

# How Many Terms Till You're a Tyrant Ripe for Regime Change?

In some cases, the hint that a country might be removing presidential term limits provides Washington sufficient cause to support a coup, but in other cases Washington celebrates presidents-for-life, observes Ted Snider.

By Ted Snider

Donald Trump caused some concern last week when he appeared to praise Chinese President Xi Jinping's removal of term limits on the president from the Chinese constitution, clearing the path for him to become "president for life." At a fundraiser in Florida, Trump said, "He's now president for life. President for life. No, he's great." He then added, to enthusiastic cheers: "I think it's great. Maybe we'll have to give that a shot some day."

Perhaps Trump was joking about China's removal of presidential term limits from the constitution, but the U.S. wasn't laughing when removing presidential term limits from the Honduran constitution was being considered. Washington backed a coup instead.

How many consecutive terms turns a president into a dictator? Many parliamentary democracies lack term limits. In Britain, Robert Walpole was prime minister for almost 21 years. William Pitt the Younger served for almost 19 and Thatcher and Blair served for 12 and 10 respectively. Washington never called Thatcher or Blair a dictator. In Canada, William Lyon Mackenzie King served as P.M. for more than 21 years. Canada's first prime minister, John A. Macdonald, served for almost 19, and Pierre Elliot Trudeau, father of the current prime minister, served for 15.

Term limits became a constitutional issue early in America. Many of the framers backed lifetime appointment for presidents. Alexander Hamilton and James Madison both supported lifetime terms. So did others. One person would have swung the vote as it was defeated by a margin of only six votes to four.

The Constitutional Convention of 1787 did not impose term limits on the president. And, despite Washington declining to run for a third term, Ulysses S. Grant, Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson all sought third terms. Franklin Delano Roosevelt won a third term. And a fourth. It wasn't until the middle of the last century that the 22<sup>nd</sup> amendment ensured that "No person shall be elected to the office of the President more than twice ..."

That is a sentence that has recently come up for consideration in other

countries too: none more troublingly than Honduras as far as the U.S. reaction goes. In 2015, the Supreme Court of Honduras removed the one-term limit on the president, clearing the way for Juan Orlando Hernández to run for a second term in office. The U.S. has supported Hernández's bid for a second term though it is not clear the Honduran court had the authority to make that constitutional amendment without a vote by the people. It is also not clear that the court did legitimately make that amendment since a five-member panel and not the full 15-member court voted on the change.

The same support was not offered to the previous Honduran president, the popularly elected Manuel Zelaya, though he didn't go as far as Hernández. Zelaya did not touch the constitution, he did not change presidential term limits and he did not run for a second term. He merely opened the constitutional change for discussion. Zelaya only had to announce a plebiscite to see if Hondurans wanted to draft a new constitution for the hostile political establishment to falsely translate his intention into an intention to seek an unconstitutional second term and oust him in a coup.

Zelaya had never declared the intention to stand for a second term – only to open the constitutional prohibition on presidential re-election to discussion. But the Supreme Court declared the president's plebiscite unconstitutional. On June 28, 2009, the military kidnapped Zelaya, and the Supreme Court charged Zelaya with treason and declared a new president.

Though the U.S. backed Hernández, who actually did change term limits and actually did run for reelection, it not only failed to back the far more innocent Zelaya, it backed the coup against him. Rodolfo Pastor Fasquelle, the minister of culture in the Zelaya government, said on Democracy Now that "I know for a fact that CIA operatives and military personnel of the United States were in direct contact with the conspirators of the coup d'état and aided the conspirators of the coup d'état."

Latin American expert Mark Weisbrot at least partially corroborated that claim when he told me that "the Obama administration acknowledged that they were talking to the [Honduran] military right up to the day of the coup, allegedly to convince them not to do it." But, he added, "I find it hard to believe that they couldn't convince them not to do it if they really wanted to: the Honduran military is pretty dependent on the U.S."

After the coup d'état, then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton admitted that she aided the coup government by helping to block the return of the elected government: "In the subsequent days [after the coup] I spoke with my counterparts around the hemisphere, including Secretary [Patricia] Espinosa in Mexico. We strategized on a plan to restore order in Honduras and ensure that

free and fair elections could be held quickly and legitimately, which would render the question of Zelaya moot.”

The U.S. did all this while being in full knowledge that what was unfolding in Honduras was a coup. By July 24, 2009, less than a month after the coup, the White House, Clinton and many others were in receipt of a cable called “Open and Shut: the Case of the Honduran Coup” that was sent from the U.S. embassy in Honduras. The embassy cable says “There is no doubt that the military, Supreme Court and National Congress conspired on June 28 in what constituted an illegal and unconstitutional coup.” And just in case there were any objections, the cable adds that “none of the ... arguments [of the coup defenders] has any substantive validity under the Honduran constitution.”

The U.S. backed a coup in Honduras that removed a popular president for merely considering removing term limits. So, it should have been surprising when it backed a president in Honduras for actually removing term limits and seeking reelection, but, of course, it was never about term limits. It was fine for Juan Orlando Hernández because, according to State Department cables, “he has consistently supported U.S. interests.” But, it was not fine for Manuel Zelaya because he dared to serve the interests of the people who elected him instead of U.S. interests.

So, when Washington’s servant removed presidential term limits in America’s backyard, the U.S. embassy in Honduras certified his reelection, saying it was “pleased” with its “transparency.”

**Ted Snider writes on analyzing patterns in U.S. foreign policy and history. [This article originally appeared at Antiwar.com. Reprinted with permission.]**

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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 emails and gave them to WikiLeaks.



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.

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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.

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## Questioning the Russia-gate 'Motive'

A key pillar of the Russia-gate affair is the assumption that Russia's leaders wanted to stop Hillary Clinton and boost Donald Trump, but the Kremlin's views on last year's election were much more nuanced, writes Gilbert Doctorow.

By Gilbert Doctorow

The American public is now experiencing mass paranoia over Russia-gate, hysteria about Russia supposedly corrupting and manipulating the U.S. political system. This panic originated with Obama administration holdovers in the intelligence community who outlined the narrative while providing few if any facts – and it has been carried forward by Democrats, some Republicans hostile to President

Trump, and by the U.S. mainstream media.

The Russia-gate frenzy has similarities to the madness that followed the 9/11 attacks when public passions were manipulated to serve the geopolitical agenda of President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney. In that case, civil liberties that had become accepted norms in the U.S. were suddenly cast aside – and the public was deceptively led into the invasion of Iraq.

In both cases – the Iraq War and Russia-gate – the U.S. intelligence community played central roles by – regarding Iraq – promoting false intelligence that Iraq was hiding WMD and had ties to Al Qaeda and – in the Russian case – assessing (without presenting evidence) that Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the hacking of Democratic emails and their publication via WikiLeaks to hurt Hillary Clinton’s campaign and to help elect Donald Trump.

While the Iraq deception was driven by the neoconservatives in the Bush-Cheney administration, the Russia paranoia was started by the nominally left-of-center administration of Barack Obama in the closing months of his presidency. It has been fanned ever since by liberals and centrists in the Democratic Party and the never-Trump contingent in the Republican Party as well as the mainstream media – with the goal of either removing Trump from office or politically crippling him and his administration, i.e., to reverse the results of the 2016 election or, as some might say, reverse the “mistake” of the 2016 election.

Because promoters of the Russia-gate hysteria talk about the Kremlin’s “war” on the U.S. political process, the frenzy also carries extreme dangers, even greater than the death and destruction from the Iraq War. Russia is the only country on earth capable of turning the United States into ashes within a day. And even as U.S. journalists and politicians have casually – and sloppily – hyped the Russia-gate affair, the Russians have taken the growls of hostility from the United States very seriously.

### **Rumbles of War**

If Russia is preparing for war, as the latest issue of *Newsweek* magazine tells us, we have no one but our political leaders and media pundits to blame. They have no concern for Russian national sensitivities and the “red lines” that the Russians have drawn. U.S. senators and congressmen listen only to what U.S. “experts” think the Russian interests should be if they are to fit into a U.S.-run world. That is why the Senate can vote 98-2 in favor of elevating President Obama’s executive sanctions against Russia into federal law as happened this past summer so President Trump can’t reverse them.

There have been a few U.S. journalists and academics who have examined the

actual facts of the Russia-gate story and found them lacking in substance if not showing outright signs of fabrication, including Consortiumnews.com, Truthdig.com, and Antiwar.com. But they make up a very small minority.

Instead the major U.S. media has taken the Jan. 6 “Intelligence Community Assessment” accusing the Russians of meddling in the 2016 election as unassailable truth despite its stunning lack of evidence. According to President Obama’s Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, that “assessment” came from a “hand-picked” group of analysts from the CIA, FBI and National Security Agency, not the “all 17 intelligence agencies consensus” that the public was repeatedly told.

Perhaps the most significant challenge to the Russia-did-the-hacking “assessment” came from a study of the available forensic evidence by a group of former U.S. intelligence officers with relevant technical expertise from Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity.

The VIPS’ analysis of the known download speed of one batch of Democratic emails concluded in July that the emails were likely extracted by a local download, not an external hack over the Internet, i.e., an inside job by someone with direct access to the computers. But the VIPS findings were largely ignored by the U.S. mainstream media, which has treated the original “assessment” by those “hand-picked” analysts as unchallengeable if not flat fact.

Besides the conventional wisdom that Russia did “hack” the emails and somehow slipped the emails to WikiLeaks, there is another core assumption of the Jan. 6 report – that Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the hack of the Democratic emails and their publication through WikiLeaks because of his contempt for Hillary Clinton and his desire for Trump to win.

Indeed, the Jan. 6 “assessment” treats this supposed motive as the central evidence of Russian guilt, since actual physical or testimonial evidence is lacking. Yet what is also missing from the report is any recognition of other attitudes among the Russian political elite that would go against the report’s thesis, including whether Putin would have taken such a risk in the face of a widespread consensus that Clinton was the near-certain winner – and the strong possibility that any Russian operation would be exposed. An evenhanded intelligence “assessment” would have included these counter-arguments even if in the end they were cast aside. But the Jan. 6 report offered no such context or balance.

### **A View from Moscow**

However, from my perspective – having participated in some of the leading

Russian public affairs programs in 2016 – I heard Russian insiders close to President Putin expressing grave doubts about whether a Trump presidency would be good for Russia.

Political talk shows are a very popular component of Russian television programming on all channels, both state-run and commercial channels. They are mostly carried on prime time in the evening but also are showing up in mid-afternoon where they have displaced soap operas and cooking lessons as entertainment for housewives and pensioners.

The shows are broadcast live either to the Moscow time zone or to the Far East time zone. Given the fact that Russia extends over nine time zones, they are also video recorded and reshowed locally at prime time. In the case of the highest quality and most watched programs produced by Vesti 24 for the Rossiya One channel, they also are posted in their entirety and in the original Russian on Youtube.

The panelists come from a rather small pool of Russian legislators, including chairmen of the relevant committees of the Duma (lower house) and Federation Council (upper house); leading journalists; think tank professors; and retired military brass. The politicians are drawn from among the most visible and colorful personalities in the Duma parties, but also extend to Liberal parties such as Yabloko, which failed to cross the five-percent threshold in legislative elections and thus received no seats in parliament.

(Since I live in Brussels, I was flown by the various channels who paid airfare and hotel accommodation in Moscow. That is to say, my expenses were covered but there was no honorarium. I make this explicit acknowledgement to rebut in advance any notion that I and other outside panelists were in any way “paid by the Kremlin” or restricted in our freedom of speech on air.)

During the period under review, I appeared on both state channels, Rossiya-1 and Pervy Kanal, as well as on the major commercial television channel, NTV. My debut on the No. 1 talk show in Russia, “Sunday Evening with Vladimir Soloviev,” on Sept. 11, 2016, was particularly useful because I had a chance to speak with the host, Vladimir Soloviev, for five minutes before the program.

I put to him the question that interested me the most: whom did he want to see win the U.S. presidential election. Without hesitation, Soloviev told me that he did not want to see Trump win because the celebrity businessman was volatile, unpredictable – and weak. Soloviev added that he and other politically knowledgeable Russians did not expect improved relations with the U.S. regardless of who won. He rejected the notion that Trump’s tossing the neocons out of government would be a great thing in and of itself.

## **The Devil You Know**

Soloviev's resistance to the idea that Trump could be a good thing was not just an example of Russians' prioritizing stability, the principle "better the devil you know," meaning Hillary Clinton. During a chat with a Russian ambassador, someone also close to power, I heard the firm belief that the United States is like a big steamship which has its own inertia and cannot be turned around, that presidents come and go but American foreign policy remains the same.

This view may be called cynical or realistic, depending on your taste, but it is reflective of the thinking that came out from many of the panelists in the talk shows.

To appreciate what weight the opinions of Vladimir Soloviev carry, you have to consider just who he is – that his talk show is the most professional from among numerous rival shows and attracts the most important politicians and expert guests. But even more to the point, he is as close to Putin as journalists can get and is familiar with the President's thinking.

In April 2015, Soloviev conducted a two-hour interview with Putin that was aired on Rossiya 1 under the title "The President." In early January 2016, the television documentary "World Order," co-written and directed by Soloviev, set out in forceful terms Putin's views on American and Western attempts to stamp out Russian sovereignty that first were spoken at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007 and have evolved and become ever more frank since.

Soloviev has a Ph.D. in economics from the Institute of World Economics and International Relations of the USSR Academy of Sciences. He was an active entrepreneur in the 1990s and spent some time back then in the U.S., where his activities included teaching economics at the University of Alabama. He is fluent in English and has been an unofficial emissary of the Kremlin to the U.S. at various times.

For all of these reasons, I believe it is safe to say that Vladimir Soloviev represents the thinking of Russian elites close to Putin, if not the views of Putin himself.

I encountered similar skepticism about Trump elsewhere as well. On Sept. 27, 2016, I took part in the "Sixty Minutes" talk show on Rossiya 1 that presented a post-mortem of the first Trump-Clinton debate the day before.

Presenter Yevgeny Popov and his wife and co-presenter Olga Skabeyeva made a point that was largely missing in Western news coverage – that the Democrats and Republicans had largely switched positions on the use of military force, with Clinton taking the more hawkish position and Trump the more dovish stance.

## **Doubting Trump**

Yet, Russian politicians and journalists on the panel were split down the middle on whether Trump or Clinton was their preferred next occupant of the Oval Office. The Trump skeptics noted that he was impulsive and could not be trusted to act with prudence if there was some crisis or accidental clash between U.S. and Russian forces in the field, for example.

They took the cynical view that the more dovish positions that Trump took earlier were purely tactical, to differentiate himself from his Republican competitors and then Clinton. Thus, these analysts felt that Trump could turn out to be no friend of Russia on the day after the elections.

One Trump doubter called Trump a “non-systemic” politician – or anti-establishment. But that is not a compliment in the Russian context. It has the odious connotation applied to Alexei Navalny and some members of the U.S.- and E.U.-backed Parnas political movement, suggesting seditious intent.

The Oct. 20 program “Evening with Vladimir Soloviev,” which I watched on television from abroad, was devoted to the third Clinton-Trump debate. My main takeaway from the show was that there was a bemused unanimity on the very diverse panel that the U.S. presidential campaign was awful, with both candidates having serious weaknesses of character and/or careers. Particular attention was devoted to the very one-sided position of the U.S. mass media and the centrist establishments of both parties favoring Hillary Clinton.

Though flamboyant in his language, nationalist politician Vladimir Zhirinovsky, leader of the LDPR Party, touched on a number of core concerns:

“The debates were weak. The two cannot greet one another on stage, cannot say goodbye to one another at the end. They barely can get out the texts that have been prepared for them by their respective staffs. Repeating on stage what one may have said in the locker room. Billions of people around the world conclude with one word: disgrace! This is the worst electoral campaign ever.

“And mostly what we see is the style of the campaign. However much people criticize the USSR – the old fogies who ran it, one and the same, supposedly the conscience of the world. Now we see the same thing in the USA: the exceptional country – the country that has bases everywhere, soldiers everywhere, is bombing everywhere in some city or other. ...

“Hillary has some kind of dependency. A passion for power – and that is dangerous for the person who will have her finger on the nuclear button. If she

wins, on November 9th the world will be at the brink of a big war.”

Zhirinovskiy made no secret of his partiality for Trump, calling him “clean” and “a good man” whereas Clinton has “blood on her hands” for the deaths of hundreds of thousands due to her policies as Secretary of State. But then again, Zhirinovskiy has made his political career over more than 30 years precisely by making outrageous statements that run up against what the Russian political establishment says aloud.

Zhirinovskiy had been the loudest voice in Russian politics in favor of Turkey and its president Erdogan, a position which he came to regret when the Turks shot down a Russian jet at the Syrian border, causing a rupture in bilateral relations.

The final word on Russia’s electoral preferences during the Oct. 20 show was given by the moderator, Vladimir Soloviev: “There can be no illusions. Both Trump and Clinton have a very bad attitude toward Russia. What Trump said about us and Syria was no compliment at all. The main theme of American political life right now is McCarthyism and anti-Russian hysteria.”

This being Russia, one might assume that the deeply negative views of the ongoing presidential election reflected a general hostility toward the United States as a country. But nothing of the sort came out from the discussion. To be sure, there was the odd outburst from Zhirinovskiy. But otherwise the panelists, including Zhirinovskiy, displayed informed respect and even admiration for what the U.S. has achieved and represents as a country. But the panelists concluded that the U.S. has a political leadership at the national level that is unworthy and inappropriate to its position in the world.

Yet, back in the U.S., the ongoing hysteria over Russia-gate and the perceived threat that Russia poses to U.S. national interests, risks tilting the world into nuclear war.

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## Protecting the Shaky Russia-gate Narrative

**Exclusive:** The New York Times continues its sorry pattern of falsifying the record on Russia-gate, giving its readers information that the newspaper knows not to be true, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

If Russia-gate is the massive scandal that we are told it is by so many Important People – across the U.S. mainstream media and the political world – why do its proponents have to resort to lies and exaggerations to maintain the pillars supporting the narrative?

A new example on Thursday was The New York Times' statement that a Russian agency "spent \$100,000 on [Facebook's] platform to influence the United States presidential election last year" – when the Times knows that statement is not true.

According to Facebook, only 44 percent of that amount appeared *before* the U.S. presidential election in 2016 (i.e., \$44,000) and few of those ads addressed the actual election. And, we know that the Times is aware of the truth because it was acknowledged in a Times article in early October.

As part of that article, Times correspondents Mike Isaac and Scott Shane reported that the ads also covered a wide range of other topics: "There was even a Facebook group for animal lovers with memes of adorable puppies that spread across the site with the help of paid ads."

As nefarious as the Times may think it is for Russians to promote a Facebook page about "adorable puppies," the absurdity of that concern – and the dishonesty of the Times then "forgetting" what it itself reported just two months ago about the timing and contents of these "Russian-linked ads" – tells you a great deal about Russia-gate.

On Thursday, the Times chose to distort what it already knew to be true presumably because it didn't want to make the \$100,000 ad buy (which is not a particularly large sum) look even smaller and less significant by acknowledging the pre-election total was less than half that modest amount – and even that total had little to do with the election.

Why would the Times lie? Because to tell the truth would undercut the narrative of evil Russians defeating Hillary Clinton and putting Donald Trump in the White House – the core narrative of Russia-gate.

Another relevant fact is that Facebook failed to find any "Russian-linked" ads during its first two searches and only detected the \$100,000 after a personal

visit from Sen. Mark Warner, D-Virginia, the vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee and a leading legislator on Internet regulation.

In other words, Facebook's corporate executives dredged up something to appease Warner. That way, Warner and the Democrats could blame Russia for the Trump presidency, sparing further criticism of Clinton's dreadful campaign (in which she labeled half of Trump's voters "deplorables") and her neo-liberal economic policies (and neo-conservative foreign policies) that have alienated much of America's working class as well as many progressives.

### **Leaving Out Context**

The Times also might have put the \$100,000 in "Russian-linked" ads over a two-year period in the context of Facebook's \$27 billion in annual revenue, but the Times didn't do that – apparently because it would make even the full \$100,000 look like a pittance.

Trimming the total down to \$44,000 and admitting that only a few of those ads actually dealt with Clinton and Trump would be even worse for the Russia-gate narrative.

Ironically, the Times' latest false depiction of the \$100,000 in ads as designed "to influence" the 2016 election appeared in an article about Facebook determining that other Russian-linked ads, which supposedly had a powerful effect on Great Britain's Brexit vote, totaled just three ads at the cost of 97 cents. (That is not a misprint.)

According to Facebook, the three ads, which focused on immigration, were viewed some 200 times by Britons over four days in May 2016. Of course, the response from British parliamentarians who wanted to blame the Brexit vote on Moscow was to assert that Facebook must have missed something. It couldn't be that many Britons had lost faith in the promise of the European Union for their own reasons.

We have seen a similar pattern with allegations about Russian interference in German and French elections, with the initial accusations being widely touted but not so much the later conclusions by serious investigations knocking down the claims. [See, for instance, Consortiumnews.com's "German Intel Clears Russia on Interference."]

The only acceptable conclusion, it seems, is "Russia Guilty!"

These days in Official Washington, it has become almost forbidden to ask for actual evidence that would prove the original claim that Russia "hacked" Democratic emails, even though the accusation came from what President Obama's

Director of National Intelligence James Clapper acknowledged were “hand-picked” analysts from the CIA, FBI and National Security Agency.

These “hand-picked” analysts produced the evidence-lite Jan. 6 “assessment” about Russia “hacking” the emails and slipping them to WikiLeaks – a scenario denied by both WikiLeaks and Russia.

When that “assessment” was released almost a year ago, even the Times’ Scott Shane noticed the lack of proof, writing: “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 Times soon “forgot” what Shane had inconveniently noted and began reporting the Russian “hacking” as accepted wisdom.

### **The 17-Agencies Canard**

Whenever scattered expressions of skepticism arose from a few analysts or non-mainstream media, the doubts were beaten back by the claim that “all 17 U.S. intelligence agencies” concurred in the conclusion that Russian President Vladimir Putin had ordered the hacking to hurt Hillary Clinton and help Donald Trump. And what kind of nut would doubt the collective judgment of all 17 U.S. intelligence agencies!

Though the 17-agency canard was never true, it served an important purpose in establishing the Russia-gate groupthink. Wielding the “all 17 intelligence agencies” club, the U.S. mainstream media pounded politicians and policymakers into line, making any remaining skeptics seem more out of step and crazy.

So, in May 2017, when Clapper (along with former CIA Director John Brennan) admitted in congressional testimony that it wasn’t true that all 17 agencies concurred in the Russian hacking conclusion, those statements received very little attention in the mainstream media.

The New York Times among other major news outlets just continued asserting the 17-agency falsehood until the Times was finally pressured to correct its lie in late June, but that only led to the Times shifting to slightly different but still misleading wording, citing a “consensus” among the intelligence agencies without mentioning a number or by simply stating the unproven hacking claim as flat fact.

Even efforts to test the Russian-hack claims through science were ignored or ridiculed. When former NSA technical director William Binney conducted

experiments that showed that the known download speed of one batch of DNC emails could not have occurred over the Internet but matched what was possible for a USB-connected thumb drive – an indication that a Democratic insider likely downloaded the emails and thus that there was no “hack” – Binney was mocked as a “conspiracy theorist.”

Even with the new disclosures about deep-seated anti-Trump bias in text messages exchanged between two senior FBI officials who played important early roles in the Russia-gate investigation, there is no indication that Official Washington is willing to go back to the beginning and see how the Russia-gate story might have been deceptively spun.

In a recently released Aug. 15, 2016 text message from Peter Strzok, a senior FBI counterintelligence official, to his reputed lover, senior FBI lawyer Lisa Page, Strzok referenced an apparent plan to keep Trump from getting elected before suggesting the need for “an insurance policy” just in case he did. A serious investigation into Russia-gate might want to know what these senior FBI officials had in mind.

But the Times and other big promoters of Russia-gate continue to dismiss doubters as delusional or as covering up for Russia and/or Trump. By this point – more than a year into this investigation – too many Important People have bought into the Russia-gate narrative to consider the possibility that there may be little or nothing there, or even worse, that it is the “insurance policy” that Strzok envisioned.

**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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## The Foundering Russia-gate ‘Scandal’

**Exclusive:** Taking on water from revealed FBI conflicts of interest, the foundering Russia-gate probe – and its mainstream media promoters – are resorting to insults against people who note the listing ship, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The disclosure of fiercely anti-Trump text messages between two romantically

involved senior FBI officials who played key roles in the early Russia-gate inquiry has turned the supposed Russian-election-meddling “scandal” into its own scandal, by providing evidence that some government investigators saw it as their duty to block or destroy Donald Trump’s presidency.

As much as the U.S. mainstream media has mocked the idea that an American “deep state” exists and that it has maneuvered to remove Trump from office, the text messages between senior FBI counterintelligence official Peter Strzok and senior FBI lawyer Lisa Page reveal how two high-ranking members of the government’s intelligence/legal bureaucracy saw their role as protecting the United States from an election that might elevate to the presidency someone as unfit as Trump.

In one Aug. 6, 2016 text exchange, Page told Strzok: “Maybe you’re meant to stay where you are because you’re meant to protect the country from that menace.” At the end of that text, she sent Strzok a link to a David Brooks [column](#) in The New York Times, which 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.”

Apparently after reading that stirring advice, Strzok replied, “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.”

At a House Judiciary Committee hearing on Wednesday, Rep. Jim Jordan, R-Ohio, criticized Strzok’s boast that “I can protect our country at many levels.” Jordan said: “this guy thought he was super-agent James Bond at the FBI [deciding] there’s no way we can let the American people make Donald Trump the next president.”

In the text messages, Strzok also expressed visceral contempt for working-class Trump voters, for instance, writing on Aug. 26, 2016, “Just went to a southern Virginia Walmart. I could SMELL the Trump support. ... it’s scary real down here.”

Another text message suggested 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 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.”

It’s unclear what strategy these FBI officials were contemplating to ensure

Trump's defeat, but the comments mesh with what an intelligence source told me after the 2016 election, that there was a plan among senior Obama administration officials to use the allegations about Russian meddling to block Trump's momentum with the voters and – if elected – to persuade members of the Electoral College to deny Trump a majority of votes and thus throw the selection of a new president into the House of Representatives under the rules of the Twelfth Amendment.

The scheme involved having some Democratic electors vote for former Secretary of State Colin Powell (which did happen), making him the third-place vote-getter in the Electoral College and thus eligible for selection by the House. But the plan fizzled when enough of Trump's electors stayed loyal to their candidate to officially make him President.

After that, Trump's opponents turned to the Russia-gate investigation as the vehicle to create the conditions for somehow nullifying the election, impeaching Trump, or at least weakening him sufficiently so he could not take steps to improve relations with Russia.

In one of her text messages to Strzok, Page made reference to a possible Watergate-style ouster of Trump, writing: "Bought all the president's men. Figure I needed to brush up on watergate."

As a key feature in this oust-Trump effort, Democrats have continued to lie by claiming that "all 17 U.S. intelligence agencies concurred" in the assessment that Russia hacked the Democratic emails last year on orders from President Vladimir Putin and then slipped them to WikiLeaks to undermine Hillary Clinton's campaign.

That canard was used in the early months of the Russia-gate imbroglio to silence any skepticism about the "hacking" accusation, and the falsehood was repeated again by a Democratic congressman during Wednesday's hearing of the House Judiciary Committee.

But the "consensus" claim was never true. In May 2017 testimony, President Obama's Director of National Intelligence James Clapper acknowledged that the Jan. 6 "Intelligence Community Assessment" was put together by "hand-picked" analysts from only three agencies: the CIA, FBI and National Security Agency.

### **Biased at the Creation**

And, the new revelations of high-level FBI bias puts Clapper's statement about "hand-picked" analysts in sharper perspective, since any intelligence veteran will tell you that if you hand-pick the analysts you are effectively hand-picking the analysis.

Although it has not yet been spelled out exactly what role Strzok and Page may have had in the Jan. 6 report, I was told by one source that Strzok had a direct hand in writing it. Whether that is indeed the case, Strzok, as a senior FBI counterintelligence official, would almost surely have had input into the selection of the FBI analysts and thus into the substance of the report itself. [For challenges from intelligence experts to the Jan. 6 report, see Consortiumnews.com's "More Holes in the Russia-gate Narrative."]

If the FBI contributors to the Jan. 6 report shared Strzok's contempt for Trump, it could explain why claims from an unverified dossier of Democratic-financed "dirt" on Trump, including salacious charges that Russian intelligence operatives videotaped Trump being urinated on by prostitutes in a five-star Moscow hotel, was added as a classified appendix to the report and presented personally to President-elect Trump.

Though Democrats and the Clinton campaign long denied financing the dossier – prepared by ex-British spy Christopher Steele who claimed to rely on second- and third-hand information from anonymous Russian contacts – it was revealed in October 2017 that the Democratic National Committee and the Clinton campaign shared in the costs, with the payments going to the "oppo" research firm, Fusion GPS, through the Democrats' law firm, Perkins Coie.

That discovery helped ensnare another senior Justice Department official, Associate Attorney General Bruce Ohr, who talked with Steele during the campaign and had a post-election meeting with Fusion GPS co-founder Glenn Simpson. Recently, Simpson has acknowledged that Ohr's wife, Nellie Ohr, was hired by Fusion GPS last year to investigate Trump.

Bruce Ohr has since been demoted and Strzok was quietly removed from the Russia-gate investigation last July although the reasons for these moves were not publicly explained at the time.

Still, the drive for "another Watergate" to oust an unpopular – and to many insiders, unfit – President remains at the center of the thinking among the top mainstream news organizations as they have scrambled for Russia-gate "scoops" over the past year even at the cost of making serious reporting errors.

For instance, last Friday, CNN – and then CBS News and MSNBC – trumpeted an email supposedly sent from someone named Michael J. Erickson on Sept. 4, 2016, to Donald Trump Jr. that involved WikiLeaks offering the Trump campaign pre-publication access to purloined Democratic National Committee emails that WikiLeaks published on Sept. 13, nine days later.

### **Grasping for Confirmation**

Since the Jan. 6 report alleged that WikiLeaks received the “hacked” emails from Russia – a claim that WikiLeaks and Russia deny – the story seemed to finally tie together the notion that the Trump campaign had at least indirectly colluded with Russia.

This new “evidence” spread like wildfire across social media. As The Intercept’s Glenn Greenwald wrote in an article critical of the media’s performance, some Russia-gate enthusiasts heralded the revelation with graphics of cannons booming and nukes exploding.

But the story soon collapsed when it turned out that the date on the email was actually Sept. 14, 2016, i.e., the day *after* WikiLeaks released the batch of DNC emails, not Sept. 4. It appeared that “Erickson” – whoever he was – had simply alerted the Trump campaign to the public existence of the WikiLeaks disclosure.

Greenwald noted, “So numerous are the false stories about Russia and Trump over the last year that I literally cannot list them all.”

Yet, despite the cascade of errors and grudging corrections, including some belated admissions that there was no “17-intelligence-agency consensus” on Russian “hacking” – The New York Times made a preemptive strike against the new documentary evidence that the Russia-gate investigation was riddled with conflicts of interest.

The Times’ lead editorial on Wednesday mocked reporters at Fox News for living in an “alternate universe” where the Russia-gate “investigation is ‘illegitimate and corrupt,’ or so says Gregg Jarrett, a legal analyst who appears regularly on [Sean] Hannity’s nightly exercise in presidential ego-stroking.”

Though briefly mentioning the situation with Strzok’s text messages, the Times offered no details or context for the concerns, instead just heaping ridicule on anyone who questions the Russia-gate narrative.

“To put it mildly, this is insane,” the Times declared. “The primary purpose of Mr. Mueller’s investigation is not to take down Mr. Trump. It’s to protect America’s national security and the integrity of its elections by determining whether a presidential campaign conspired with a foreign adversary to influence the 2016 election – a proposition that grows more plausible every day.”

The Times fumed that “roughly three-quarters of Republicans still refuse to accept that Russia interfered in the 2016 election – a fact that is glaringly obvious to everyone else, including the nation’s intelligence community.” (There we go again with the false suggestion of a consensus within the intelligence community.)

The Times also took to task Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-South Carolina, for seeking “a Special Counsel to investigate ALL THINGS 2016 – not just Trump and Russia.” The Times insisted that “None of these attacks or insinuations are grounded in good faith.”

But what are the Times editors so afraid of? As much as they try to insult and intimidate anyone who demands serious evidence about the Russia-gate allegations, why shouldn't the American people be informed about how Washington insiders manipulate elite opinion in pursuit of reversing “mistaken” judgments by the unwashed masses?

Do the Times editors really believe in democracy – a process that historically has had its share of warts and mistakes – or are they just elitists who think they know best and turn away their noses from the smell of working-class people at Walmart?

**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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## North Korea's Understandable Fears

By escalating threatening rhetoric – and staging provocative military maneuvers – President Trump may believe he can intimidate North Korea into capitulation but history would tell you something else, writes David William Pear.

By David William Pear

Like Pavlov's dog, the mainstream media slobbers [predicable reactions](#) every time North Korea launches another test missile. Listening to the blather one would think that once Kim Jong Un has a missile capable of reaching the U.S., he is going to use it in an unprovoked nuclear attack on the U.S. mainland killing millions of Americans.

However, for Kim to attack the U.S., he would have to be insane, paranoid, and suicidal. Top officials in the U.S. intelligence agencies say he is not. Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats has [said publicly](#) that Kim is acting very rationally; Secretary of State Rex Tillerson says that Kim is [“not insane”](#); the CIA deputy director of the Korea Mission Center, Yong Suk Lee, says that Kim is not suicidal, either.

So we can rest fairly assured that Kim Jong Un is highly unlikely to wake up one morning and nuke America because he can. According to Yong, Kim “wants to rule for a long time and die peacefully in his own bed.”[[CNN, October 6, 2017](#)]. Everyone in the mainstream media knows this or should.

And, North Korea has long had more reasons to fear the U.S. than vice versa. North Korea is not an existential threat to the U.S. national security; but the opposite is not the case – and the U.S. government is not shy about reminding North Korea of that fact. The U.S. regularly practices nuclear attacks on North Korea by air, land and sea, which draw the predictable response from Kim.

Yet, North Korea has offered to stop testing nuclear bombs, if the U.S. would stop playing nuclear war games on its border [[The Guardian](#)]. The reality is that the U.S. has been threatening North Korea for over 70 years.

While the U.S. mainstream media excites the U.S. public with warnings about “crazy” Kim Jong Un, what should frighten the American people is the long history of U.S. crazies who seriously contemplated and/or implicitly threatened to start a nuclear war with a variety of countries. President Trump is not the first president who cannot be trusted with the nuclear button. It is only by sheer luck that the world has escaped a nuclear war or a cataclysmic nuclear accident. There have been many close calls, and one day there may be one too many.

The U.S. keeps gambling with nuclear roulette, threatening North Korea, Iran, Russia, and the enemy *du jour*. One of the favorite U.S. verbal threats is to say that “all options are on the table,” which adversaries understand to include the nuclear option. The U.S. has even used nuclear bombs twice against civilian populations in 1945, and according to many historians unnecessarily, because Japan had already offered to surrender. Hundreds of thousands of Japanese died mostly so that President Harry Truman could impress Soviet leader Josef Stalin with a terrifying show of U.S. military might.

During the Korean War (1950 to 1953). President Truman publicly threatened to use the atomic bomb, and the military planned, practiced and shipped nuclear bombs to Asia to be dropped on North Korea. General Douglas MacArthur wanted to use 26 nuclear bombs and start a war with China, too [[History News Network](#)].

Truman gave General Matthew Ridgeway pre-authorization to use nuclear bombs, even after MacArthur was relieved of his command. Instead, the [U.S. chose to destroy North Korea](#) with conventional bombs and napalm, killing an estimated 20 percent to 30 percent of the population.

The Korean War is called the “Forgotten War” for a number of reasons, including

that the U.S. military suffered what amounted to a humiliating defeat with some 37,000 American soldiers killed while they were being used essentially as negotiating chips. They “died for a tie,” where to draw the Military Demarcation Line between the North and South; and South Korea, too, was largely “destroyed to save it” from communism.

The South Koreans deserve a lot of credit for rebuilding a modern highly advanced society in all categories such as education, healthcare, technology, and their standard of living. But contrary to propaganda mythology, they did not develop under capitalist free-trade and democracy. The South Korean “miracle on the Han River” was achieved under a U.S.-backed military dictatorship, a highly planned economy, and billions of dollars from U.S. aid, loans and direct investment. [“Bad Samaritans: The Myth of Free Trade and the Secret History of Capitalism”, by Ha-Joon Chang].

### **Very Good Reasons**

So, Kim Jong Un has very good reasons to fear U.S. threats. He knows that the U.S. is ruthless enough to kill millions of his people and destroy his country (along with gruesomely dispatching its leaders), much like the U.S. did in Iraq and Libya.

Sen. John McCain’s daughter Meghan McCain said on Fox News that the U.S. should assassinate the “Crazy Fat Kid”. Words like that along with Trump’s insults (“Little Rocket Man”), threats and nuclear war games are sure to draw bombastic verbal reactions by Kim Jong Un and cause him to redouble his nuclear and missile programs. [The Nation].

While the U.S. constantly talks about a denuclearized Korean peninsula, it is the U.S. that first nuclearized it, starting with President Harry Truman’s threats in 1951. Then in July 1957, President Dwight D. Eisenhower unilaterally withdrew from section 13(d) of the 1953 Armistice Agreement, which made the introduction of any new weapon systems in the Korean peninsula forbidden to both sides. The U.S. broke the promise so that it could “equip U.S. forces in Korea with modern weapons;” dual capability (nuclear-conventional) weapons, such as the Honest John and the 280 mm. cannon, i.e. tactical nuclear weapons [National Security Council Report].

All during the rest of the Cold War the U.S. stationed at least 950 nuclear weapons in South Korea. The U.S. may have withdrawn its nuclear weapons from South Korea in 1991 as it says, but it still has plenty in Guam and elsewhere that it uses to constantly threaten North Korea with a nuclear attack.

While the U.S. mainstream media ponders how to get North Korea to sit down at

the negotiating table, it is the U.S. that refuses to talk. North Korea has often offered to sign a permanent peace treaty and non-aggression agreement, but the U.S. has consistently rebuffed the offers. The State Department has repeatedly said in news conferences that it will not negotiate with North Korea unless North Korean officials meet unspecified preconditions first [U.S. Department of State]. What is puzzling is what the preconditions are, and how to get the U.S. to sit down at the table. Yet, the U.S. and its media constantly say it is North Korea that refuses to talk.

### **Understandable Paranoia**

Unless there is a diplomatic solution, Kim Jong Un is rationally following in his father's footsteps by developing a credible nuclear deterrent against threatened U.S. aggression.

In 2000, George W. Bush scoffed at President Clinton's nuclear agreement with North Korea, and then, as President in 2002, Bush intensified threats with his "Axis of Evil" speech, which put North Korea on an enemies list with Iraq and Iran. Bush followed that speech by invading Iraq in 2003 with "Shock and Awe," leaving the cradle of human civilization in ruins and later hanging Saddam Hussein.

Bush did not plan to stop with Iraq. Retired Gen. Wesley Clark says he was told at the Pentagon that Bush planned to invade seven countries in five years: Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Iran [YouTube].

It is the U.S. that has been paranoid, unpredictable and insane during the Twenty-first Century. And the problem did not start with Trump. After the initial U.S. invasion of Iraq, a smug-looking Bush got out of the passenger seat of a fighter jet that the pilot had landed on the USS Abraham Lincoln. He strutted over to the microphone in his flight suit and gave a premature "Mission Accomplished" speech.

Lisa Schiffren gushed in the Wall Street Journal that Bush's performance made him look hot and sexy in his flight suit, adding with admiration that Bush is "credible as a Commander in Chief." The mainstream media has been the cheerleader for all of the Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Obama, Clinton and Kerry wars. The media is now inciting the U.S. public with propaganda for war with North Korea, Iran and Russia.

What can be said of Trump is that he seems to take pride in acting even crazier than his predecessors. So, Kim Jong Un is not paranoid to be fearful of what the U.S. might do and he has been acting predictably. The U.S. has left him little choice other than to defend his country with the deterrent of nuclear weapons.

As part of the “Axis of Evil” strategy, President George W. Bush sabotaged the negotiated nuclear agreement that the U.S. and North Korea had made under President Bill Clinton in the 1990s. That is what precipitated North Korea withdrawing from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and resuming its nuclear program.

### **Lessons Learned**

Other countries tried submissive tactics to mollify Washington. For instance, in 2003, Bush persuaded Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi to abandon his nuclear program. At the time, Bush encouraged North Korea to follow suit, saying “we want to have lessons learned, because we want Libya to be a model for other countries” to unilaterally disarm.

So, North Korea was paying close attention in 2011 when President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton backed a military campaign that exploited Libya’s defenselessness, destroyed the country, and led to Gaddafi’s torture-murder. In a TV interview, Clinton gloated “we came, we saw, he died!, hahaha!”

The lesson of Libya, according to Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats, is that “unfortunately, if you have nukes, never give them up – if you don’t have them, get them.”

Based on that history, the North Koreans are not going to trust a U.S. agreement again. They will trust in themselves, as they did when Kim’s grandfather Kim Il-sung led the guerrilla warfare against the Japanese. Korea’s historical philosophy is based on the principle of self-sufficiency and resistance against foreign domination, especially in the North.

The North Koreans now call their historical philosophy “Juche.” North Korea is determined to follow the principle of Juche to the “realization of independence in politics, self-sufficiency in the economy and self-reliance in national defence.” [official DPRK Juche link].

Now, President Trump has slammed the door shut on negotiations with Kim Jong Un by threatening to totally destroy North Korea with “fire and fury” and insulting him as the “Little Rocket Man.”

Kim takes it seriously when the U.S. repeatedly threatens to destroy his country. Trump’s insults also caused Kim to “lose face (kibun),” a very serious affront in Korean culture. The natural reaction for a Korean who has been disrespected is to become infuriated. It is predictable, and the U.S. knows it.

U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Nikki Haley’s latest outburst that “if war comes, the North Korean regime will be utterly destroyed” is a further provocation,

which the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov called “a really bloodthirsty tirade.”

But Lavrov added that “Moscow has been closely working with the U.S. on the North Korean issue, with several meetings being held between the countries’ diplomats in the Russian capital, and other venues.”

### **Vast Bloodshed**

In the late Twentieth and early Twentieth-first centuries, U.S. wars and embargoes have killed millions of people around the planet, according to some estimates. Besides deploying devastating high-tech military weapons, the U.S. has interdicted food and medical supplies as part of total-war concepts.

As President Bill Clinton’s U.N. Ambassador (and later Secretary of State) Madeleine Albright once said, 500,000 dead children in Iraq – victims of U.S. sanctions – were “worth it” to punish the Iraqi government’s behavior. That is what the U.S. sanctions are now doing to North Korea. But as Russian President Vladimir Putin said, “North Korea will ‘eat grass’ before giving up nukes.”

The Koreans know the history of U.S. war-making well. The U.S. first contact with Korea in the Nineteenth Century involved a U.S. military expedition in support of a U.S. trade mission that challenged Korea’s isolation, self-sufficiency and refusal to trade. The appearance of U.S. warships sparked a conflict that led to the Americans killing some 243 Koreans at the cost of three American lives. When Japan colonized and annexed Korea in 1910, the Western colonial powers including the U.S. cheered approval.

All Korea has ever wanted was to be left alone. During its 4,000-year history, Korea has not been an aggressive expansionist country. To the contrary, Korea has been invaded by China, Mongolia, Japan, Russia and the U.S. Historically, Korea has resisted contact with foreigners because foreigners had always brought invasions.

Like his Korean ancestors, Kim Jong Un wants North Korea to be left alone for the Korean people to determine their own future.

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# Russia-gate's Litany of Corrections

**Exclusive:** As much as the U.S. mainstream media insists that the Russia-gate scandal is growing, what is undeniably growing is the list of major corrections that news outlets have been forced to issue, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The U.S. mainstream media's year-long hysteria over Russia's alleged role in the election of Donald Trump has obliterated normal reporting standards leading to a rash of journalistic embarrassments that have both disgraced the profession and energized Trump's backers over new grievances about the MSM's "fake news."



Misguided groupthink is always a danger when key elements of the Washington establishment and the major news media share the same belief – whether that is Iraq's supposed possession of WMD or the need to bring down some foreign or domestic leader unpopular with the elites.

Yet, we have rarely witnessed such a cascading collapse of journalistic principles as has occurred around the Russia-gate "scandal." It is hard to keep track of all the corrections or to take note of all the dead ends that the investigation keeps finding.

But anyone who dares note the errors, the inconsistencies or the illogical claims is either dismissed as a "Kremlin stooge" or a "Trump enabler." The national Democrats and the mainstream media seem determined to keep hurtling down the Russia-gate roadway assuming that the evidentiary barriers ahead will magically disappear at some point and the path to Trump's impeachment will be clear.

On Friday, the rush to finally prove the Russia-gate narrative led CNN – and then CBS News and MSNBC – to trumpet an email supposedly sent from someone named Michael J. Erickson on Sept. 4, 2016, to Donald Trump Jr. that involved WikiLeaks offering the Trump campaign pre-publication access to purloined Democratic National Committee emails that WikiLeaks published on Sept. 13, nine days later.

With CNN finally tying together the CIA's unproven claim that WikiLeaks collaborates with Russia and the equally unproven claim that Russian intelligence "hacked" the Democratic emails, CNN drew the noose more tightly around the Trump campaign for "colluding" with Russia.

After having congressional reporter Manu Raju lay out the supposed facts of the scoop, CNN turned to a panel of legal experts to pontificate about the crimes that the Trump campaign may have committed now that the "evidence" proving Russia-gate was finally coming together.

Not surprisingly the arrival of this long-awaited "proof" of Russian "collusion" exploded across social media. As The Intercept's Glenn Greenwald noted in an article critical of the media's performance, some Russia-gate enthusiasts heralded the CNN revelation with graphics of cannons booming and nukes exploding.

The problem, however, was that CNN and other news outlets that jumped on the story misreported the date of the email; it was Sept. 14, 2016, i.e., the day *after* WikiLeaks released the batch of DNC emails, not Sept. 4. In other words, it appeared that "Erickson" – whoever he was – was simply alerting the Trump campaign to the WikiLeaks disclosure.

CNN later issued a quiet correction to its inflammatory report – and not surprisingly people close to Trump cited the false claim as yet another example of "fake news" being spread by the mainstream media, which has put itself at the forefront of the anti-Trump Resistance over the past year.

But this sloppy journalism – compounded by CNN's rush to put the "Sept. 4 email" in some criminal context and with CBS and MSNBC panting close behind – was not a stand-alone screw-up. A week earlier, ABC News made a similar mistake in claiming that candidate Donald Trump instructed Michael Flynn to contact Russian officials during the campaign, when Trump actually made the request after the election when Flynn was national security adviser-designate, a thoroughly normal move for a President-elect to make. That botched story led ABC News to suspend veteran investigative reporter Brian Ross.

Another inaccurate report from Bloomberg News, The Wall Street Journal and other news outlets – that Russia-gate special prosecutor Robert Mueller had subpoenaed Deutsche Bank records of President Trump and his family – was denied by Trump's lawyer and later led to more corrections. The error apparently was that the bank records were not those of Trump and his family but possibly other associates.

## **A Pattern of Bias**

But it wasn't just a bad week for American mainstream journalism. The string of

errors followed a pattern of earlier false and misleading reporting and other violations of journalistic standards, a sorry record that has been the hallmark of the Russia-gate “scandal.” Many stories have stirred national outrage toward nuclear-armed Russia before petering out as either false or wildly exaggerated. [See, for instance, Consortiumnews.com’s [“Russia-gate Jumps the Shark.”](#)]

As Greenwald [noted](#), “So numerous are the false stories about Russia and Trump over the last year that I literally cannot list them all.”

The phenomenon began in the weeks after Trump’s shocking victory over Hillary Clinton as Democrats and the mainstream media looked for people to blame for the defeat of their much-preferred candidate.

So, on Thanksgiving Day, just weeks after the election, The Washington Post published a front-page story based on an anonymous group called PropOrNot accusing 200 Web sites of [acting as propaganda agents](#) for Russia. The list included some of the Internet’s leading independent news sources, including Consortiumnews, but the Post did not bother to contact the slandered Web sites nor to dissect the dubious methodology of the unnamed accusers.

Apparently, the “crime” of the Web sites was to show skepticism toward the State Department’s claims about Syria and Ukraine. In conflating a few isolated cases of “fake news” in which people fabricated stories for political or profitable ends with serious dissent regarding the demonizing of Russia and its allies, the Post was laying down a marker that failure to get in line behind the U.S. government’s propaganda on these and other topics would get you labeled a “Kremlin tool.”

As the Russia-gate hysteria built in the run-up to Trump’s inauguration during the final weeks of the Obama administration, the Post also jumped on a claim from the Department of Homeland Security that Russian hackers had penetrated into the nation’s electrical grid through Vermont’s Burlington Electric.

As journalist Gareth Porter [noted](#), “The Post failed to follow the most basic rule of journalism, relying on its DHS source instead of checking with the Burlington Electric Department first. The result was the Post’s sensational Dec. 30 story under the headline ‘Russian hackers penetrated U.S. electricity grid through a utility in Vermont, U.S. officials say.’ ...

“The electric company quickly issued a firm denial that the computer in question was connected to the power grid. The Post was forced to retract, in effect, its claim that the electricity grid had been hacked by the Russians. But it stuck by its story that the utility had been the victim of a Russian hack for another three days before admitting that no such evidence of a hack existed.”

## The Original Sin

In other cases, major news outlets, such as The New York Times, reported dubious Russia-gate claims from U.S. intelligence agencies as flat fact, rather than unproven allegations that remain in serious dispute. The Times and others reported Russian “hacking” of Democratic emails as true even though WikiLeaks denied getting the material from the Russians and the Russians denied providing it.

For months into 2017, in dismissing or ignoring those denials, the U.S. mainstream media reported routinely that all 17 U.S. intelligence agencies concurred in the conclusion that Russia was behind the disclosure of Democratic emails as part of a plot initiated by Russian President Vladimir Putin to help elect Trump. Anyone who dared question this supposed collective judgment of all the U.S. intelligence agencies risked being called a “conspiracy theorist” or worse.

But the “consensus” claim was never true. Such a consensus judgment would have called for a comprehensive National Intelligence Estimate, which was never commissioned on the Russian “hacking” issue. Instead there was something called an “Intelligence Community Assessment” on Jan. 6 that – according to testimony by President Obama’s Director of National Intelligence James Clapper in May 2017 – was put together by “hand-picked” analysts from only three agencies: the CIA, FBI and National Security Agency.

Even after Clapper’s testimony, the “consensus” canard continued to circulate. For instance, in The New York Times’ White House Memo of June 25, correspondent Maggie Haberman mocked Trump for “still refus[ing] to acknowledge a basic fact agreed upon by 17 American intelligence agencies that he now oversees: Russia orchestrated the attacks, and did it to help get him elected.”

Finally, the Times ran a correction appended to that article. The Associated Press ran a similar “clarification” applied to some of its fallacious reporting which used the “17-intelligence-agencies” meme.

After the correction, however, the Times simply shifted to other deceptive wording to continue suggesting that U.S. intelligence agencies were in accord on Russian “hacking.” Other times, the Times just asserted the claim of Russian email hacking as flat fact. All of this was quite unprofessional, since the Jan. 6 “assessment” itself stated that it was not asserting Russian “hacking” as fact, explaining: “Judgments are not intended to imply that we have proof that shows something to be a fact.”

Even worse than the Times, the “fact-checking” site Politifact, which is part of

Google's First Draft Coalition for deciding what the search engine's algorithms will promote as true and what information will be disappeared as false, simply decided to tough it out and continued insisting that the false "consensus" claim was true.

When actual experts, such as former National Security Agency technical director William Binney, sought to apply scientific analysis to the core claim about Russian "hacking," they reached the unpopular conclusion that the one known download speed of a supposed "hack" was not possible over the Internet but closely matched what would occur via a USB download, i.e., from someone with direct access to the Democratic National Committee's computers using a thumb drive. In other words, the emails more likely came from a DNC insider, not an external "hack" from the Russians or anyone else.

You might have thought that the U.S. news media would have welcomed Binney's discovery. However, instead he was either ignored or mocked as a "conspiracy theorist." The near-religious belief in the certainty of the Russian "hack" was not to be mocked or doubted.

### **'Hand-picked' Trouble**

In recent days, former DNI Clapper's reference to "hand-picked" analysts for the Jan. 6 report has also taken on a more troubling odor, since questions have been raised about the objectivity of the Russia-gate investigators and – as any intelligence expert will tell you – if you "hand-pick" analysts known for their personal biases, you are hand-picking the conclusion, a process that became known during the Reagan administration as "politicizing intelligence."

Though little is known about exactly who was "hand-picked" by President Obama's intelligence chiefs to assess the Russian "hacking" suspicions, Russia-gate special prosecutor Robert Mueller has been forced to reassign Peter Strzok, one of the top FBI investigators who worked on both the Hillary Clinton email-server case and the Trump-Russia inquiry, after it was discovered that he exchanged anti-Trump and pro-Clinton text messages with a lawyer who also works at the FBI.

Last week, Republicans on the House Judiciary Committee sought answers from new FBI Director Christopher Wren about Strzok's role in clearing Hillary Clinton of criminal wrongdoing in her use of a private unsecured email server to handle official State Department communications while Secretary of State. They also wanted to know what role in the Russia-gate probe was played by a Democratic-funded "opposition research" report from ex-British intelligence officer Christopher Steele, which included unverified hearsay claims by unnamed Russians about Trump.

Wren avoided direct answers by citing an ongoing Inspector General's review and Mueller's criminal investigation, but Republicans expressed displeasure at this evasiveness.

The Republican questions prompted E.J. Dionne Jr., a liberal columnist at The Washington Post, to publish a spirited attack on the GOP committee members, accusing them of McCarthyistic tactics in questioning the FBI's integrity.

Dionne's straw man was to postulate that Republicans – because of this discovery of anti-Trump bias – would discount evidence that proves Trump's collusion with Russia: “if Strzok played some role in developing [the] material. ... Trump's allies want us to say: Too bad the president lied or broke the law or that Russia tried to tilt our election. This FBI guy sending anti-Trump texts is far more important, so let's just forget the whole thing. Really?”

But the point is that no such evidence of Russian collusion has been presented and to speculate how people might react if such evidence is discovered is itself McCarthyistic, suggesting guilt based on hypotheticals, not proof. Whatever one thinks of Trump, it is troubling for Dionne or anyone to imply treasonous activities based on speculation. That is the sort of journalistic malfeasance that has contributed to the string of professional abuses that pervades Russia-gate.

What we are witnessing is such an intense desire by mainstream journalists to get credit for helping oust Trump from office that they have forgotten that journalism's deal with the public should be to treat everyone fairly, even if you personally disdain the subject of your reporting.

Journalists are always going to get criticized when they dig up information that puts some politician or public figure in a negative light, but that's why it's especially important for journalists to strive for genuine fairness and not act as if journalism is just another cover for partisan hatchetmen.

The loss of faith among large swaths of Americans in the professionalism of journalists will ultimately do severe harm to the democratic process by transforming information into just one more ideological weapon. Some would say that the damage has already been done.

It was, if you recall, the U.S. mainstream media that started the controversy over “fake news,” expanding the concept from the few low-lives who make up stories for fun and profit into a smear against anyone who expressed skepticism toward State Department narratives on foreign conflicts. That was the point of The Washington Post's PropOrNot story.

But now many of these same mainstream outlets are livid when Trump and his

backers throw the same “fake news” epithet back at the major media. The sad truth is that The New York Times, The Washington Post, CNN, MSNBC and other leading news organizations that have let their hatred of Trump blind them from their professional responsibilities have made Trump’s job easy.

**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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## National Democrats Resist Reforms

Still refusing to face why Donald Trump and the Republicans won in 2016, the national Democratic Party rebuffs proposals from progressives to make the party more democratic and less corporate-dominated, writes Norman Solomon.

By Norman Solomon

With the Democratic Party’s “Unity Reform Commission” now history, major political forces are entering a new stage of contention over the future of the party. Seven months after the commission’s first meeting – and nine months after Hillary Clinton backer Tom Perez won a close election over Bernie Sanders supporter Keith Ellison to become chair of the Democratic National Committee – the battle lines are coming into focus for next year.

The commission’s final meeting adjourned on Saturday after a few steps toward democratizing the party had won approval – due to the grassroots strength of progressives. But the recommendations from the commission will go to the Rules and Bylaws Committee, which was one of the DNC decision-making bodies that Perez subjected to a purge two months ago. Now, in the words of Jim Zogby (who was removed from the Executive Committee by Perez), “There are virtually no Bernie supporters on the Rules and Bylaws Committee.”

When the latest Unity Reform Commission meeting got underway, Perez talked a lot about unity. But kicking Sanders supporters off of key DNC committees is the ugly underside of an ongoing dual discourse. (Are we supposed to believe Perez’s soothing words or our own eyes?) And party unity behind a failed approach – internally undemocratic and politically hitched to corporate wagons – would hardly be auspicious.

“Emerging sectors of the electorate are compelling the Democratic Party to come to terms with adamant grassroots rejection of economic injustice,

institutionalized racism, gender inequality, environmental destruction and corporate domination,” says the recent report “Autopsy: The Democratic Party in Crisis” (which I co-authored). The report adds: “Siding with the people who constitute the base isn’t truly possible when party leaders seem to be afraid of them.”

DNC Chairman Perez and allied power brokers keep showing that they’re afraid of the party’s progressive base. No amount of appealing rhetoric changes that reality.

“We pride ourselves on being inclusive and welcoming to all,” the Democratic National Committee proclaimed anew at the start of this month, touting the commission meeting as “open to the public.” Yet the DNC delayed and obscured information about the meeting, never replying to those who filled out an online RSVP form – thus leaving them in the dark about the times of the meeting. In short, the DNC went out of its way to suppress public turnout rather than facilitate it.

### **Rebuking the DNC**

One member of the task force that wrote the Autopsy, Karen Bernal, is the chair of the Progressive Caucus of the California Democratic Party. After traveling across the country and sitting in the sparse audience during the first day of the Unity Reform Commission meeting, she took the liberty of speaking up as the second day got underway. Bernal provided a firm rebuke of the DNC’s efforts to suppress public attendance.

“For all of the talk about wanting to improve and reform and make this party more transparent, the exact opposite has happened,” Bernal told the commission. (Her intervention, which lasted a little more than two minutes, aired in full on C-SPAN.)

On Sunday, a mass email from Zogby via Our Revolution summed up: “We are fighting for racial, social, economic, and environmental justice. The Democratic Party needs everyone, regardless of their race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age, ability, country of origin, language, or socioeconomic status, to be deeply involved in order to change the course of this country.”

For those reasons, he added, “we are calling for an end to superdelegates, [for] open primaries and caucuses, [for] same-day registration, and [for] more transparent, fair, and accountable leadership at the helm of the DNC.”

Overall, the commission approved some recommendations that were partial victories for progressives. Among the most notable: It called for reducing the number of notoriously undemocratic superdelegates to the national convention

from 712 to about 300, while the only democratic number would be zero.

[Superdelegates are party insiders who are not chosen through a primary or caucus but nevertheless get to vote for the party's nominees. In 2016, they broke overwhelmingly for Hillary Clinton.]

The commission somewhat improved transparency for often-dubious DNC contracts with high-paid consultants and vendors, while defeating sensible amendments by commission member Nomiki Konst – who spoke with notable clarity about the need to clamp down on financial conflicts of interest among DNC decision-makers.

The eight Sanders appointees – Konst, Zogby, Larry Cohen, Lucy Flores, Jane Kleeb, Gus Newport, Nina Turner and Jeff Weaver – put up a good fight as members of the Unity Reform Commission. They were outnumbered, and on key issues were often outvoted, by the 13 who'd been selected by Clinton or Perez. Next year, the odds to overcome will be much worse.

With the purged Rules and Bylaws Committee now overwhelmingly stacked against progressives, only massive pressure from the grassroots will be able to sustain momentum toward a democratic Democratic Party. Meanwhile, corporate forces will do all they can to prevent the Democratic Party from living up to its first name.

**Norman Solomon, the national coordinator of the online activist group RootsAction.org, is a member of the task force that wrote "Autopsy: The Democratic Party in Crisis." His books include *War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death*.**

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## The Tangled Threads of Russia-gate

**Exclusive:** Once a Washington groupthink takes hold, as it has in the fervent belief about Russia-gate, respect for facts and logic fly out the window since all these important people can't be wrong, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

A curious feature about the Russia-gate "scandal" is that its proponents ignore the growing number of moments when their evidence undercuts their narrative. Instead, they press ahead toward a predetermined destination in much the way that true-believing conspiracy theorists are known to do.

For instance, The New York Times ran a story on Monday, entitled "Operative

Offered Trump Campaign Access to Putin,” detailing how a conservative operative “told a Trump adviser that he could arrange a back-channel meeting between Donald J. Trump and Vladimir V. Putin, the Russian president, according to an email sent to the Trump campaign” – and apparently described to the Times by a helpful source on Capitol Hill.

The Times quoted the email from National Rifle Association member Paul Erickson to Trump campaign adviser Rick Dearborn as saying, “Putin is deadly serious about building a good relationship with Mr. Trump. ... [Putin] wants to extend an invitation to Mr. Trump to visit him in the Kremlin before the election.”

An NRA conference in Louisville, Kentucky, was supposed to be the location for the “first contact” between the Russians and the Trump campaign, according to the email.

The Times treated its new information as further confirmation of nefarious connections between the Trump campaign and the Russian government. Immediately after introducing this May 2016 email, which had the subject line, “Kremlin Connection,” the Times reprised the background of former FBI Director Robert Mueller conducting a special-prosecutor investigation into “Russian interference in the election and possible collusion with the Trump campaign.”

Note how the Times’ reference to “Russian interference” was treated as flat fact although the Times still hedges on “possible collusion” between the Kremlin and the Trump campaign. Like much of the U.S. mainstream media, the Times no longer bothers to use “alleged” in front of “Russian interference” even though no solid evidence of a coordinated Kremlin effort has been presented.

But there is a bigger problem with this “scoop”: If the Russia-gate narrative were correct – that the Kremlin had identified Trump years earlier as a likely U.S. president and undertook a multi-year campaign to bribe and blackmail him to be Moscow’s Manchurian candidate or Putin’s “puppet” as Hillary Clinton charged – the Russians wouldn’t need some little-known “conservative operative” to serve as an intermediary in May 2016 to set up a back-channel meeting.

### **The Contradiction**

In other words, assuming that the Times’ story is correct, the email suggests the opposite of the impression that the Times wants its readers to get. The email is either meaningless in that it led to no actual meeting or it contradicts the storyline about a longstanding Russian operation to plant a patsy in the White House.

Times reporter Nicholas Fandos noted that it was unclear what Dearborn did in response to this overture, although the Times reported that Dearborn had

forwarded a similar proposal by Christian conservative activist Rick Clay to Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner, who rebuffed the offer.

On Monday, I read the rest of the Times email story looking for some acknowledgement of the problems with its implied scenario, but found none. Fandos made references to other low-level efforts by Russians to make contact with Trump's advisers (without noticeable success, I might add), but again these examples actually run counter to the image of Trump as the Kremlin's prized chump.

If Putin had several years ago foreseen what no one else did – that Trump would become the U.S. president – then these ad hoc contacts with members of Trump's entourage in 2016 would not have been needed.

The Times' scoop parallels the story of the plea deal that Russia-gate prosecutors struck with low-level Trump foreign policy adviser George Papadopoulos who admitted lying about his contacts with an obscure academic in Stirling, Scotland, who supposedly offered to be another intermediary between Trump's team and the Kremlin.

According to court documents, Papadopoulos, a 30-year-old campaign aide, got to know a professor of international relations who claimed to have "substantial connections with Russian government officials," with the professor identified in press reports as Joseph Mifsud, who is associated with the University of Stirling.

The first contact between Mifsud and Papadopoulos supposedly occurred in mid-March 2016 in Italy, with a second meeting in London on March 24 when the professor purportedly introduced Papadopoulos to a Russian woman whom the young campaign aide believed to be Putin's niece, an assertion that Mueller's investigators determined wasn't true.

Trump, who then was under pressure for not having a foreign policy team, included Papadopoulos as part of a list drawn up to fill that gap, and Papadopoulos participated in a campaign meeting on March 31 in Washington at which he suggested a meeting between Trump and Putin, a prospect that other senior aides reportedly slapped down.

In other words, at least based on the reporting about the Dearborn email and the Papadopoulos overture, there is no reason to believe that Trump was colluding with Moscow or had any significant relationship at all.

If these developments point to anything, it is to the opposite; that Russia was fishing for some contacts with what – however implausibly – was starting to look like a possible future U.S. president, but with whom they were not well-

connected.

### **Gotcha Moments**

There have been similar problems with other Russia-gate “gotcha” moments, such as disclosures of a possible Trump hotel deal in Moscow with Mikhail Fridman of Russia’s Alfa Bank. Though Trump’s presumed financial tie-ins to Russian oligarchs close to Putin were supposed to be fundamental to the Russia-gate narrative, the outcome of the hotel deal turned out to be a big nothing.

One source knowledgeable about the proposed deal told me it fell apart because Trump was willing to put little on the table beyond the branding value of the Trump name. However, if Putin were actually trying to buy Trump’s loyalty, money presumably would have been no obstacle. Indeed, you would think that the more money used to line Trump’s pockets the better. But the hotel deal collapsed; there is no Trump hotel in Moscow.

Other Russia-gate cases are equally disconnected from what had been the original narrative about senior Russians spending years cultivating Trump as their Manchurian candidate.

The accusations against Trump’s onetime campaign chief Paul Manafort focus on his alleged failure to report income from – and pay taxes on – work that he did for the elected government of Ukraine before any involvement in the Trump campaign.

Last week’s guilty plea from former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn related to purportedly false statements and omissions that he made when questioned by FBI agents about calls to Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak during the transition, i.e., after Trump had been elected.

Despite the breathless coverage on MSNBC and the Times’ excited headlines about how the “inquiry grows,” there remain other core problems for the narrative. No matter how often the U.S. mainstream media asserts the suspicion of Russian “hacking” of Democratic emails as flat fact, no solid proof has yet been presented – and the claim has been denied by both the Russian government and WikiLeaks, which published the key emails.

### **Sleight of Hand**

The Times and other mainstream media outlets play their sleight of hand on this key point by asserting that “U.S. intelligence agencies” have “concluded” that Russian intelligence services “hacked” the emails from the Democratic National Committee and Clinton’s campaign chief John Podesta, but that summary ignores the specifics.

First of all, by using this summary of the facts, the Times and other outlets continue to give the false impression that all 17 U.S. intelligence agencies concurred in the conclusion, a false claim that Hillary Clinton and the mainstream press have asserted over and over, although it is now clear that no such consensus ever existed.

Former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper testified that the Jan. 6 report on alleged Russian interference was produced by “hand-picked” analysts from only three organizations: the FBI, CIA and National Security Agency.

And, even those “hand-picked” analysts stipulated that they were not asserting Russian guilt as fact but only as their best guess. They included the disclaimer: “Judgments are not intended to imply that we have proof that shows something to be a fact. Assessments are based on collected information, which is often incomplete or fragmentary, as well as logic, argumentation, and precedents.”

Even New York Times reporter Scott Shane initially noted the absence of evidence, writing: “What is missing from the 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.’”

Former senior U.S. intelligence officials, including the NSA’s ex-technical director William Binney, have raised further doubts about whether a “hack” occurred. Binney conducted tests on download speeds and determined that the extraction of one known batch of Democratic emails was not possible over the Internet, but did match the speed of a USB download onto a thumb drive, suggesting a leak from a Democratic insider.

So, rather than the many disparate strings of Russia-gate coming neatly together more than a year after last year’s election, the various threads either are becoming hopelessly tangled or flying off in different directions.

**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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## How Russia-gate Rationalizes Censorship

**Special Report:** The Russia-gate hysteria has spread beyond simply a strategy for

neutralizing Donald Trump or even removing him from office into an excuse for stifling U.S. dissent that challenges the New Cold War, reports Joe Lauria.

By Joe Lauria

At the end of October, I wrote an article for *Consortiumnews* about the Democratic National Committee and Hillary Clinton's campaign paying for unvetted opposition research that became the basis for much of the disputed story about Russia allegedly interfering in the 2016 presidential election on the orders of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The piece showed that the Democrats' two paid-for sources that have engendered belief in Russia-gate are at best shaky. First was former British spy Christopher Steele's largely unverified dossier of second- and third-hand opposition research portraying Donald Trump as something of a Russian Manchurian candidate.

And the second was CrowdStrike, an anti-Putin private company, examining the DNC's computer server to dubiously claim discovery of a Russian "hack." In a similar examination of an alleged hack of a Ukrainian artillery app, CrowdStrike also blamed Russia but used faulty data for its report that it was later forced to rewrite. CrowdStrike was hired after the DNC refused to allow the FBI to look at the server.

My piece also described the dangerous consequences of partisan Democratic faith in Russia-gate: a sharp increase in geopolitical tensions between nuclear-armed Russia and the U.S., and a New McCarthyism that is spreading fear – especially in academia, journalism and civil rights organizations – about questioning the enforced orthodoxy of Russia's alleged guilt.

After the article appeared at *Consortiumnews*, I tried to penetrate the mainstream by then publishing a version of the article on the *HuffPost*, which was rebranded from the *Huffington Post* in April this year by new management. As a contributor to the site since February 2006, I am trusted by *HuffPost* editors to post my stories directly online. However, within 24 hours of publication on Nov. 4, *HuffPost* editors retracted the article without any explanation.

This behavior breaks with the earlier principles of journalism that the Web site claimed to uphold. For instance, in 2008, Arianna Huffington told radio host Don Debar that, "We welcome all opinions, except conspiracy theories." She said: "Facts are sacred. That's part of our philosophy of journalism."

But Huffington stepped down as editor in August 2016 and has nothing to do with the site now. It is run by Lydia Polgreen, a former *New York Times* reporter and

editor, who evidently has very different ideas. In April, she completely redesigned the site and renamed it *HuffPost*.

Before the management change, I had published several articles on the *Huffington Post* about Russia without controversy. For instance, *The Huffington Post* published my piece on Nov. 5, 2016, that predicted three days *before* the election that if Clinton lost she'd blame Russia. My point was reaffirmed by the campaign-insider book *Shattered*, which revealed that immediately after Clinton's loss, senior campaign advisers decided to blame Russia for her defeat.

On Dec. 12, 2016, I published another piece, which the *Huffington Post* editors promoted, called, "Blaming Russia To Overturn The Election Goes Into Overdrive." I argued that "Russia has been blamed in the U.S. for many things and though proof never seems to be supplied, it is widely believed anyway."

After I posted an updated version of the *Consortiumnews* piece – renamed "On the Origins of Russia-gate" – I was informed 23 hours later by a Facebook friend that the piece had been retracted by *HuffPost* editors. As a reporter for mainstream media for more than a quarter century, I know that a newsroom rule is that before the serious decision is made to retract an article the writer is contacted to be allowed to defend the piece. This never happened. There was no due process. A *HuffPost* editor ignored my email asking why it was taken down.

### **Support from Independent Media**

Like the word "fascism," "censorship" is an over-used and mis-used accusation, and I usually avoid using it. But without any explanation, I could only conclude that the decision to retract was political, not editorial.

I am non-partisan as I oppose both major parties for failing to represent millions of Americans' interests. I follow facts where they lead. In this case, the facts led to an understanding that the Jan. 6 FBI/NSA/CIA intelligence "assessment" on alleged Russian election interference, prepared by what then-Director of National Intelligence James Clapper called "hand-picked" analysts, was based substantially on unvetted opposition research and speculation, not serious intelligence work.

The assessment even made the point that the analysts were not asserting that the alleged Russian interference was a fact. The report contained the disclaimer: "Judgments are not intended to imply that we have proof that shows something to be a fact. Assessments are based on collected information, which is often incomplete or fragmentary, as well as logic, argumentation, and precedents."

Under deadline pressure on Jan. 6, Scott Shane of *The New York Times* instinctively wrote what many readers of the report must have been

thinking: “What is missing from the 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.’”

Yet, after the Jan. 6 report was published, leading Democrats asserted falsely that the “assessment” represented the consensus judgment of all 17 U.S. intelligence agencies – not just the views of “hand-picked” analysts from three – and much of the U.S. mainstream media began treating the allegations of Russian “hacking” as flat fact, not as an uncertain conclusion denied by both the Russian government and WikiLeaks, which insists that it did not get the two batches of Democratic emails from Russia.

(There is also dissent inside the broader U.S. intelligence community about whether an alleged “hack” over the Internet was even possible based on the download speeds of one known data extraction, which matched what was possible from direct USB access to a computer, i.e., a download onto a thumb drive presumably by a Democratic insider,)

However, because of the oft-repeated “17 intelligence agencies” canard and the mainstream media’s careless reporting, the public impression has built up that the accusations against Russia are indisputable. If you ask a Russia-gate believer today what their faith is based on, they will invariably point to the Jan. 6 assessment and mock anyone who still expresses any doubt.

For instance, an unnamed former CIA officer told *The Intercept* last month, “You’ve got all these intelligence agencies saying the Russians did the hack. To deny that is like coming out with the theory that the Japanese didn’t bomb Pearl Harbor.”

That the supposedly dissident *Intercept* would use this quote is instructive about how imbalanced the media’s reporting on Russia-gate has been. We have actual film of Japanese planes attacking Pearl Harbor and American ships burning – and we have the eyewitness accounts of thousands of U.S. soldiers and sailors. Yet, on Russia-gate, we only have the opinions of some “hand-picked” intelligence officials who themselves say that they are not claiming that their opinions are fact. No serious editor would allow a self-interested and unnamed source to equate the two in print.

In this groupthink atmosphere, it was probably easy for *HuffPost* editors to hear some complaints from a few readers and blithely decide to ban my story. However, before it was pulled, 125 people had shared it. Ray McGovern, a former CIA analyst and frequent contributor to *Consortiumnews*, then took up my cause, being the first to write about the *HuffPost* censorship on his blog. McGovern included

a link to a .pdf file that I captured of the censored HuffPost story. It has since been republished on numerous other websites.

Journalist Max Blumenthal tweeted about it. British filmmaker and writer Tariq Ali posted it on his Facebook page. Ron Paul and Daniel McAdams interviewed me at length about the censorship on their TV program. *ZeroHedge* wrote a widely shared piece and someone actually took the time, 27 minutes and 13 seconds to be exact, to read the entire article on YouTube. I began a petition to *HuffPost's* Polgreen to either explain the retraction or restore the article. It has gained more than 1,900 signatures so far. If a serious fact-check analysis was made of my article, it must exist and can and should be produced.

### **Watchdogs & Media Defending Censorship**

Despite this support from independent media, a senior official at Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, I learned, declined to take up my cause because he believes in the Russia-gate story. I also learned that a senior officer at the American Civil Liberties Union rejected my case because he too believes in Russia-gate. Both of these serious organizations were set up precisely to defend individuals in such situations on principle, not preference.

In terms of their responsibilities for defending journalism and protecting civil liberties, their personal opinions about whether Russia-gate is real or not should be irrelevant. The point is whether journalists should be permitted to show skepticism toward this latest dubiously based groupthink. I fear that – amid the frenzy about Russia and the animosity toward Trump – concerns about careers and funding are driving these decisions, with principles brushed aside.

One online publication decidedly took the *HuffPost's* side. Steven Perlberg, a media reporter for *BuzzFeed*, asked the *HuffPost* why they retracted my article. While ignoring me, the editors issued a statement to *BuzzFeed* saying that “Mr. Lauria’s self-published” piece was “later flagged by readers, and after deciding that the post contained multiple factually inaccurate or misleading claims, our editors removed the post per our contributor terms of use.” Those terms include retraction for “any reason,” including, apparently, censorship.

Perlberg posted the *HuffPost* statement on Twitter. I asked him if he inquired of the editors what those “multiple” errors and “misleading claims” were. I asked him to contact me to get my side of the story. Perlberg totally ignored me. He wrote nothing about the matter. He apparently believed the *HuffPost* and that was that. In this way, he acquiesced with the censorship.

*BuzzFeed*, of course, is the sensationalist outlet that irresponsibly published the Steele dossier in full, even though the accusations – not just about Donald

Trump but also many other individuals – weren't verified. Then on Nov. 14, *BuzzFeed* reporter Jason Leopold wrote one of the most ludicrous of a long line of fantastic Russia-gate stories, reporting that the Russian foreign ministry had sent money to Russian consulates in the U.S. "to finance the election campaign of 2016." The scoop generated some screaming headlines before it became clear that the money was to pay for Russian citizens in the U.S. to vote in the 2016 Duma election.

That Russia-gate has reached this point, based on faith and not fact, was further illustrated by a Facebook exchange I had with Gary Sick, an academic who served on the Ford and Carter national security staffs. When I pressed Sick for evidence of Russian interference, he eventually replied: "If it walks like a duck and talks like a duck..." When I told him that was a very low-bar for such serious accusations, he angrily cut off debate.

Part of this Russia-gate groupthink stems from the outrage – and even shame – that many Americans feel about Trump's election. They want to find an explanation that doesn't lay the blame on the U.S. citizenry or America's current dysfunctional political/media process. It's much more reassuring, in a way, to blame some foreign adversary while also discrediting Trump's legitimacy as the elected president. That leaves open some hope that his election might somehow be negated.

And, so many important people and organizations seem to be verifying the Russia-gate suspicions that the theory must be true. Which is an important point. When belief in a story becomes faith-based or is driven by an intense self-interest, honest skeptics are pushed aside and trampled. That is the way groupthink works, as we saw in the run-up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq when any doubts about Iraq possessing WMD made you a "Saddam apologist."

As the groupthink grows, the true-believers become disdainful of facts that force them to think about what they already believe. They won't waste time making a painstaking examination of the facts or engage in a detailed debate even on something as important and dangerous as a new Cold War with Russia.

This is the most likely explanation for the *HuffPost*'s censorship: a visceral reaction to having their Russia-gate faith challenged.

### **Why Critical News is Suppressed**

But the *HuffPost*'s action is hardly isolated. It is part of a rapidly growing landscape of censorship of news critical of American corporate and political leaders who are trying to defend themselves from an increasingly angry

population. It's a story as old as civilization: a wealthy and powerful elite fending off popular unrest by trying to contain knowledge of how the insiders gain at the others' expense, at home and abroad.

A lesson of the 2016 campaign was that growing numbers of Americans are fed up with three decades of neoliberal policies that have fabulously enriched the top tier of Americans and debased a huge majority of the citizenry. The population has likewise grown tired of the elite's senseless wars to expand their own interests, which these insiders try to conflate with the entire country's interests.

America's bipartisan rulers are threatened by popular discontent from both left and right. They were alarmed by the Bernie Sanders insurgency and by Donald Trump's victory, even if Trump is now betraying the discontented masses who voted for him by advancing tax and health insurance plans designed to further crush them and benefit the wealthy.

Trump's false campaign promises will only make the rulers' problem of a restless population worse. Americans are subjected to economic inequality greater than in the first Gilded Age. They are also subjected today to more war than in the first Gilded Age. American rulers today are engaged in multiple conflicts following decades of post-World War II invasions and coups to expand their global interests.

People with wealth and power always seem to be nervous about losing both. So plutocrats use the concentrated media they own to suppress news critical of their wars and domestic repression. For example, almost nothing was reported about militarized police forces until the story broke out into the open in the Ferguson protests and much of that discontent has been brushed aside more recently.

Careerist journalists readily acquiesce in this suppression of news to maintain their jobs, their status and their lifestyles. Meanwhile, a growing body of poorly paid freelancers compete for the few remaining decent-paying gigs for which they must report from the viewpoint of the mainstream news organizations and their wealthy owners.

To operate in this media structure, most journalists know to excise out the historical context of America's wars of domination. They know to uncritically accept American officials' bromides about spreading democracy, while hiding the real war aims.

Examples abound: America's role in the Ukraine coup was denied or downplayed; a British parliamentary report exposing American lies that led to the destruction

of Libya was suppressed; and most infamously, the media promoted the WMD hoax and the fable of “bringing democracy” to Iraq, leading to the illegal invasion and devastation of that country. A recent example from November is a *60 Minutes* report on the Saudi destruction of Yemen, conspicuously failing to mention America’s crucial role in the carnage.

I’ve pitched numerous news stories critical of U.S. foreign policy to a major American newspaper that were rejected or changed in the editorial process. One example is the declassified Defense Intelligence Agency document of August 2012 that accurately predicted the rise of the Islamic State two years later.

The document, which I confirmed with a Pentagon spokesman, said the U.S. and its Turkish, European and Gulf Arab allies, were supporting the establishment of a Salafist principality in eastern Syria to put pressure on the Syrian government, but the document warned that this Salafist base could turn into an “Islamic State.”

But such a story would undermine the U.S. government’s “war on terrorism” narrative by revealing that the U.S.-backed strategy actually was risking the expansion of the jihadists’ foothold in Syria. The story was twice rejected by my editors and has received attention almost entirely – if not exclusively – on much-smaller independent news Web sites.

Another story I pitched in June 2012, just a year into the Syrian war, about Russia’s motives in Syria being guided by a desire to defeat the growing jihadist threat there, was also rejected. Corporate media wanted to keep the myth of Russia’s “imperial” aims in Syria alive. I had to publish the article outside the U.S., in a South African daily newspaper.

In September 2015 at the U.N. General Assembly, Russian President Vladimir Putin confirmed my story about Russia’s motives in Syria to stop jihadists from taking over. Putin invited the U.S. to join this effort as Moscow was about to launch its military intervention at the invitation of the Syrian government. The Obama administration, still insisting on “regime change” in Syria, refused. And the U.S. corporate media continued promoting the myth that Russia intervened to recapture its “imperial glory.”

It was much easier to promote the “imperial” narrative and to ignore Putin’s clear explanation to French TV channel TF1, which was not picked up by American media.

“Remember what Libya or Iraq looked like before these countries and their organizations were destroyed as states by our Western partners’ forces?” Putin said. “These states showed no signs of terrorism. They were not a threat for

Paris, for the Cote d'Azur, for Belgium, for Russia, or for the United States. Now, they are the source of terrorist threats. Our goal is to prevent the same from happening in Syria.”

### **Why Russia Is Targeted**

So, where are independent-minded Western journalists to turn if their stories critical of the U.S. government and corporations are suppressed?

The imperative is to get these stories out – and Russian media has provided an opening for some. This has presented a new problem for the plutocracy. The suppression of critical news in their corporate-owned media is no longer working if it's seeping out in Russian media (and through some dissident Western news sites on the Internet).

The solution has been to brand the content of the Russian television network, RT, as “propaganda” since it presents facts and viewpoints that most Americans have been kept from hearing. But just because these views – many coming from Americans and other Westerners – are not what you commonly hear on the U.S. mainstream media doesn't make them “propaganda” that must be stigmatized and silenced.

As a Russian-government-financed English-language news channel, RT also gives a Russian perspective on the news, the way CNN and *The New York Times* give an American perspective and the BBC a British one. American mainstream journalists, from my experience, arrogantly deny suppressing news and believe they present a universal perspective, rather than a narrow American view of the world.

The viewpoints of Iranians, Palestinians, Russians, North Koreans and others are never fully reported in the Western media although the supposed mission of journalism is to help citizens understand a frighteningly complex world from multiple points of view. It's impossible to do so without those voices included. Routinely or systematically shutting them out also dehumanizes people in those countries, making it easier to gain popular support to go to war against them.

Russia is scapegoated by charging that RT or *Sputnik* are sowing divisions in the U.S. by focusing on issues like homelessness, racism, or out-of-control militarized police forces, as if these divisive issues didn't already exist. The U.S. mainstream media also seems to forget that the U.S. government has engaged in at least 70 years of interference in other countries' elections, foreign invasions, coups, planting stories in foreign media and cyber-warfare.

Now, these American transgressions are projected onto Moscow. There's also a measure of self-reverence in this for “successful” people with a stake in an establishment that underpins the elite, demonstrating how wonderfully democratic

they are compared to those ogres in Russia.

The overriding point about the “Russian propaganda” complaint is that when America’s democratic institutions, including the press and the electoral process, are crumbling under the weight of corruption that the American elites have created or maintained, someone else needs to be blamed. Russia is both an old and a new scapegoat.

The Jan. 6 intelligence assessment on alleged Russian election meddling is a good example of how this works. A third of its content is an attack on RT for “undermining American democracy” by reporting on Occupy Wall Street, the protest over the Dakota pipeline and, of all things, holding a “third party candidate debates.”

According to the Jan. 6 assessment, RT’s offenses include reporting that “the US two-party system does not represent the views of at least one-third of the population and is a ‘sham.’” RT also “highlights criticism of alleged US shortcomings in democracy and civil liberties.” In other words, reporting on newsworthy events and allowing third-party candidates to express their opinions undermine democracy.

The report also says all this amounts to “a Kremlin-directed campaign to undermine faith in the US Government and fuel political protest,” but it should be noted those protests by dissatisfied Americans are against privileges of the wealthy and the well-connected, a status quo that the intelligence agencies routinely protect.

There are also deeper reasons why Russia is being targeted. The Russia-gate story fits neatly into a geopolitical strategy that long predates the 2016 election. Since Wall Street and the U.S. government lost the dominant position in Russia that existed under the pliable President Boris Yeltsin, the strategy has been to put pressure on getting rid of Putin to restore a U.S. friendly leader in Moscow. There is substance to Russia’s concerns about American designs for “regime change” in the Kremlin.

Moscow sees an aggressive America expanding NATO and putting 30,000 NATO troops on its borders; trying to overthrow a secular ally in Syria with terrorists who threaten Russia itself; backing a coup in Ukraine as a possible prelude to moves against Russia; and using American NGOs to foment unrest inside Russia before they were forced to register as foreign agents. Russia wants Americans to see this perspective.

### **Accelerated Censorship in the Private Sector**

The Constitution prohibits government from prior-restraint, or censorship,

though such tactics were imposed, largely unchallenged, during the two world wars. American newspapers voluntarily agreed to censor themselves in the Second World War before the government dictated it.

In the Korean War, General Douglas MacArthur said he didn't "desire to reestablish wartime censorship" and instead asked the press for self-censorship. He largely got it until the papers began reporting American battlefield losses. On July 25, 1950, "the army ordered that reporters were not allowed to publish 'unwarranted' criticism of command decisions, and that the army would be 'the sole judge and jury' on what 'unwarranted' criticism entailed," according to a Yale University study on military censorship.

After excellent on-the-ground reporting from Vietnam brought the war home to America, the military reacted by instituting, initially in the first Gulf War, serious control of the press by "embedding" reporters from private media companies which accepted the arrangement, much as World War II newspapers censored themselves.

It is important to realize that the First Amendment does not apply to private companies, including the media. It is not illegal for them to practice censorship. I never made a First Amendment argument against the *HuffPost*, for instance. However, under pressure from Washington, even in peacetime, media companies can do the government's dirty work to censor or limit free speech for the government.

In the past few weeks, we've seen an acceleration of attempts by corporations to inhibit Russian media in the U.S. Both Google and Facebook, which dominate the Web with more than 50 percent of ad revenue, were at first resistant to government pressure to censor "Russian propaganda." But they are coming around.

Eric Schmidt, executive chairman of Alphabet, Google's parent company, said on Nov. 18 that Google would "derank" articles from RT and Sputnik in the Google searches, making the stories harder for readers to find. The billionaire Schmidt claimed Russian information can be "repetitive, exploitative, false, [or] likely to have been weaponized," he said. That is how factual news critical of U.S. corporate and political leadership is seen, as a weapon.

"My own view is that these patterns can be detected, and that they can be taken down or deprioritized," Schmidt said.

Though Google would effectively be hiding news produced by RT and *Sputnik*, Schmidt is sensitive to the charge of censorship, even though there's nothing legally to stop him.

"We don't want to ban the sites. That's not how we operate," Schmidt said

cynically. "I am strongly not in favor of censorship. I am very strongly in favor of ranking. It's what we do."

But the "deranking" isn't only aimed at Russian sites; Google algorithms also are taking aim at independent news sites that don't follow the mainstream herd – and thus are accused of spreading Russian or other "propaganda" if they question the dominant Western narratives on, say, the Ukraine crisis or the war in Syria. A number of alternative websites have begun reporting a sharp fall-off of traffic directed to their sites from Google's search engines.

Responding to a deadline from Congress to act, Facebook on Nov. 22 announced that it would inform users if they have been "targeted" by Russian "propaganda." Facebook's help center will tell users if they liked or shared ads allegedly from the St. Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency, which supposedly bought \$100,000 in ads over a two-year period, with more than half these ads coming after the 2016 U.S. election and many not related to politics.

(The \$100,000 sum over two years compares to Facebook's \$27 billion in annual revenue. Plus, Facebook only says it "believes" or it's "likely" that the ads came from that firm, whose links to the Kremlin also have yet to be proved.)

Facebook described the move as "part of our ongoing effort to protect our platforms and the people who use them from bad actors who try to undermine our democracy." Congress wants more from Facebook, so it will not be surprising if users will eventually be told when they've liked or shared an RT report in the future.

While the government can't openly shut down a news site, the Federal Communications Commission's upcoming vote on whether to deregulate the Internet by ending net neutrality will free private Internet companies in the U.S. to further marginalize Russian and dissident websites by slowing them down and thus discouraging readers from viewing them.

Likewise, as the U.S. government doesn't want to be openly seen shutting down RT operations, it is working around the edges to accomplish that.

After the Department of Justice forced, under threat of arrest, RT to register its employees as foreign agents under the *Foreign Agents Registration Act*, State Department spokeswoman Heather Nuaert said last Tuesday that "FARA does not police the content of information disseminated, does not limit the publication of information or advocacy materials, and does not restrict an organization's ability to operate." She'd earlier said that registering would not "impact or affect the ability of them to report news and information. We just have them register. It's as simple as that."

Then on Wednesday the Congressional press office stripped RT correspondents of their Capitol Hill press passes, citing the FARA registration. "The rules of the Galleries state clearly that news credentials may not be issued to any applicant employed 'by any foreign government or representative thereof.' Upon its registration as a foreign agent under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), RT Network became ineligible to hold news credentials," read the letter to RT.

Even so, Russia-gate faithful ignore these aggressive moves and issue calls for even harsher action. After forcing RT to register, Keir Giles, a Chatham House senior consulting fellow, acted as though it never happened. He said in a Council on Foreign Relations Cyber Brief on Nov. 27: "Although the Trump administration seems unlikely to pursue action against Russian information operations, there are steps the U.S. Congress and other governments should consider."

I commented on this development on RT America. It would also have been good to have the State Department's Nuaert answer for this discrepancy about the claim that forced FARA registrations would not affect news gathering when it already has. My criticism of RT is that they should be interviewing U.S. decision-makers to hold them accountable, rather than mostly guests outside the power structure. Tse decision-makers could be called out on air if they refuse to appear.

### **Growing McCarthyite Attacks**

Western rulers' wariness about popular unrest also can be seen in the extraordinary and scurrilous attack on the Canadian website globalresearch.ca. The attack started with a chilling study by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization into the relatively obscure website, followed by a vicious hit piece on Nov. 18 by the *Globe and Mail*, Canada's largest newspaper. The headline was: "How a Canadian website is being used to amplify the Kremlin's view of the world."

"What once appeared to be a relatively harmless online refuge for conspiracy theorists is now seen by NATO's information warfare specialists as a link in a concerted effort to undermine the credibility of mainstream Western media – as well as the North American and European public's trust in government and public institutions," the *Globe and Mail* reported. "Global Research is viewed by NATO's Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence – or StratCom – as playing a key accelerant role in helping popularize articles with little basis in fact that also happen to fit the narratives being pushed by the Kremlin, in particular, and the Assad regime."

I've not agreed with everything I've read on the site. But it is a useful

clearinghouse for alternative media. Numerous *Consortiumnews* articles are republished there, including a handful of mine. But the site's typical sharing and reposting on the Internet is seen by NATO as a plot to undermine the Free World.

Drawing from the NATO report, *The Globe and Mail's* denunciation of this website continued: "It uses that reach to push not only its own opinion pieces, but 'news' reports from little-known websites that regularly carry dubious or false information. At times, the site's regular variety of international-affairs stories is replaced with a flurry of items that bolster dubious reportage with a series of opinion pieces, promoted on social media and retweeted and shared by active bots."

The newspaper continued, "'That way, they increase the Google ranking of the story and create the illusion of multi-source verification,' said Donara Barojan, who does digital forensic research for [StratCom]. But she said she did not yet have proof that Global Research is connected to any government."

This sort of smear is nothing more than a blatant attack on free speech by the most powerful military alliance in the world, based on the unfounded conviction that Russia is a fundamental force for evil and that anyone who has contacts with Russia or shares even a part of its multilateral world view is suspect.

High-profile individuals are now also in the crosshairs of the neo-McCarthyite witchhunt. On Nov. 25 *The Washington Post* ran a nasty hit piece on Washington Capitals' hockey player Alex Ovechkin, one of the most revered sports figures in the Washington area, simply because he, like 86 percent of other Russians, supports his president.

"Alex Ovechkin is one of Putin's biggest fans. The question is, why?" ran the headline. The story insidiously implied that Ovechkin was a dupe of his own president, being used to set up a media campaign to support Putin, who is under fierce and relentless attack in the United States where Ovechkin plays professional ice hockey.

"He has given an unwavering endorsement to a man who U.S. intelligence agencies say sanctioned Russian meddling in last year's presidential election," write the *Post* reporters, once again showing their gullibility to U.S. intelligence agencies that have provided no proof for their assertions (and even admit that they are not asserting their opinion as fact).

Less prominent figures are targeted too. John Kiriakou, a former CIA agent who blew the whistle on torture and was jailed for it, was kicked off a panel in Europe on Nov. 10 by a Bernie Sanders supporter who refused to appear with

Kiriakou because he co-hosts a show on *Radio Sputnik*.

Then last week, Reporters Without Borders, an organization supposedly devoted to press freedom, tried to kick journalist Vanessa Beeley off a panel in Geneva to prevent her from presenting evidence that the White Helmets, a group that sells itself as a rescue organization inside rebel-controlled territory in Syria, has ties to Al Qaeda. The Swiss Press Club, which hosted the event, resisted the pressure and let Beeley speak.

### **Russia-gate's Hurdles**

Much of this spreading global hysteria and intensifying censorship traces back to Russia-gate. Yet, it remains remarkable that the corporate media has failed so far to prove any significant Russian interference in the U.S. election at all. Nor have the intelligence agencies, Congressional investigations and special prosecutor Robert Mueller. His criminal charges so far have been for financial crimes and lying to federal authorities on topics unrelated to any "collusion" between the Trump campaign and Russians to "hack" Democratic emails.

There may well be more indictments from Mueller, even perhaps a complaint about Trump committing obstruction of justice because he said on TV that he fired Comey, in part, because of the "Russia thing." But Trump's clumsy reaction to the "scandal," which he calls "fake news" and a "witch hunt," still is not proof that Putin and the Russians interfered in the U.S. election to achieve the unlikely outcome of Trump's victory.

The Russia-gate faithful assured us to wait for the indictment of retired Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, briefly Trump's national security adviser. But again there was nothing about pre-election "collusion," only charges that Flynn had lied to the FBI or omitted details about two conversations with the Russian ambassador regarding policy matters during the presidential transition, i.e., *after* the election.

And, one of those conversations related to trying unsuccessfully to comply with an Israeli request to get Russia to block a United Nations resolution censuring Israel's settlements on Palestinian land.

As journalist Yasha Levine tweeted: "So the country that influenced US policy through Michael Flynn is Israel, not Russia. But Flynn did try to influence Russia, not the other way around. Ha-ha. This is the smoking gun? What a farce."

There remain a number of key hurdles to prove the Russia-gate story. First, convincing evidence is needed that the Russian government indeed did "hack" the Democratic emails, both those of the DNC and Clinton's campaign chairman John Podesta – and gave them to WikiLeaks. And, further that somehow the Trump

campaign was involved in aiding and abetting this operation, i.e., collusion.

There's also the question of how significant the release of those emails was anyway. They did provide evidence that the DNC tilted the primary campaign in favor of Clinton over Sanders; they exposed the contents of Clinton's paid speeches to Wall Street, which she was trying to hide from the voters; and they revealed some pay-to-play features of the Clinton Foundation and its foreign donations.

But – even if the Russians were involved in providing that information to the American people – those issues were not considered decisive in the campaign. Clinton principally pinned her loss on FBI Director James Comey for closing and then reopening the investigation into her improper use of a private email server while Secretary of State. She also spread the blame to Russia (repeating the canard about “seventeen [U.S. intelligence] agencies, all in agreement”), Bernie Sanders, the inept DNC and other factors.

As for the vaguer concerns about some Russian group “probably” buying \$100,000 in ads, mostly after Americans had voted, as a factor in swaying a \$6 billion election, is too silly to contemplate. That *RT* and *Sputnik* ran pieces critical of Hillary Clinton was their right, and they were hardly alone. *RT* and *Sputnik*'s reach in the U.S. is minuscule compared to *Fox News*, which slammed Clinton throughout the campaign, or for that matter, *MSNBC*, *CNN* and other mainstream news outlets, which often expressed open disdain for Republican Donald Trump but also gave extensive coverage to issues such as the security concerns about Clinton's private email server.

Another vague Russia-gate suspicion stemming largely from Steele's opposition research is that somehow Russia is bribing or blackmailing Trump because Trump has done some past business with Russians. But there are evidentiary and logical problems with these theories, since some lucrative deals fell through (and presumably wouldn't have if Trump was being paid off) – and no one, including the Russians, foresaw Trump's highly improbable election as U.S. President years earlier.

Some have questioned how Trump could have supported detente with Russia without being beholden to Moscow in some way. But Jeffery Sommers, a political scientist at the University of Wisconsin, wrote a convincing essay explaining adviser Steve Bannon's influence on Trump's thinking about Russia and the need for cooperation between the two powers to solve international problems.

Without convincing evidence, I remain a Russia-gate skeptic. I am not defending Russia. Russia can defend itself. However, amid the growing censorship and this dangerous new McCarthyism, I am trying to defend America – from itself.

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