trouble."

Edsall and Cooperman added, "In presidential elections, Democratic candidates depend on Jewish supporters to supply as much as 60 percent of the money raised from private sources. Any significant reduction in the financial support will weaken Democratic candidates and the Democratic Party organizations."

## A Partisan Issue

As part of that strategy to defund the Democratic Party, Republicans have sought to turn Israel from a bipartisan issue—a bedrock principle of the traditional Israel Lobby, led by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC)—into a partisan one their party could exploit.

That became easier as Israel itself turned hard right politically under the leadership of the Likud Party, headed now by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. His unyielding crackdown on the Palestinians, vigorous campaign against President Obama's nuclear deal with Iran, and tacit support for Mitt Romney in 2012 thrilled conservatives, alienated liberal Democrats, and left strong supporters of Israel within the Democratic Party divided.

Further driving a wedge between Democrats and Republicans, Israel today resembles a Trumpian state more than a liberal democracy, as tribalism, authoritarianism, and religious zealotry increasingly define its politics. "Israeli's secular democrats are growing increasingly worried that Israel's future may resemble Saudi Arabia and Iran more than Europe," writes journalist Israel Rafalovich.

None of that bothers Christian conservatives in the United States, many of whom believe the gathering of Jews in Israel heralds the Second Coming of Christ. Borrowing from Trump's bag of divisive culture-war issues, Netanyahu told a large Christian Zionist audience last summer that "Israel has no better friend in America than you," calling them allies in a "struggle of free societies against the forces of militant Islam."

Netanyahu was right: 78% of white evangelicals support Israel, more than almost any other group. Given that they are also among Trump's strongest allies, it's no wonder Republicans today are far more likely (52%) to have a favorable opinion of Netanyahu than Democrats (18%).

As a result, the GOP's dream of capturing Israel as a partisan issue is coming true.

"The partisan divide in Middle East sympathies, for Israel or the Palestinians, is now wider than at any point since 1978," the Pew Research Center reported this week. "Currently, 79% of Republicans say they sympathize more with Israel than the Palestinians, compared with just 27% of Democrats."

The Republican Jewish Coalition, citing the survey, crowed, "Republican Support for Israel Soars as Democrat Support Wanes."

## The Embassy as a Political Wedge

Trump's decision to relocate the U.S. embassy drove this wedge even deeper. A strong majority of Christian evangelicals backed the move. Alluding to the Book of Revelations, televangelist Pat Robertson said "it's absolutely crucial in terms of biblical prophecy that [Israel] maintain control over [Jerusalem] ... It's going to be a major battle, it will be over Jerusalem."

The fact that the United Nations General Assembly voted overwhelmingly to condemn the administration's decision was a feature, not a bug. It gave UN Ambassador Nikki Haley raw meat to throw at Trump's base of aggrieved America Firsters, as she spoke hotly of "exercising our right as a sovereign nation" and threatened to cut funding to the world body.

Outbreaks of violence by Palestinians in reaction to the announcement were also selling points for Trump and Netanyahu, furthering their narrative that the United States and Israel are lonely defenders of order and Judeo-Christian civilization.

"Religious conflicts, like racial and ethnic ones, are critical to Trump's appeal," observed journalist and political scientist Peter Beinart. "He needs Mexican-Americans to rape and murder white girls. He needs African-American athletes to 'disrespect the flag.' And he needs Muslims to explode bombs and burn American flags. . . . If Trump has to invent these dangers, he will. In the case of Jerusalem, however, he can go further: He can help create them."

Above all, however, the decision furthered the GOP's long-range strategy of driving a wedge between the Democratic Party and its biggest traditional funders.

Even as most American Jews oppose an immediate move of the embassy, mainstream Jewish organizations like AIPAC, which disproportionately represent Jewish donors, generally greeted the decision (no doubt with some private reservations).

Hard-line pro-Israel political funders lauded the administration's break with past U.S. policy. President Trump reportedly acted at the urging of his biggest backer, the hawkish casino billionaire, Sheldon Adelson. According to reporter Eli Clifton, Adelson and his wife donated \$35 million to help elect Trump in 2016, in part because Trump promised to move the embassy. Adelson also forked over another \$5 million for Trump's inauguration.

As grassroots Democrats grow more skeptical of Israel's right-wing government, the question is whether major Democratic donors will tolerate a diversity of opinion toward Israel within the party, in keeping with progressive values.

For example, Hillary Clinton's single biggest financial backer was Adelson's

friend Haim Saban, a strongly pro-Israel billionaire. To keep him and other large donors on board, Clinton strongly attacked the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement and promised to meet with Netanyahu her first month in office. If the Democrats next time put up a candidate like Bernie Sanders, who is more critical of Israel's leadership, there's strong reason to believe fundlers like Saban would hold onto their wallets.

The specter of losing critical financial support will undoubtedly motivate more clashes between party insiders and progressive insurgents who decline to give unconditional support to Israel. The Democratic Party may try to sidestep such conflicts by focusing on economic, environmental, and other winning causes. But Trump and the GOP will surely keep stoking the Middle East as a hot domestic wedge issue as long as they can.

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## Treasury's 'Kremlin Report' Seen as Targeting Russian Economy

The Treasury Dept. has issued a list of some 200 Russians for sanctions, which could impact the whole Russian economy and further exacerbate U.S.-Russian tensions, Gilbert Doctorow explains.

By Gilbert Doctorow

January 29 had been seen as a kind of "D-Day" in Russia, with anticipation and apprehension building for weeks over what many Russians believed could mark a critical change for the worse in relations with the United States. Russian media pitched their coverage to the country's elites, who were under the Sword of Damocles of new U.S. sanctions that might be directed against them, but also to the general Russian public, who have watched with uneasiness, concerned over the effects of sanctions on the economy, on their livelihoods and living standards.



The document to be released on Jan. 29 was the Treasury Department's so-called "Kremlin Report," which identified 210 Russian officials and billionaires considered to be part of President Vladimir Putin's ruling elite. The report, which the Trump administration was required to file with Congress no later than the 29<sup>th</sup> under the terms of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, could open up these "oligarchs" to sanctions.

CAATSA was passed overwhelmingly by Congress and signed into law by President Trump on August 2, 2017, notwithstanding the Act directly contradicting his stated desire to normalize relations with Russia. His signature was effectively forced, in the recognition that his possible veto would be instantly overridden and further embitter his relations with Congress at a time when his administration had still no legislative achievements to its record.

With the anticipation of a breaking-news story of great importance to the nation, Russian media spared no expense to ensure their coverage of the Kremlin Report on the ground in the U.S. at the time of the release of reports relating to sanctions would be appropriate to the suspense at home. The top-rated Russian state news channel, Rossiya-1 sent its principal talk show presenter Yevgeni Popov to Washington to head up a panel of local experts that would get extensive broadcast time back home.

Among the American panelists chosen to speak about the Kremlin Report were the credible and well known commentators Paul Sanders of *The National Interest* and David Filipov, until recently the Moscow bureau chief of *The Washington Post*. Their live coverage began at mid-day Moscow time which turned out to be almost 20 hours before the Report about which they were expected to comment was actually released. No matter, talk shows often dwell on speculation and so the medium did not disappoint.

By contrast, American and European media generally reacted more slowly and with less interest to the release of the Kremlin Report, with most coverage appearing only after the fact. While part of the lag might be explained by the timing of the report's release just before midnight on the 29th – and the six-hour time difference between the U.S. and Europe – the differences in coverage may also be explained by the level of prioritization the various players in the media give to Russian affairs.

In any case, be it known that notwithstanding the midnight hour of release, the European newspapers *The Financial Times (UK)* and *Le Monde* were right there in their morning online editions with excellent news coverage of the reports that remained factual and did little or no editorializing. This set them apart from other mainstream print media on the Continent who had zero coverage even in the middle of the business day on the 30<sup>th</sup>. I think in particular of *The Guardian*



(UK), *Le Figaro* (France), *Die Zeit* or *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Germany).

Tuesday morning in the United States found no coverage of the Kremlin Report in mainstream print media including *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, despite the report's potential for aggravating U.S. tensions.

Typically on major developments relating to Russia that somehow take an unexpected turn, as was surely the case with the Kremlin Report, the editorial boards take their time, sniff the air to see which way the wind is blowing, and only then commit themselves to an editorial position that directs their journalistic reporting.

And so it was not before mid-afternoon that the online edition of *The New York Times* took a stand on the report. And it was an equivocal and arm's length stand, telling us that the Trump administration had issued a report that managed to offend both sides to the issue: the Russians and the American Congressmen, both sides objecting to the lists and how they were compiled.

U.S. electronic media were faster off the mark and gave much more extensive coverage to the issue. None entered the fray with greater zest for the scent of blood than CNN, the longstanding *bête noire* of the Trump administration. CNN reporter and guest experts rounded on the President for defying the will of Congress and not immediately ratcheting up the sanctions on Russia to punish them for their meddling in the 2016 presidential elections and to prevent continued meddling in the 2018 midterm elections as CIA director Pompeo had warned might happen just the day before.

Meanwhile, Bloomberg's online article on the sanctions was factual if brief, while their opinion writer specializing in Russian affairs, Leonid Bershidsky, smelled a rat in the way the lists of officials and in particular "oligarchs" had been compiled. As one-time chief editor of the Russian edition of *Forbes*, the rather embittered anti-Putin émigré Bershidsky used his space less for objective analysis and more for editorializing on how the lists really should have been drawn up and on how sanctions should have been imposed now.

Russian concerns over what exactly the Trump administration would issue had been fed by statements to the media from several advisers to the sanctions list project, all of whom have well established reputations as Russia-bashers. I make reference to the authors of an article entitled "How to Identify the Kremlin Ruling Elite and its Agents. Criteria for the US Administration's Kremlin Report" published by the Atlantic Council on November 13, 2017.

These authors are Anders Aslund, Daniel Fried, Andrei Illarianov and Andrei Piontkovsky. The idea they wished to see realized was an exposé of Putin and his

“cronies,” tracing their alleged illicit gains through corruption and abuse of power. Their view follows directly on the principles that guided the first American sanctions on Russia, the Magnitsky Act of 2012. In the days just before the 29<sup>th</sup>, Russian television carried a short video of several of the authors. One, Aslund, boasted that the coming sanctions would be “smart,” as in targeted against the malefactors running things in Russia while doing no harm to the general population.

For more than a week in advance of what they called “Judgment Day,” Russian media had featured warnings that the Kremlin Report could spell sharply stepped up sanctions. In Davos last week, Andrei Kostin, CEO of VTB Bank, one of the country’s largest state-owned financial institutions decried the expected new sanctions as all-out economic warfare which would get a very harsh response from the Kremlin.

Against the background of threats by American Neocons and Russian fears and warnings in response, US Ambassador in Moscow Jon Huntsman had, in the meanwhile, been issuing statements to the press insisting that the sanctions would not be a serious impediment to relations,, that he sought dialogue with Russia just as his counterpart, the Russian Ambassador in Washington, was doing, and that there remain prospects for cooperation in areas of common interest notwithstanding the disagreements making the news.

So we must ask yet again, which voice on Russia policy coming from Washington is authoritative? Who has the upper hand: Congress or the White House? And within the administration, the President or his cabinet, and in particular his Secretary of State, who has in recent months become an intellectual hostage to the same neocons who ran the Obama foreign policy and before that the foreign policy of George W. Bush?

The Kremlin Report mandated by U.S. law was released to the public by the Treasury at the same time as a longer secret redaction was delivered to Congress. The time of delivery and more importantly the content of the report suggest that the Trump administration was responding to the letter of a law that the President had opposed but could not veto given its fulsome support in the legislature.

Yet, the administration dragged its feet and produced at the very last moment a report that could have been compiled in a couple of hours if it so desired. And the public version of the report itself is so patently absurd in content as to bring ridicule on the Congress that ordered it.

To wit, as the few Russians who were amused by this cynical anti-Russian exercise commented, the authors of the Kremlin Report lists of 200-plus Russians

eligible for future sanctions just took the telephone directory of the Russian cabinet of ministers, presidential administration, and parastatal institutions and copied down the names of the top officers. The only high official omitted was Vladimir Putin himself.

As for the "oligarchs," they were arbitrarily defined as persons with net worth of more than \$1 billion, as shown in the Forbes ranking of the 100 richest persons in Russia.

If there was any exposé, any dirt on Russia's government and business elite in the secret version of the report, one can be sure that would have been leaked by now, given past behavior of the US authorities in anti-Russian operations. Nothing at all has surfaced so far.

This, of course, did not prevent the Russian authorities from hyperventilating over the sanctions report when asked to comment by local and international media today. For his part, while attending a campaign gathering, Vladimir Putin explained his views on the Kremlin Report in taking a question from the floor as to why he alone in the government was not on the sanctions list.

Putin said that the report named individuals who hold sway over whole sectors of the economy and strata of the population, which means, in a sense, that the sanctions lists embraced the entire Russian nation of 146 million people.

He noted that things could have been worse, and that he had been prepared, if necessary, *to cut all ties with the United States down to zero*. Nonetheless, he deemed the release of the Kremlin Report to be a hostile act that would contribute only to further deterioration of relations with the United States. For the moment, he said, there would be no Russian counter-measures, with his government adopting a wait-and-see posture.

Indeed, while the Kremlin Report did not introduce new personal sanctions and only identified those who would be the first to feel them if the situation justifying sanctions changed, that situation itself is very much under the control of American authorities and their proxies in Ukraine, in the Baltics, in Syria. The possibility is ever present that some miscalculation or some provocation would once again bring opprobrium upon the Russian Federation and prompt imposition of severe sanctions that were averted now.

Finally, let us consider the second report delivered by the Trump administration to Congress under the terms of the CAATSA: the report on advisability of further sectoral sanctions on Russian companies.

This was still briefer and will surely be questioned by the Russia-bashers in Congress. The administration reported that the existing sectoral sanctions on

Russia's military industrial complex and on those who do business with it domestically in Russia and abroad were working effectively, so that no further sectoral actions were required. Specifically, it was claimed that thanks to the sanctions in place, Russia had been denied sales of arms worth several billion dollars.

That claim may be hard to verify, but January 29 was also the effective date for application of previously enacted sanctions on companies anywhere in the world doing business with prescribed Russian defense manufacturers and sales or import entities.

The ultimate objective of these sanctions is to attack Russia's arms sales abroad which amounted to more than \$14 billion in 2017, making it one of the largest suppliers worldwide. Major customers for Russian arms were India, China, Algeria, Vietnam, Iraq and Egypt as reported by the news agency RBC quoting *Jane's* for 2016.

Theoretically the U.S. can punish companies violating this ban on dealings with the Russian military industrial complex by applying any of five different sanctions including restricting their access to credits from American banks, a prohibition on carrying out transactions in dollars, or barring their officers from entering the United States.

However, in practice these sales can be shifted from private companies to Ministries of Defense, and then the feasibility of attaching sanctions becomes doubtful. The recent efforts of the U.S. to persuade the Turkish authorities to abandon their \$2.5 billion contract with Russia for procurement of its S-400 air defense system failed miserably. In these open trials of strength with the objective of punishing Russia, the United States exposes itself to failure and humiliation.

To summarize, should the United States resolve one day to impose sanctions on the whole Russian government listed in the Kremlin Report of 29 January, it will create a barrier that will quickly be broken by kinetic action, meaning a hot war with Russia.

If it implements the possibilities it theoretically enjoys against Russian industrial sectors, and in particular against the military industrial complex, then it is likely to suffer humiliation as other nations refuse to be bullied. For the United States in relation to Russia, the whole sanctions game amounts to a "heads you win, tails I lose" proposition.

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2017. Both paperback and e-book versions are available for purchase on [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) and all affiliated Amazon websites worldwide.

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# The Dangerous Erosion of U.S. Leadership

Despite Donald Trump's speech to the World Economic Forum in which he attempted to reassure global leaders on his "America First" ideology, the damage to U.S. credibility may already be done, as Alon Ben-Meir explains.

By Alon Ben-Meir

Just one year after Donald Trump was inaugurated as the 45th president of the United States, the U.S. has already experienced alarming setbacks to its global leadership role and has badly damaged its image.

In short order, Trump has managed to bewilder friends and allies, intensify the enmity between the U.S. and its adversaries, and evoke fear, concerns, and unpredictability to the dismay of the international community. It is difficult to imagine how much further America's reputation will decline as an increasing number of countries, including traditional U.S. allies, have resigned themselves to the lack of American leadership under Trump's watch, which will have major adverse repercussions on our national interest and influence the world over.

Although Trump tried to qualify his "America First" approach to global affairs at a speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos this week by saying that "America First" doesn't mean "America Alone," his general approach has been to abandon U.S. soft power and America's longstanding leadership role. His tweets and reckless utterances have deeply troubled countries with strong ties to the United States, enraged those who have been maligned by his reprehensible rhetoric, and delighted U.S. adversaries, while leaving America increasingly isolated.

On the issue of North Korea's nuclear weapons and anti-ballistic missiles, instead of engaging Pyongyang in quiet diplomacy to resolve the conflict, he resorted to bellicose rhetoric and threats that only heightened tensions and brought the U.S. and North Korea ever closer to the unthinkable prospect of nuclear war.

On the Iran nuclear deal, rather than trying to renegotiate any changes, especially regarding the prickly issue of sunset provisions, Trump unilaterally decertified the deal and threatened to resume old sanctions and impose new ones,

which would torpedo it completely. He demanded that Congress modify the deal, even though the other five signatories to the accord vehemently reject any tampering of the deal because of Iran's continued full adherence.

Tehran, for its part, rejected any changes, and threatened to withdraw from the deal and resume its nuclear program, which would undermine nuclear non-proliferation efforts and subject the region's inhabitants to living in the shadows of nuclear conflagration.

On immigration, Trump's racist attitude toward Muslims and people of color has severely undermined America's "melting pot" image based on its historical status as a nation of immigrants who made America great in the first place. His reference to Africa, Haiti, and El Salvador as "shithole" countries provoked widespread international outrage on perhaps an unprecedented scale.

Scores of U.S. ambassadors in capitals across the world were summoned to explain the inexplicable, which the diplomats themselves could not fathom. Why would a sitting U.S. president utter such filth, in the White House no less? Former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney, a Republican, put it succinctly when he said: "What he [Trump] communicated caused racists to rejoice, minorities to weep, and the vast heart of America to mourn."

As to international treaties and accords, Trump has completely disregarded our commitment to live up to such agreements. He insists on renegotiating the terms of NAFTA, and effectively withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (connecting the Americas with Asia and Australia). He pulled the US out of the Paris Climate Agreement and withdrew from the United Nations Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), accusing it of holding an anti-Israel bias because Palestine is a member of the organization.

As a result, he has acutely damaged America's credibility, making many countries wary of entering into bilateral or multilateral agreements with the U.S., as they can no longer trust his administration to live up to its commitments. This leaves a wide opening for adversaries to fill the vacuum he created.

Trump has further shocked all democracies around the world with his incessant assault on the press. Though a few of his predecessors have occasionally ostracized the press, none has mounted such vile criticism. He accuses all media outlets (except for FOX News) of being the enemy of the people, claiming they are biased and spreading 'Fake News' to purposefully malign him and deride his policy initiatives.

Sadly, whereas America was seen as the beacon of freedom and democracy to be emulated, Trump is consciously undermining one of our central constitutional pillars—the free press—to the utter consternation of democracies around the

world.

On the question of the U.S.'s reliability, many countries who depend on America for their national security are worried about Trump's real commitment to safeguarding their security. His criticism of NATO, which is the core of West European security, and his appeasement of Russia, which is viewed as the West's staunchest enemy, raises questions as to where he would stand if they were threatened.

This concern is being expressed by our allies in the Middle East and Europe, which is further diminishing America's role. Germany's Chancellor Merkel expressed her misgivings, stating that: "The times when we could fully rely on others have passed us by a bit... we Europeans must really take our destiny into our own hands... We have to know that we must fight for our future on our own, for our destiny as Europeans."

The fact that Trump lies as often as he breathes deeply troubles countries around the world because they can no longer take his word for granted on issues of major importance to them.

Trump seems to be totally oblivious to the reality that without American global leadership, which spans over seven decades, the world will be even more chaotic than today. Trump has no end-strategy for Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, nor the focus or interest in stemming the widespread, destabilizing violent conflicts and human rights abuses around the world.

It is sad that in the most recent Gallup poll 'Rating World Leaders', the U.S. is ranked third, behind Germany and China (and just ahead of Russia). The damage that Trump has caused to American credibility and moral global leadership will not be readily repaired after electing a new president. It will take time and a president who is stable, politically skilled, and intellectually competent with vision and understanding of America's pivotal role in the international arena before America's global leadership can be restored.

The Republican Party has become complicit in Trump's mischiefs and misguided policies. It is now up to the Democrats to get their act together, regain control of the House and Senate, and shackle Trump before he causes irreparable damage to America's global role and responsibility.

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## The FBI Hand Behind Russia-gate

**Special Report:** In the Watergate era, liberals warned about U.S. intelligence

agencies manipulating U.S. politics, but now Trump-hatred has blinded many of them to this danger becoming real, as ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern notes.

By Ray McGovern

Russia-gate is becoming FBI-gate, thanks to the official release of unguarded text messages between loose-lipped FBI counterintelligence official Peter Strzok and his garrulous girlfriend, FBI lawyer Lisa Page. (Ten illustrative texts from their exchange appear at the end of this article.)

Despite his former job as chief of the FBI's counterintelligence section, Strzok had the naive notion that texting on FBI phones could not be traced. Strzok must have slept through "Security 101." Or perhaps he was busy texting during that class. Girlfriend Page cannot be happy at being misled by his assurance that using office phones would be a secure way to conduct their affair(s).

It would have been unfortunate enough for Strzok and Page to have their adolescent-sounding texts merely exposed, revealing the reckless abandon of star-crossed lovers hiding (they thought) secrets from cuckolded spouses, office colleagues, and the rest of us. However, for the never-Trump plotters in the FBI, the official release of just a fraction (375) of almost 10,000 messages does incalculably more damage than that.

We suddenly have documentary proof that key elements of the U.S. intelligence community were trying to short-circuit the U.S. democratic process. And that puts in a new and dark context the year-long promotion of Russia-gate. It now appears that it was not the Russians trying to rig the outcome of the U.S. election, but leading officials of the U.S. intelligence community, shadowy characters sometimes called the Deep State.

More of the Strzok-Page texting dialogue is expected to be released. And the Department of Justice Inspector General reportedly has additional damaging texts from others on the team that Special Counsel Robert Mueller selected to help him investigate Russia-gate.

Besides forcing the removal of Strzok and Page, the text exposures also sounded the death knell for the career of FBI Deputy Director Andrew McCabe, in whose office some of the plotting took place and who has already announced his plans to retire soon.

But the main casualty is the FBI's 18-month campaign to sabotage candidate-and-now-President Donald Trump by using the Obama administration's Russia-gate intelligence "assessment," electronic surveillance of dubious legality, and a salacious dossier that could never pass the smell test, while at the same time



using equally dubious techniques to immunize Hillary Clinton and her closest advisers from crimes that include lying to the FBI and endangering secrets.

Ironically, the Strzok-Page texts provide something that the Russia-gate investigation has been sorely lacking: first-hand evidence of both corrupt intent and action. After months of breathless searching for “evidence” of Russian-Trump collusion designed to put Trump in the White House, what now exists is actual evidence that senior officials of the Obama administration colluded to keep Trump out of the White House – proof of what old-time gumshoes used to call “means, motive and opportunity.”

Even more unfortunately for Russia-gate enthusiasts, the FBI lovers’ correspondence provides factual evidence exposing much of the made-up “Resistance” narrative – the contrived storyline that *The New York Times* and much of the rest of the U.S. mainstream media deemed fit to print with little skepticism and few if any caveats, a scenario about brilliantly devious Russians that not only lacks actual evidence – relying on unverified hearsay and rumor – but doesn’t make sense on its face.

The Russia-gate narrative always hinged on the preposterous notion that Russian President Vladimir Putin foresaw years ago what no American political analyst considered even possible, the political ascendancy of Donald Trump. According to the narrative, the fortune-telling Putin then risked creating even worse tensions with a nuclear-armed America that would – by all odds – have been led by a vengeful President Hillary Clinton.

Besides this wildly improbable storyline, there were flat denials from WikiLeaks, which distributed the supposedly “hacked” Democratic emails, that the information came from Russia – and there was the curious inability of the National Security Agency to use its immense powers to supply any technical evidence to support the Russia-hack scenario.

### **The Trump Shock**

But the shock of Trump’s election and the decision of many never-Trumpers to cast their lot with the Resistance led to a situation in which any prudent skepticism or demand for evidence was swept aside.

So, on Jan. 6, 2017, President Obama’s Director of National Intelligence James Clapper released an evidence-free report that he said was compiled by “hand-picked” analysts from the CIA, FBI and NSA, offering an “assessment” that Russia and President Putin were behind the release of the Democratic emails in a plot to help Trump win the presidency.

Despite the extraordinary gravity of the charge, even New York Times

correspondent Scott Shane noted that proof was lacking. He wrote at the time: “What is missing from the [the Jan. 6] public report is what many Americans most eagerly anticipated: hard evidence to back up the agencies’ claims that the Russian government engineered the election attack. ... Instead, the message from the agencies essentially amounts to ‘trust us.’”

But the “assessment” served a useful purpose for the never-Trumpers: it applied an official imprimatur on the case for delegitimizing Trump’s election and even raised the long-shot hope that the Electoral College might reverse the outcome and possibly install a compromise candidate, such as former Secretary of State Colin Powell, in the White House. Though the Powell ploy fizzled, the hope of somehow removing Trump from office continued to bubble, fueled by the growing hysteria around Russia-gate.

Virtually all skepticism about the evidence-free “assessment” was banned. For months, the Times and other newspapers of record repeated the lie that all 17 U.S. intelligence agencies had concurred in the conclusion about the Russian “hack.” Even when that falsehood was belatedly acknowledged, the major news outlets just shifted the phrasing slightly to say that U.S. intelligence agencies had reached the Russian “hack” conclusion. Shane’s blunt initial recognition about the lack of proof disappeared from the mainstream media’s approved narrative of Russia-gate.

Doubts about the Russian “hack” or dissident suggestions that what we were witnessing was a “soft coup” were scoffed at by leading media commentators. Other warnings from veteran U.S. intelligence professionals about the weaknesses of the Russia-gate narrative and the danger of letting politicized intelligence overturn a constitutional election were also brushed aside in pursuit of the goal of removing Trump from the White House.

It didn’t even seem to matter when new Russia-gate disclosures conflicted with the original narrative that Putin had somehow set Trump up as a Manchurian candidate. All normal journalistic skepticism was jettisoned. It was as if the Russia-gate advocates started with the conclusion that Trump must go and then made the facts fit into that mold, but anyone who noted the violations of normal investigative procedures was dismissed as a “Trump enabler” or a “Moscow stooge.”

### **The Text Evidence**

But then came the FBI text messages, providing documentary evidence that key FBI officials involved in the Russia-gate investigation were indeed deeply biased and out to get Trump, adding hard proof to Trump’s longstanding lament that he was the subject of a “witch hunt.”

Justified or not, Trump's feeling of vindication could hardly be more dangerous – particularly at a time when the most urgent need is to drain some testosterone from the self-styled Stable-Genius-in-Chief and his martinet generals.

On the home front, Trump, his wealthy friends, and like-thinkers in Congress may now feel they have an even wider *carte blanche* to visit untold misery on the poor, the widow, the stranger and other vulnerable humans. That was always an underlying danger of the Resistance's strategy to seize on whatever weapons were available – no matter how reckless or unfair – to “get Trump.”

Beyond that, Russia-gate has become so central to the Washington establishment's storyline that there appears to be no room for second-thoughts or turning back. The momentum is such that some Democrats and the media never-Trumpers can't stop stoking the smoke of Russia-gate and holding out hope against hope that it will somehow justify Trump's impeachment.

Yet, the sordid process of using legal/investigative means to settle political scores further compromises the principle of the “rule of law” and integrity of journalism in the eyes of many Americans. After a year of Russia-gate, the “rule of law” and “pursuit of truth” appear to have been reduced to high-falutin' phrases for political score-settling, a process besmirched by Republicans in earlier pursuits of Democrats and now appearing to be a bipartisan method for punishing political rivals regardless of the lack of evidence.

### **Strzok and Page**

Peter Strzok (pronounced “struck”) has an interesting pedigree with multiple tasks regarding both Mrs. Clinton and Mr. Trump. As the FBI's chief of counterespionage during the investigation into then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's unauthorized use of a personal email server for classified information, Strzok reportedly changed the words “grossly negligent” (which could have triggered legal prosecution) to the far less serious “extremely careless” in FBI Director James Comey's depiction of Clinton's actions. This semantic shift cleared the way for Comey to conclude just 20 days before the Democratic National Convention began in July 2016, that “no reasonable prosecutor” would bring charges against Mrs. Clinton.

Then, as Deputy Assistant Director of the Counterintelligence Division, Strzok led the FBI's investigation into alleged Russian interference in the U.S. election of 2016. It is a safe bet that he took a strong hand in hand-picking the FBI contingent of analysts that joined “hand-picked” counterparts from CIA and NSA in preparing the evidence-free, Jan. 6, 2017 assessment accusing Russian President Vladimir Putin of interfering in the election of 2016. (Although accepted in Establishment groupthink as revealed truth, that poor excuse for

analysis reflected the apogee of intelligence politicization – rivaled only by the fraudulent intelligence on “weapons of mass destruction” in Iraq 15 years ago.)

In June and July 2017 Strzok was the top FBI official working on Special Counsel Robert Mueller’s investigation into possible links between the Trump campaign and Russia, but was taken off that job when the Justice Department IG learned of the Strzok-Page text-message exchange and told Mueller.

There is no little irony in the fact that what did in the FBI sweathearts was their visceral disdain for Mr. Trump, their cheerleading-cum-kid-gloves treatment of Mrs. Clinton and her associates, their 1950-ish, James Clapperesque attitude toward Russians as “almost genetically driven” to evil, and their (Strzok/Page) elitist conviction that they know far better what is good for the country than regular American citizens, including those “deplorables” whom Clinton said made up half of Trump’s supporters.

But Strzok/Page had no idea that their hubris, elitism and scheming would be revealed in so tangible a way. Worst of all for them, the very thing that Strzok, in particular, worked so hard to achieve – the sabotaging of Trump and immunization of Mrs. Clinton and her closest advisers is now coming apart at the seams.

### **Congress: Oversee? or Overlook?**

At this point, the \$64 question is whether the various congressional oversight committees will remain ensconced in their customarily cozy role as “overlook” committees, or whether they will have the courage to attempt to carry out their Constitutional duty. The latter course would mean confronting a powerful Deep State and its large toolbox of well-practiced retaliatory techniques, including J. Edgar Hoover-style blackmail on steroids, enabled by electronic surveillance of just about everything and everyone. Yes, today’s technology permits blanket collection, and “Collect Everything” has become the motto.

Sen. Chuck Schumer, D-New York, with almost four decades of membership in the House and Senate, openly warned incoming President Trump in January 2017 against criticizing the U.S. intelligence community because U.S. intelligence officials have “six ways from Sunday to get back at you” if you are “dumb” enough to take them on.

Thanks to the almost 10,000 text messages between Strzok and Page, only a small fraction of which were given to Congress four weeks ago, there is now real evidentiary meat on the bones of the suspicions that there indeed was a “deep-state coup” to “correct” the outcome of the 2016 election. We now know that the

supposedly apolitical FBI officials had huge political axes to grind. The Strzok-Page exchanges drip with disdain for Trump and those deemed his smelly deplorable supporters. In one text message, Strzok expressed visceral contempt for those working-class Trump voters, writing on Aug. 26, 2016, “Just went to a southern Virginia Walmart. I could SMELL the Trump support. ... it’s scary real down here.”

The texts even show Strzok warning of the need for an “insurance policy” to thwart Trump on the off-chance that his poll numbers closed in on those of Mrs. Clinton.

An Aug. 6, 2016 text message, for example, shows Page giving her knight in shining armor strong affirmation: “Maybe you’re meant to stay where you are because you’re meant to protect the country from that menace [Trump].” That text to Strzok includes a link to a David Brooks column in The New York Times, in which Brooks concludes with the clarion call: “There comes a time when neutrality and laying low become dishonorable. If you’re not in revolt, you’re in cahoots. When this period and your name are mentioned, decades hence, your grandkids will look away in shame.”

Another text message shows that other senior government officials – alarmed at the possibility of a Trump presidency – joined the discussion. In an apparent reference to an August 2016 meeting with FBI Deputy Director Andrew McCabe, Strzok wrote to Page on Aug. 15, 2016, “I want to believe the path you threw out for consideration in Andy’s office – that there’s no way he [Trump] gets elected – but I’m afraid we can’t take that risk.” Strzok added, “It’s like an insurance policy in the unlikely event that you die before you’re 40.”

### **Insurance Policy?**

Senate Judiciary Committee chair Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, says he will ask Strzok to explain the “insurance policy” when he calls him to testify. What seems already clear is that the celebrated “Steele Dossier” was part of the “insurance,” as was the evidence-less legend that Russia hacked the DNC’s and

Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta's email



If congressional investigators have been paying attention, they already know what former weapons inspector Scott Ritter shared with Veteran intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS) colleagues this week; namely, that Fusion GPS's Glenn Simpson, who commissioned the Russia dossier using Democratic Party money, said he reached out to Steele after June 17, just three days before Steele's first report was published, drawing on seven sources.

"There is a snowball's chance in hell that this is raw intelligence gathered by Steele; rather he seems to have drawn on a single 'trusted intermediary' to gather unsubstantiated rumor already in existence."

Another VIPS colleague, Phil Giraldi, writing out of his own experience in private sector consulting, added: "The fact that you do not control your sources frequently means that they will feed you what they think you want to hear. Since they are only doing it for money, the more lurid the details the better, as it increases the apparent value of the information. The private security firm in turn, which is also doing it for the money, will pass on the stories and even embroider them to keep the client happy and to encourage him to come back for more. When I read the Steele dossier it looked awfully familiar to me, like the scores of similar reports I had seen which combined bullshit with enough credible information to make the whole product look respectable."

It is now widely known that the Democrats ponied up the "insurance premiums," so to speak, for former British intelligence officer Christopher Steele's "dossier" of lurid – but largely unproven – "intelligence" on Trump and the Russians. If, as many have concluded, the dossier was used to help justify a FISA warrant to snoop on the Trump campaign, those involved will be in deep kimchi, if congressional overseers do their job.

How, you might ask, could Strzok and associates undertake these extra-legal steps with such blithe disregard for the possible consequences should they be caught? The answer is easy; Mrs. Clinton was a shoo-in, remember? This was just extra insurance with no expectation of any “death benefit” ever coming into play – save for Trump’s electoral demise in November 2016. The attitude seemed to be that, if abuse of the FISA law should eventually be discovered – there would be little interest in a serious investigation by the editors of The New York Times and other anti-Trump publications and whatever troubles remained could be handled by President Hillary Clinton.

Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-South Carolina, who chairs the Judiciary Subcommittee of Judiciary on Crime and Terrorism, joined Sen. Grassley in signing the letter referring Christopher Steele to the Justice Department to investigate what appear to be false statements about the dossier. In signing, Graham noted the “many stop signs the Department of Justice ignored in its use of the dossier.” The signature of committee ranking member Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-California, however, was missing – an early sign that a highly partisan battle royale is in the offing. On Tuesday, Feinstein unilaterally released a voluminous transcript of Glenn Simpson’s earlier testimony and, as though on cue, Establishment pundits portrayed Steele as a good source and Fusion GPS’s Glenn Simpson as a victim.

The Donnybrook is now underway; the outcome uncertain.

**Ray McGovern works with Tell the Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. He was an Army and CIA intelligence analyst for 30 years; prepared and briefed the President’s Daily Brief for Nixon, Ford, and Reagan; and is co-founder of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS).**

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Sample text messages between Peter Strzok and Lisa Page, released to Congress and the media on December 13, 2016

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**03/04/2016**

Strzok – God Hillary should win. 100,000,000-0.

Page – I know

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**04/02/2016**

Page – So look, you say we text on that phone when we talk about Hillary because it can't be traced, you were just venting, bc you feel bad that you're gone so much but that can't be helped right now.

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**07/08/2016**

Strzok – And meanwhile, we have Black Lives Matter protestors, right now, chanting “no justice no peace” around DoJ and the White House...

Page – That's awful.

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**07/14/2016**

Page – Have you read this? It's really frightening. For Whites Sensing Decline, Donald Trump Unleashes Words of Resistance <http://NYTI/ms/29WCu5!>

Strzok – I have not. But I think it's clear he's capturing all the white, poor voters who the mainstream republicans abandoned in all but name in the quest for the almighty \$\$\$

Page – Yeah, it's not good.

Strzok – Poll Finds Emails Weighing on Hillary Clinton, Now Tied With Donald Trump <http://nyti.ms/29RV5gf>

Page – It is

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**07/26/2016**

Strzok – And hey. Congrats on a woman nominated for President in a major party! About damn time! Many many more returns of the day!!

Page – That's cute. Thanks

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**08/06/2016**

Page – Jesus. You should read this. And Trump should go f himself. Moment in Convention Glare Shakes Up Khans American Life <http://nyti.ms/2aHulE0>

Strzok – God that's a great article. Thanks for sharing. And F TRUMP.



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**08/06/2016**

Page – And maybe you're meant to stay where you are because you're meant to protect the country from that menace. To that end comma, read this:

Page – Trump Enablers Will Finally Have to Take A Stand <http://nyti.ms/2aFakry>

Strzok – Thanks. It's absolutely true that we're both very fortunate. And of course I'll try and approach it that way. I just know it will be tough at times. I can protect our country at many levels, not sure if that helps

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**08/09/2016**

Page – He's not ever going to become president, right? Right?!

Strzok – OMG did you hear what Trump just said?

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**08/26/2016**

Strzok – Just went to a southern Virginia Walmart. I could SMELL the Trump support...

Page – Yep. Out to lunch with (redacted) We both hate everyone and everything.

Page – Just riffing on the hot mess that is our country.

Strzok – Yeah...it's scary real down here

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**10/20/2016**

Strzok: I am riled up. Trump is a f\*\*\*ing idiot, is unable to provide a coherent answer.

Strzok – I CAN'T PULL AWAY, WHAT THE F\*\*K HAPPENED TO OUR COUNTRY (redacted)??!?!?

Page– I don't know. But we'll get it back. We're America. We rock.

Strzok– Donald just said "bad hombres"

Strzok– Trump just said what the FBI did is disgraceful.

END

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## Missing the Trump Team's Misconduct

Between flailing over Russia-gate and obsessing over a “tell-all” book, the major U.S. news media continues to miss the more substantive misconduct of the Trump administration, says JP Sottile.

By JP Sottile

On Monday, I flipped over to MSNBC and what were they “covering”? Trump’s “stable genius” tweet. And no, they were not “advancing the story” ... that is, if there is a way to advance a stale story based on a two-day-old tweet. Instead, they just had a couple talking heads blathering on in pointless speculation about Trump’s state of mind. In other words, they were filling dead air with hot air.

Surprisingly, there is a takeaway from this episode and from the countless hours of Trumped-Up, blatherati-driven coverage churned out by MSNBC, CNN and the three networks ... and it’s this: If the so-called “Liberal Media” really is out to “get” Trump ... they really suck at it.

Why? Because if I was a managing editor at MSNBC (or CNN or the “Today Show” or “Good Morning America,” for that matter) and I was “out to get” Trump ... I’d have spent a good three blocks of airtime on former Eli Lilly bigwig Alex Azar. He’s Trump’s replacement for the sleazy, insider trading Dr. Tom Price at the Department of Health and Human Services. Hell, POLITICO even did most of the work when it published a big story detailing the way Eli Lilly gamed the patent system to sustain Cialis as a rock-hard profit producer when Azar was a Lilly exec. They used a pediatric study loophole the makers of OxyContin had once used to squeeze another six months of profits out of their drug.

Why not hone-in on THAT story? It’s Eli Lilly, for chrissake! They are right there with Monsanto as a name that inspires groans and occasional vomiting (along with a voluminous list of quite real side effects). Even better, Azar is another in a long list of crony-baloney capitalists who’ve turned the Trump Administration into one of the most corrupt cash machines I’ve ever seen. But what is MSNBC talking about? A senescent tweet.

On the other hand, they are not talking about the Oil Industry’s influence and the opening up of offshore drilling. They are not talking about the significant

expansion of the war on terror ... and Trump's direct hand in a spike in civilian casualties around the Muslim world. They are not talking about the trainwrecks inside the Department of Energy, the U.S. Department of Agriculture or the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). They are not talking about Trump pushing DIPLOMATS to get even more involved in selling weapons around the world. They are not talking about Trump's role in opening up the media for more consolidation. And they are not talking about a dozen other damning stories that, if they'd just dispatch some effing reporters and producers and photographers, they could use those video-driven packages like a goddamn barrage to pepper Trump's presidency and, in turn, to corner his supporters on Capitol Hill.

But no ... they are poring over the cheap and easy regurgitation of kooky tweets. They are wringing every last drop out of Michael Wolff's book. And they are forever circling around meaningless details about Russiagate that not only DO NOT advance the story, but ultimately make it look like they are ginning-up stories when, in fact, they actually don't know what Mueller knows ... even as they piss away precious hours of airtime speculating about "what's coming next."

Fine, I get it. If you get a leaked detail, you report it and talk about it for a few hours ... but then you MOVE ON to Trump's growing ownership of an ever-bloodier War on Terror or to food safety or environmental collapse or to growing consumer debt or to Trump's retinue of corporate shells like Alex Azar. You look at the policies that are being made each and every day and the quite real consequences that will come of these often-major shifts.

The upshot is that you'd not only be doing real damage to Trump's presidency ... but you'd also be doing ACTUAL JOURNALISM! You can "get" Trump and do your job, too! It's a two-fer! Everything else is just an easy way to maintain the profitability you could only dream of before that 24/7 star of your predictable little daytime drama came down that godforsaken escalator in his monomaniacal search for the one thing you give him in spades – airtime.

**JP Sottile is a freelance journalist, radio co-host, documentary filmmaker and former broadcast news producer in Washington, D.C. He blogs at [Newsvandal.com](http://www.newsvandal.com) or you can follow him on Twitter, <http://twitter/newsvandal>.**

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## An Apology and Explanation

**From Editor Robert Parry:** For readers who have come to see Consortiumnews as a daily news source, I would like to extend my personal apology for our

spotty production in recent days. On Christmas Eve, I suffered a stroke that has affected my eyesight (especially my reading and thus my writing) although apparently not much else. The doctors have also been working to figure out exactly what happened since I have never had high blood pressure, I never smoked, and my recent physical found nothing out of the ordinary. Perhaps my personal slogan that "every day's a work day" had something to do with this.

Perhaps, too, the unrelenting ugliness that has become Official Washington and national journalism was a factor. It seems that since I arrived in Washington in 1977 as a correspondent for The Associated Press, the nastiness of American democracy and journalism has gone from bad to worse. In some ways, the Republicans escalated the vicious propaganda warfare following Watergate, refusing to accept that Richard Nixon was guilty of some extraordinary malfeasance (including the 1968 sabotage of President Johnson's Vietnam peace talks to gain an edge in the election and then the later political dirty tricks and cover-ups that came to include Watergate). Rather than accept the reality of Nixon's guilt, many Republicans simply built up their capability to wage information warfare, including the creation of ideological news organizations to protect the party and its leaders from "another Watergate."

So, when Democrat Bill Clinton defeated President George H.W. Bush in the 1992 election, the Republicans used their news media and their control of the special prosecutor apparatus (through Supreme Court Chief Justice William Rehnquist and Appeals Court Judge David Sentelle) to unleash a wave of investigations to challenge Clinton's legitimacy, eventually uncovering his affair with White House intern Monica Lewinsky.

The idea had developed that the way to defeat your political opponent was not just to make a better argument or rouse popular support but to dredge up some "crime" that could be pinned on him or her. The GOP success in damaging Bill Clinton made possible George W. Bush's disputed "victory" in 2000 in which Bush took the presidency despite losing the popular vote and almost certainly losing the key state of Florida if all ballots legal under state law were counted. Increasingly, America – even at the apex of its uni-power status – was taking on the look of a banana republic except with much higher stakes for the world.

Though I don't like the word "weaponized," it began to apply to how "information" was used in America. The point of Consortiumnews, which I founded in 1995, was to use the new medium of the modern Internet to allow the old principles of journalism to have a new home, i.e., a place to pursue important facts and giving everyone a fair shake. But we were just a tiny pebble in the ocean. The trend of using journalism as just another front in no-holds-barred

political warfare continued – with Democrats and liberals adapting to the successful techniques pioneered mostly by Republicans and by well-heeled conservatives.

Barack Obama's election in 2008 was another turning point as Republicans again challenged his legitimacy with bogus claims about his "Kenyan birth," a racist slur popularized by "reality" TV star Donald Trump. Facts and logic no longer mattered. It was a case of using whatever you had to diminish and destroy your opponent.

We saw similar patterns with the U.S. government's propaganda agencies developing themes to demonize foreign adversaries and then to smear Americans who questioned the facts or challenged the exaggerations as "apologists." This approach was embraced not only by Republicans (think of President George W. Bush distorting the reality in Iraq in 2003 to justify the invasion of that country under false pretenses) but also by Democrats who pushed dubious or downright false depictions of the conflict in Syria (including blaming the Syrian government for chemical weapons attacks despite strong evidence that the events were staged by Al Qaeda and other militants who had become the tip of the spear in the neocon/liberal interventionist goal of removing the Assad dynasty and installing a new regime more acceptable to the West and to Israel.

More and more I would encounter policymakers, activists and, yes, journalists who cared less about a careful evaluation of the facts and logic and more about achieving a pre-ordained geopolitical result – and this loss of objective standards reached deeply into the most prestigious halls of American media. This perversion of principles – twisting information to fit a desired conclusion – became the modus vivendi of American politics and journalism. And those of us who insisted on defending the journalistic principles of skepticism and evenhandedness were increasingly shunned by our colleagues, a hostility that first emerged on the Right and among neoconservatives but eventually sucked in the progressive world as well. Everything became "information warfare."

### **The New Outcasts**

That is why many of us who exposed major government wrongdoing in the past have ended up late in our careers as outcasts and pariahs. Legendary investigative reporter Seymour Hersh, who helped expose major crimes of state from the My Lai massacre to the CIA's abuses against American citizens, including illegal spying and LSD testing on unsuspecting subjects, has literally had to take his investigative journalism abroad because he uncovered inconvenient evidence that implicated Western-backed jihadists in staging chemical weapons attacks in Syria so the atrocities would be blamed on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The anti-Assad group think is so intense in the West that even strong evidence of staged

events, such as the first patients arriving at hospitals before government planes could have delivered the sarin, was brushed aside or ignored. The Western media and the bulk of international agencies and NGOs were committed to gin up another case for “regime change” and any skeptics were decried as “Assad apologists” or “conspiracy theorists,” the actual facts be damned.

So Hersh and weapons experts such as MIT’s Theodore Postol were shoved into the gutter in favor of hip new NATO-friendly groups like Bellingcat, whose conclusions always fit neatly with the propaganda needs of the Western powers.

The demonization of Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russia is just the most dangerous feature of this propaganda process – and this is where the neocons and the liberal interventionists most significantly come together. The U.S. media’s approach to Russia is now virtually 100 percent propaganda. Does any sentient human being read the New York Times’ or the Washington Post’s coverage of Russia and think that he or she is getting a neutral or unbiased treatment of the facts? For instance, the full story of the infamous Magnitsky case cannot be told in the West, nor can the objective reality of the Ukraine coup in 2014. The American people and the West in general are carefully shielded from hearing the “other side of the story.” Indeed to even suggest that there is another side to the story makes you a “Putin apologist” or “Kremlin stooge.”

Western journalists now apparently see it as their patriotic duty to hide key facts that otherwise would undermine the demonizing of Putin and Russia. Ironically, many “liberals” who cut their teeth on skepticism about the Cold War and the bogus justifications for the Vietnam War now insist that we must all accept whatever the U.S. intelligence community feeds us, even if we’re told to accept the assertions on faith.

## **The Trump Crisis**

Which brings us to the crisis that is Donald Trump. Trump’s victory over Democrat Hillary Clinton has solidified the new paradigm of “liberals” embracing every negative claim about Russia just because elements of the CIA, FBI and the National Security Agency produced a report last Jan 6 that blamed Russia for “hacking” Democratic emails and releasing them via WikiLeaks. It didn’t seem to matter that these “hand-picked” analysts (as Director of National Intelligence James Clapper called them) evinced no evidence and even admitted that they weren’t asserting any of this as fact.

The hatred of Trump and Putin was so intense that old-fashioned rules of journalism and fairness were brushed aside. On a personal note, I faced harsh criticism even from friends of many years for refusing to enlist in the anti-Trump “Resistance.” The argument was that Trump was such a unique threat to

America and the world that I should join in finding any justification for his ouster. Some people saw my insistence on the same journalistic standards that I had always employed somehow a betrayal.

Other people, including senior editors across the mainstream media, began to treat the unproven Russia-gate allegations as flat fact. No skepticism was tolerated and mentioning the obvious bias among the never-Trumpers inside the FBI, Justice Department and intelligence community was decried as an attack on the integrity of the U.S. government's institutions. Anti-Trump "progressives" were posturing as the true patriots because of their now unquestioning acceptance of the evidence-free proclamations of the U.S. intelligence and law enforcement agencies.

Hatred of Trump had become like some invasion of the body snatchers – or perhaps many of my journalistic colleagues had never believed in the principles of journalism that I had embraced throughout my adult life. To me, journalism wasn't just a cover for political activism; it was a commitment to the American people and the world to tell important news stories as fully and fairly as I could; not to slant the "facts" to "get" some "bad" political leader or "guide" the public in some desired direction.

I actually believed that the point of journalism in a democracy was to give the voters unbiased information and the necessary context so the voters could make up their own minds and use their ballot – as imperfect as that is – to direct the politicians to take actions on behalf of the nation. The unpleasant reality that the past year has brought home to me is that a shockingly small number of people in Official Washington and the mainstream news media actually believe in real democracy or the goal of an informed electorate.

Whether they would admit it or not, they believe in a "guided democracy" in which "approved" opinions are elevated – regardless of their absence of factual basis – and "unapproved" evidence is brushed aside or disparaged regardless of its quality. Everything becomes "information warfare" – whether on Fox News, the Wall Street Journal editorial page, MSNBC, the New York Times or the Washington Post. Instead of information provided evenhandedly to the public, it is rationed out in morsels designed to elicit the desired emotional reactions and achieve a political outcome.

As I said earlier, much of this approach was pioneered by Republicans in their misguided desire to protect Richard Nixon, but it has now become all pervasive and has deeply corrupted Democrats, progressives and mainstream journalism. Ironically, the ugly personal characteristics of Donald Trump – his own contempt for facts and his crass personal behavior – have stripped the mask off the broader face of Official America.

What is perhaps most alarming about the past year of Donald Trump is that the mask is now gone and, in many ways, all sides of Official Washington are revealed collectively as reflections of Donald Trump, disinterested in reality, exploiting “information” for tactical purposes, eager to manipulate or con the public. While I’m sure many anti-Trumpers will be deeply offended by my comparison of esteemed Establishment figures with the grotesque Trump, there is a deeply troubling commonality between Trump’s convenient use of “facts” and what has pervaded the Russia-gate investigation.

My Christmas Eve stroke now makes it a struggle for me to read and to write. Everything takes much longer than it once did – and I don’t think that I can continue with the hectic pace that I have pursued for many years. But – as the New Year dawns – if I could change one thing about America and Western journalism, it would be that we all repudiate “information warfare” in favor of an old-fashioned respect for facts and fairness – and do whatever we can to achieve a truly informed electorate.

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

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