

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 textmessages 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](#)).

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*.

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).

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. The 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.

Joe Lauria is a veteran foreign-affairs journalist. He has written for the

Boston Globe, the Sunday Times of London and the Wall Street Journal among other newspapers. He is the author of *How I Lost By Hillary Clinton* published by OR Books in June 2017. He can be reached at joelauria@gmail.com and followed on Twitter at [@unjoe](https://twitter.com/unjoe).

Democrats Rely on Blame-Shifting

By riding hatred of President Trump and spurring on the Russia-gate hysteria, Democrats hope to win in 2018 without a serious examination of why they lost support of key working- and middle-class voting blocs, says Andrew Spannaus.

By Andrew Spannaus

Victories in state-level elections in New Jersey and Virginia on Nov. 7 have buoyed Democratic hopes for an anti-Trump wave among the population that will lead to a big victory in next year's mid-term elections, and permanently damage President Trump heading towards 2020. Yet there is significant risk in hoping that anti-Trump sentiment will be enough for the Democrats to return to power.

The danger is that the considerable differences between the centrist faction, which for the most part controls the party structure, and the progressive wing of the party, will be swept under the rug in the name of unity, perpetuating the substantive problems that have alienated important sections of the population from the party.

The power of opposition to Trump has been on display from the very beginning: It was more than a bit ironic to see feminist protestors – properly exercising their right to protest against a President who has made many derogatory comments towards women – hold up signs defending the CIA during the Women's March on Inauguration Day.

Yes, in their zeal to oppose Trump, both the center and the far left have been willing to embrace the battle led by a limited but powerful grouping in the intelligence community to stop the President from his stated intention of improving relations with Vladimir Putin's Russia.

This has become such a *cause célèbre* that people who would normally look suspiciously at the motives of the CIA or other similar agencies seem unable to recognize that the basic "crime" Trump is accused of is favoring diplomacy with a country most of the institutions consider an enemy. With the media's help, it has apparently been decided that this President does not have the right to

influence policy, if the majority of the establishment disagrees with his positions.

The major issue in the Democratic Party is obviously the economy. Sen. Bernie Sanders, officially an Independent from Vermont, won 43 percent of the vote in the 2016 Democratic primaries because he pushed a “populist,” anti-system message that was heavily critical of globalization, Wall Street and trade deals that have weakened the American middle class.

There were numerous similarities with the positions of Trump himself, although without the offensive language and scapegoating of various ethnic groups. Yet the Democratic élite did its best to ensure a Hillary Clinton victory, both legitimately based on the notion that Hillary would be the strongest candidate, and through actions that have led to accusations of a rigged nomination process.

A Deeper Problem

The recent spat raised by the publication of Donna Brazile’s new book *Hacks: The Inside Story of the Break-ins and Breakdowns That Put Donald Trump in the White House* (Hachette, November 2017) shows that the issue is still being fought out.

Indeed in October, Democratic National Committee Chairman Tom Perez unveiled his picks for the party’s Executive Committee, and many Sanders supporters immediately complained that their faction was being sidelined. One of the key removals was that of James Zogby, whose pro-Palestinian positions are clearly unappreciated by many higher-ups, who prefer to avoid criticism of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

In terms of economic policy, the question is whether the party will embrace the progressive message espoused by Sanders and Sen. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts or maintain a centrist tone by avoiding positions considered “unrealistic” according to Washington veterans; many of these political operators fear losing their influence if the terms of the debate change.

Two of the major issues Sanders and Warren have been fighting for are incisive reforms regarding healthcare and the banking sector. In September, Sanders presented a bill for a single-payer health care system under the name of Medicare-for-All, and has been holding numerous public events on the issue, joined by Warren and various other Senators.

Policymakers and industry representatives tend to shudder at such “radical” proposals, but the political calculus is clearly that you need to set your sights high if you want to achieve anything at all. This proposition was proven – although negatively – by the numerous compromises made by Barack Obama in the first year of his presidency.

On financial reform, the key issue is the restoration of Glass-Steagall, the Depression-era law that separates commercial banks and investment banks, in order to protect the real economy from financial speculation. The law was officially repealed in 1999, at the end of Bill Clinton's administration, in the context of a gradual loosening of financial regulations that began in the 1980s.

The results are before our eyes: the crash of 2007-2008 – despite the weak attempts by Wall Street defenders to divert attention from deregulation as a cause for the crisis – and its political aftermath; this includes the election of Donald Trump, which certainly would not have happened if there had been a more effective response to the crisis, rather than bailing out the banks while imposing austerity and lower wages on the population.

Excuses, Excuses

The Democratic Party platform adopted the call for Glass-Steagall in 2016 (as did the Republicans), although Clinton had repeatedly stated her opposition to the measure, claiming she would be really tough on Wall Street in other ways. Many people clearly didn't believe her; and taking hundreds of thousands of dollars from large banks for speeches exemplified the candidate's lack of credibility.

Why should workers in states such as Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania trust someone who was soft on Wall Street, and had trumpeted international trade deals for years?

This is the issue that the Democratic Party must tackle. To say that Hillary won the popular vote, and thus essentially the election, but was robbed by Russian interference or fake news on the Internet, means to ignore the fundamental problem. A realignment is underway of electoral politics throughout the Western world.

Profiling voters based on their ethnicity, gender or social group showed its limits in 2016, as people followed an anti-establishment instinct fomented by the economic difficulties associated with globalization.

There were other factors, but this protest vote was enough to swing the election despite Trump's obvious weaknesses as a candidate, so any notion of going back to old models should be recognized for what it would produce: a Pyrrhic victory in which the underlying problems before the country are not faced.

If the Democrats hope to ride an anti-Trump wave, they would do best to look below the surface and recognize the tectonic shifts taking place, that much of the political establishment seems to prefer to ignore.

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Trump's Debasement of Civilization

Hillary Clinton's "deplorables" comment was surely a campaign gaffe, but she wasn't wrong about Donald Trump's exploitation of white grievances and other ugly attitudes, writes Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

There is more to being civilized than being a citizen of some political entity. This is so despite the fact that both the verb *civilize* and noun *citizen* are derived from the Latin *civitas*. To be civilized demands more than just having the language and mannerisms of the Fifth Century BCE Greeks, or the Second Century BCE Han Chinese, or the Sixteenth Century CE French. All of these groups believed that being civilized meant living and acting like them.

Today the Americans have joined the chorus. They sing to the world that theirs is the home of the brave and land of the free, and claim that they are the real model for civilization. They throw in that rather ill-defined notion of freedom as a modern customizing point.

None of these claims are very convincing. After all, each claimant has waged bloody wars of aggression, discriminated against outsiders and their own minorities, and generally sought aggrandizement by stealing other people's land.

Only recently, since the end of World War II, has there grown up an understanding that: (1) language, mannerisms, and race are so varied that they cannot be used as prerequisites for civilized status without breeding mass intolerance toward minorities and "others," and (2) aggressive war and the pursuit of conquest actually dehumanizes your nation and destroys one's civilized standing. Postwar international law has been designed to make intolerance on a large scale illegal – [a crime against humanity](#) – and the same goes for the [waging of wars of aggression](#). It is questionable how effective such laws have been. Nonetheless, they are undeniably a step in a civilizing

direction.

If you dig under the surface of ethnic- or nation-based claims to civilized standing, you often find that they rest on such things as military prowess, technological advancement, and/or a dubious claim to be some god's favorite. Collective cultural expressions of racism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia, Islamophobia and other such displays of intolerance, as well as the carrying on of a "muscular" foreign policy, seem not to complicate claims to civilized status for many average citizens. *But, of course, they should.* In fact, not being or doing any of these things should be a necessary prerequisite for any group's appeal to civilized status.

Based on such a requirement, the claim of the United States to be a civilized society seems in serious trouble. For instance, no one is going to accuse Donald Trump of being a model of tolerance. Indeed, it would seem that his election as president has inaugurated a time of intolerance embracing just those prejudices that erode a nation's civilized standing.

Hillary's Greatest Gaffe

It is true that during her run for the presidency Hillary Clinton made many mistakes. She was wedded to a traditional, and very corrupt, version of U.S. politics – a version that put her in the pocket of an array of special interests that, themselves, were not very civilized (for example, the Zionists). And, as Secretary of State under President Obama, she did her part to wage aggressive war.

Yet, she was, at least in terms of her rhetoric, ready to take a stand for tolerance when it comes to social and cultural diversity within the United States. Ironically, that willingness to, in this regard, be publicly civil – and call out those who were not – led to her biggest political gaffe of the election.

The campaign faux pas came on Sept. 9, 2016, during a speech to a group of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual) supporters. Here is what she said:

"We are living in a volatile political environment. You know, to just be grossly generalistic, you could put half of Trump's supporters into what I call the basket of deplorables. Right? The racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic – you name it. And unfortunately there are people like that. And he [Trump] has lifted them up. He has given voice to their websites that used to only have 11,000 people – now 11 million. He tweets and retweets their offensive hateful mean-spirited rhetoric. Now, some of those folks – they are irredeemable, but thankfully they are not America."

The Trump campaign people jumped on this statement and declared that it was a sign of “her true contempt for everyday Americans.” In other words, from the Trump perspective, “those folks” were the real America. Trump’s supporters proceeded to turn the term “deplorable” into something of a battle cry. I remember driving through the small Pennsylvania town of Red Lion soon after Clinton’s speech. There was a big sign declaring “Welcome to the Home of the Proud Deplorables.”

Trump the Decivilizer

Of course, Clinton was correct in her criticism of Trump and some of his supporters. In fact, they were more than just deplorable. They were downright uncivilized. And, she was right that Trump has incited and manipulated them and their prejudices during the campaign. And, he has continued to do so as president.

I think this became quite obvious at the Aug. 12 “unite the right” protest in Charlottesville, Virginia. That event signaled the fact that Trump, a wealthy, self-righteous, impulsive, one-dimensional man who, in his simplistic ignorance, cannot tell the difference between his own opinion and fact, had let loose a substantial group of racist and reactionary citizens. These people see themselves not as the uncivilized of America, but rather as saviors of an anachronistic pseudo-civilization – one based on white supremacy and mass intolerance. Regardless of how they see themselves, the behavior of both these “average Americans” and their approving President, is actually tipping America toward being unquestionably a “deplorable” and uncivilized place.

It must be kept in mind that President Trump did not originate all this prejudicial horror. It has always been there in the U.S. However, since the 1960s it has, for the most part, been kept out of the public realm. That is what the Civil Rights Movement and President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society programs accomplished – to make it socially unacceptable, and in some cases illegal, to practice these prejudices publicly.

This was actually a great step forward in the process of civilizing the United States, and if it had been maintained for say, another five generations, the number of “deplorable” voters may have shrunk to the point that the election of a decivilizer such as Trump would have been much less likely.

However, as it was, those who harbored simmering prejudices, restless anachronistic traditions, and a fear of losing privileges in an ever more diverse society, almost immediately came together to support Donald Trump when he appeared on the political scene. And the rest of us were caught unawares.

The fact is that most people do not think about what it means to be civilized, often assuming that this status is synonymous with having an I-phone and a twitter account. Among those who do think about it, some may identify the term with those who are snobbish and think they are better than others.

Or, perhaps they see civilization as a class thing to be identified with wealth. Those who think in these terms may develop resentment toward the concept of civilization. They may come to see it as a threat to their local culture and ways of life.

Finally, who knows how many macho males there are out there who might see too much civilization as a subversive factor – something that would make the nation effete. Too much enlightenment could undermine that “muscular” foreign policy (perhaps reviving, in the case of the United States, the dreaded Vietnam Syndrome) that has always been a mark of nation-state greatness.

Of course, this is not just an American problem. The “deplorables” are to be found in all populations – more in some and less in others – but never absent. In the U.S., Donald Trump is their leader. No doubt he also serves as a symbol of leadership for “deplorables” worldwide. As such President Trump and his following subvert our future – luring us in the direction of barbarism.

Remember Arnold Toynbee observation: “civilizations die from suicide and not by murder.”

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Trump and Democrats Misread Mandates

Exclusive: Neither the Democrats nor President Trump learned the right lessons from the 2016 election, leaving the nation divided at home and bogged down in wars abroad, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

One year ago, the American electorate delivered a confused but shocking result, the election of Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton, a quirky outcome in the

Electoral College that put Trump in the White House even though Clinton got three million more votes nationally. But neither party appears to have absorbed the right lessons from that surprise ending.

The Democrats might have taken away from their defeat the warning that they had forgotten how to speak to the white working class, which had suffered from job losses via “free trade” and felt willfully neglected as Democrats looked toward the “browning of America.”

The choice of Clinton had compounded this problem because she came across as elitist and uncaring toward this still important voting bloc with her memorable description of half of Trump’s voters as “deplorables,” an insult that stung many lower-income whites and helped deliver Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin to Trump.

For more than a decade, some Democratic strategists had promoted the notion that “demography is destiny,” i.e., that the relative growth of Latino, Asian and African-American populations in comparison to whites would ensure a future Democratic majority. That prediction seemed to have been validated by Barack Obama’s winning coalition in 2008 and 2012, but it also had the predictable effect of alienating many whites who felt disrespected and resentful.

So, while the Democrats and Clinton looked to a multicultural future, Trump used his experience in reality TV to communicate with this overlooked demographic group. Trump sold himself as a populist and treated the white working class with respect. He spoke to their fears about economic decline and gave voice to their grievances. He vowed to put “America First” and pull back from foreign military adventures that often used working-class kids as cannon fodder.

But much of Trump’s message, like the real-estate mogul himself, was phony. He really didn’t have policies that would address the needs of working-class Americans. Still, his promises of a massive infrastructure plan, good health-care for all, and rejection of unfair trade deals rang the right bells with enough voters to flip some traditionally Democratic blue-collar states to Republican red.

Staying Blind

You might have thought that the Democrats would respond to Trump’s shocking victory, which also left Republicans in charge of Congress and most statehouses around the country, by launching an apologetic listening tour to reconnect with working-class whites.

There also might have been a clear-eyed evaluation of the weaknesses of the Democratic presidential nominee who came to personify the corrupt insider-

culture of Official Washington, exploiting government service for financial gain by raking in millions of dollars for speeches to Wall Street and other special interests.

Clinton also offended many peace voters because of her support for aggressive war, both as a U.S. senator backing the disastrous invasion of Iraq and as Secretary of State pushing for U.S. military interventions in Libya and Syria. Her apology for voting for the Iraq War came across as opportunistic and insincere, and her undisguised delight over Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi's grisly murder ("We came; we saw; he died!") seemed ghoulish.

And, whether fairly or not, many Americans were turned off by the Democratic Party's emphasis on "identity politics," the assumption that people would vote based on their gender, race or sexual orientation, rather than on bread-and-butter policies and war-or-peace issues.

In other words, the Democratic Party could have looked in the mirror and seen what many Americans found unappealing about the modern version of a party that had done so much to build the country, from the New Deal during the Great Depression through the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, and taking a leading role in addressing environmental, health-care and other national challenges.

But today's Democrats instead chose to blame their plight largely on Russia and its alleged "meddling" in U.S. politics, a strategy that not only made little sense – given the many other reasons why voters turned away from Clinton and her party – but delivered a message to white working-class voters who had gone over to Trump that they were "stupid" and had been "duped."

Whatever one thinks about white working-class voters who favored Trump, calling people gullible is not an effective way to woo back a voting bloc that already feels insulted and alienated.

Missing a Chance

So, when Trump was sworn in last Jan. 20, the ball was largely in his court. He could have focused on rebuilding America's infrastructure; or he could have proposed a serious plan for improving access to health care; or he could have moved pragmatically to resolve a host of international conflicts that President Obama had left behind.

Instead, President Trump squandered his first days in office by getting into absurd arguments about his inaugural crowd size compared to Obama's and denying that Clinton had won the national popular vote. His "alternative facts" made him a laughingstock.

Last spring, when I spoke with a group of Trump voters in West Virginia, they were still faithful to their choice – and wanted Washington to give him a chance – but they already were complaining about Trump’s personal outbursts on Twitter; they wanted him to concentrate on their real needs, not his petty squabbles.

But Trump wasn’t listening. He couldn’t kick his Twitter habit. He kept putting his giant ego in the way.

As his presidency stumbled forward, Trump also brushed aside suggestions that he reverse his image as a person who had no regard for facts by declassifying information about the conflicts in Syria, Ukraine and elsewhere – to reveal situations where Obama and his team played propaganda games, rather than tell the truth.

And, lacking sufficient knowledge about the world, Trump failed when presented with sophisticated plans for reshaping U.S. policies in the Middle East to become less dependent on Israel and Saudi Arabia. Instead, Trump jumped into the arms of Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Saudi King Salman.

Pandering to Israeli-Saudi desires – and trying to show how tough he was – Trump fired off 59 Tomahawk missiles at Syria over a dubious chemical-weapons incident; threatened more Mideast strife against Iran; and escalated the 16-year-old war in Afghanistan.

Plus, he blustered about war against North Korea and personally insulted the country’s leader, Kim Jong Un, as “little rocket man.” Rather than rein in neoconservative aggression, he continued to unleash it.

When Trump did address domestic policy, he defined himself as basically just another right-wing Republican, supporting a health-care scheme that would have made matters worse for millions of Americans and backing a tax-cut plan that would mostly benefit the rich while blowing an even bigger hole in the deficit. All that red ink, in turn, drowned any hopes for investments in a modern infrastructure.

In other words, Trump exposed himself as the narcissistic incompetent that his critics said he was. He proved incapable of even acting presidential, let alone showing that he could use his power to make life better for average Americans. He was left with little to boast about beyond the economy that was bequeathed to him by Obama.

Republicans also had little to brag about, explaining why Ed Gillespie, the GOP’s gubernatorial nominee in Virginia in 2017, opted for ugly socially divisive attack ads as the best hope for defeating Democrat Ralph Northam, a Gillespie strategy called “Trumpism without Trump.”

But Gillespie's approach backfired with a surprisingly strong turnout of Virginia's voters putting Northam into the governor's mansion and almost erasing the solid Republican majority in the state legislature.

Trump was left to tweet about how the Virginia results, which were echoed in other states' elections on Tuesday, weren't a reflection on his own popularity, ignoring his unprecedentedly low approval ratings for a president nine months into his first term.

So, the new political question is whether Trump can belatedly learn from his failures and finally undertake some actions at home and abroad that actually serve the interests of the American people and the world. Or will he continue to bumble and stumble along?

A parallel question is whether the Democrats will misinterpret their strong showing on Tuesday as encouragement to continue ignoring their own political and institutional shortcomings – and to keep on using Russia to bash Trump. Neither side has shown much aptitude for learning.

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](#)).

The Politics of Sexual Harassment and War

The Harvey Weinstein scandal has forced the ugly practice of sexual harassment into the public square, where private companies have proven to be more responsive than the political world, reports David Marks.

By David Marks

The multiple sexual-harassment allegations against movie producer Harvey Weinstein have sent tremors around the world with newly expressed outrage toward the machismo atmosphere of the film industry and other work environments, including the news business and politics.

Clearly, the problem reaches far beyond Weinstein. Allegations and lawsuits filed against Donald Trump mirror the worst of Weinstein's behavior. Trump's hot-mic 2004 interview with "Access Hollywood" surfaced during last year's

campaign, with him bragging about his ability to get away with aggressively kissing women and grabbing their genitals: “When you’re a star, they let you do it. You can do anything. ... Grab ‘em by the pussy. You can do anything.”

But even that wasn’t enough to keep 63 million Americans from voting for Trump and putting him in the White House, although that was in part because many voters saw no moral superiority in Hillary Clinton, who not only disparaged women who complained about sexual harassment by her husband but who enthusiastically embraced war as a ready option for U.S. foreign policy.

Yet, while the political careers of Donald Trump and Bill Clinton survived disclosures of their predatory behavior, Weinstein’s movie empire quickly crumbled after a number of women came forward with accounts of how he used his power to gain sexual favors. Several prominent news personalities, from Bill O’Reilly at Fox to Michael Oreskes at NPR, have lost their jobs, too, amid other sexual harassment complaints.

Oddly, it seems that private industry is now more sensitive to allegations of this kind of sexual misconduct than the American political process, possibly because of the potential legal liabilities for companies as well as the organized partisan defenses that are immediately raised around the highest-level national leaders even when there’s clear evidence of their predatory behavior. While it’s true that some members of Congress have lost seats because of sexual misconduct, the situation has been different at the presidential level.

After Trump’s “grab ‘em by the pussy” boast became public, his Republican “base” rallied around him and prevented the expected collapse of his poll numbers. Similarly, in the 1990s, when Democratic presidential candidate (and later President) Bill Clinton was accused of predatory sexual activity with female subordinates and other vulnerable women, loyal Democrats sprang to his defense and challenged the veracity of the accusers. The Clinton team complained about “cash for trash.”

‘David Cop-a-Feel’

Even earlier, rumors about President George H.W. Bush’s extramarital activities and a fondness for groping unsuspecting women were brushed aside as yellow journalism that should not be taken seriously about so honorable a man. Only recently – in the wake of the Weinstein scandal and more women denouncing boorish male behavior – was Bush pushed into apologizing for inappropriately grabbing women as the punch line to a joke about who his favorite magician is: “David Cop-a-Feel!”

It seems that the most powerful leaders, both in industry and government, are

often the most aggressive predators; both on a personal level and with how they affect the social fabric of the country through their professional actions. There are parallels between the pattern of sexual harassment, in which the historical tendency was for women to stay silent, and the U.S. government's military assaults abroad, which most Americans tolerate as somehow necessary or inevitable.

President George W. Bush inflicted "shock and awe" on Iraq, touching off the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and the destabilization of the entire region yet he is now treated as a respected elder statesman when he criticizes Trump's behavior. President Barack Obama said he authorized military operations in seven countries, including interventions in Libya and Syria that contributed to other humanitarian disasters, but Obama faced little public outrage among the American people for these actions.

President Trump appears to have learned from his predecessors that he can boost his sagging poll numbers by threatening and launching military strikes. He'll also win some grudging acceptance from the elites of Official Washington who never seem to see a potential war that they don't want to send the U.S. military to fight. In April, Trump got some brief relief from the Russia-gate "scandal" after he ordered the firing of 59 Tomahawk missiles at Syria in a hasty reaction to a dubious chemical weapons incident that he blamed on the Syrian government.

Trump played the tough-guy again on Sept. 19 with a bellicose speech to the United Nations General Assembly, threatening hostilities against North Korea, Iran, Cuba and Venezuela and boasting about his plan to escalate the 16-year-old war in Afghanistan. Despite America's recent history of aggressive war – not to mention historical crimes of genocide, slavery and imperialism – many Americans still profess how morally superior we are to other people.

Any American who dares challenge this "American exceptionalism" can expect to face ostracism much as women who complained about unwanted sexual advances by male bosses in years past could expect to be categorized as troublesome and unfit for professional advancement. That could be especially true in a highly subjective profession like acting.

Yet, whether it's Hollywood's "casting couch" or Official Washington's actions on the international "stage," it remains difficult to stop predatory behavior. When a culture of male dominance looms in every direction, it is a rare individual who will defy convention – even a morally bereft convention – and do what's right. That's especially true when the almost certain result will be loss of friends and loss of income. We have seen plenty of cases in which even women will make excuses for male misconduct, whether involving sex or war, as Hillary Clinton has shown.

But a culture that tolerates various forms of abusive and predatory behavior, whether it's silence amid a culture of sexual harassment or blind patriotism toward dubiously justified wars, has lost its moral compass. A democracy that in principle embraces the equality of all with everyone possessing unalienable rights, including life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, would have no tolerance for predators of any kind, whether at home, in the workplace or in warfare across the globe.

David Marks is a veteran documentary filmmaker and investigative reporter. His work includes films for the BBC, including *Nazi Gold*, on the role of Switzerland in WWII and biographies of Jimi Hendrix and Frank Sinatra.

Democrats, Class and Russia-gate Magic

Stunned by the defection of working-class whites, many Democrats respond by calling these Trump voters “stupid” and hoping that Russia-gate will be the “deus ex machina” to restore Democratic power, as poet Phil Rockstroh explains.

By Phil Rockstroh

Recently, Democratic Party elites have purged progressives from positions of power within the Party; have been exposed in creating and promulgating, and swallowing whole the dodgy Russian Dossier subterfuge; and have gone round-heeled for war criminal and torturer-in-chief George Bush the Lesser – yet Democratic partisans and lesser-of-two-evils, fainting-couch jockeys still retail in the fiction that the Democrats present a viable alternative to their more crass Republican doppelgängers.

It must take hours of dedicated practice to become such virtuosos of self-deception.

Desperate liberals have convinced themselves that the risible, Russiagate fool's mythos will provide a deus ex machina miracle to rid the (sham) republic from the likes of boxy-suit-clad, two-legged toxic waste dump who ascended to the presidency due to the Democratic Party gaming their primary and nomination process for a candidate who performed the seemingly impossible – to wit, preventing the craven Trump from defeating himself.

The best thing Republicans have going for them is, the Democrats themselves, from their corrupt-to-their-reeking core leadership class down to their willfully and belligerently obtuse rank-and-file. In particular, professional

and political-class liberals' refusal even to acknowledge the grim plight of the besieged U.S. working class, and when they deign to notice their economic lessers, at all, they, as a rule, evince an aura of condescension and scorn.

Apropos, I recall a piece published in the New York Times after Trump's "pussy grabbing" palaver came to light, late in the 2016 presidential campaign. Quoting from the article, headlined: "Inside Trump Tower, an Increasingly Upset and Alone Donald Trump," published Oct 9, 2016:

"But the real source of comfort to Mr. Trump seemed to be the small band of supporters waving Trump signs on the Fifth Avenue sidewalk outside the building. His fans clashed with people walking by, including a woman who told a female Trump supporter that she should go back to her 'trailer.'"

It is a given that Trump's misogynist remarks displayed the very emblem of mouth-breather inanity. Yet the demeaning jibe bandied by the passing pedestrian, who I'm certain would self-identify as "progressive" in her politics, was emblematic of liberal classism. When was the last time you witnessed an affluent liberal expressing umbrage in regard to their caste's proclivity for class-based shaming?

The supercilious mindset is the result of an insularity borne of privilege. Moreover, when do liberals ever converse, one on one, with members of the laboring class, unless, of course, the situation involves the de facto master/servant relationship involved in a service industry exchange?

On a personal basis, liberals with whom I used to clash when I was a resident of Manhattan, almost to a person, were completely removed from and, worse, utterly incurious, about the lives of the working class. When traveling around my native South, for example, when visiting my wife's family in the rural South Carolina Low Country, I found the people there far more receptive to a socialist critique of the capitalist order than that of liberals. Why? Unlike upscale liberals, the working class, on a day-by-day basis, endure perpetual humiliation under depraved capitalism.

Why do liberals refuse to acknowledge class-based deprivation as a defining factor in the angst and animus of the laboring class?

In short, an honest reckoning would cause Liberalcrats to acknowledge classism is, as is the case with sexism and racism, hurtful, destructive, and flat-out reprehensible. Moreover, an acknowledgement would call them to account for their own privilege thus revealing the imperative to make amends and provide restitution for their complicity in the oppression inflicted on the less fortunate by capitalism, the system that is the source of liberal affluence and

the progenitor of their snobbery.

A Buffer for the Rich

The Liberal Class have, on an historical basis, acted as the buffer zone between leftist, minority, and laboring-class aspirations and the capitalist over-class – i.e., the bestower of liberacrat privilege. As the man limned in lyric, “same as it ever was.” Thus we come upon a reason for the mistrust held by people languishing on the boot-on-the-neck side of the capitalist class divide for economically privileged liberals.

Moreover, when was a last time you noticed a laboring class person parroting that the meany-pants Russian Bear ate poor, little Hillary’s homework fool’s mythos? The Cold War 2.0 tall tale that avers:

“Putin has penetrated the precious bodily fluids of the U.S. electoral system,” as a Brigadier General Jack D. Ripper of the Liberal Class might rant, thereby coming off like a liberal version of Alex Jones reading the minutes of a John Birch Society meeting, circa 1955, on communist infiltration of the Ladies’ Auxiliary Bingo Club, due to reports of an inordinate number of winners wearing red poodle skirts.

In short, there is a howling, class chasm between the cultural criteria that separates affluent liberals from the struggling laboring class. How could sneaky Vladi and his fake news-wielding squads of internet Cossacks be responsible for the neoliberal economy, comprised of low wage, no benefits, no future mcjobs, that plague the working life of the latter? Thus the Russiagate storyline holds little resonance for downscale working people.

The rise of rightist demagogues and their angst-ridden, resentment-reeking followers, both on an historical and present day basis, can be traced to a primary source: the loss of hope and the daily doses of humiliation inflicted on the working class by capitalist economic despotism. In the hollow regions of the psyche where hope has been banished, rage rises and fills the aching void.

Adding to the host of miseries, an odious aspect of the capitalist greedscape imparts, in both an overt and subliminal basis, the insidious message: The psychical injuries inflicted by the economic order are caused by personal failings. If internalized, concomitant feelings of shame will torment the mind of the sufferer – feelings freighted with intense self-reproach that tend to manifest themselves in a host of pathologies, e.g., intense anxiety and severe depression.

Hence, the dark art of shame displacement, in the form of racist and xenophobic tropes, can and will be retailed by demagogues. Don’t blame the capitalist

Plundering Class, they exhort, instead blame immigrants and minorities (who, in reality, are also victims of capitalism's inherent depravities) for your dismal prospects. Build an unscalable border wall, deport the interlopers en masse, put an end to the practice of "reverse racism" (of which, polls reveal the majority of white people, in utter defiance of reality, believe is widespread) then America's greatness will be restored and the usurped futures of hard-working, true Americans will be seized back from undeserving hordes of interlopers.

A deft demagogue's tropes of blame shifting can serve to dissipate feelings of aloneness and mitigate the miasmic shame attendant to capitalist economic despotism, a phenomenon that liberals, and history confirms the tragic fact, ignore at the peril of all concerned.

Russia-gate to the Rescue

And what is the Democrats plan? From all appearances, a full spectrum deployment of ... more of the same.

Thus we arrive at the question: How can they display such a yawning disconnect from reality? And we shamble into the tawdry reality: The Democratic Party elite and their cynical operatives possess the sum total of nada desire to be connected with anyone other than their economic elite benefactors – withal, the only constituency to whom they possess any degree of fealty.

Thus Democratic partisans cling to the salvation fantasy that an act of deus ex machina will soon be at hand. But how many times now has Trump's trajectory toward impeachment been assured by some new revelation ... yet nothing substantive comes of the vaporous evidence?

Present-day Democrats bring to mind the image of a sad, aged prom queen, passed over by time, possessed by magical-thinking-borne fantasies involving the appearance of an imaginary gentleman suitor whose arrival will restore her faded glory.

The crackbrained fantasies shield Democratic partisans from being buffeted by the reckoning: They are affiliated with the go-to Party of Wall Street and of neoliberal and militarist imperium.

It comes down to this: Almost everyone, at this point, sees through Trump's popinjay ways. Barack Obama, aka former President Citigroup von Drone, was a far more effective con man. How so? Liberals had the Wall Street bagman and multicultural imperialist Obama's back. At present, after his two terms, he is luxuriating in the cash-redolent embrace of his High Dollar benefactors, as all the while, bedecked in their broken tiara and torn prom dress regalia, Democratic Party loyalist pine away for another sweet lie-proffering, political

Lothario to replace the likes of Obama's charming vapidness.

"I don't want realism. I want magic" – Blanche DuBois, from Tennessee Williams stage play, "A Streetcar Named Desire."

What a cringe-inducing sight it is. One almost could be moved to pity in regard to Democrats' Blanche DuBois theatrics. But, of course, gentle, vulnerable Blanche never acted as an apologist for drone murder nor blamed Russian meddling for her troubled plight.

Unlike impoverished Blanche, blown and buffeted by circumstance into the seedy precincts of (un-gentrified) New Orleans' French Quarter, it is difficult to work up any degree of sympathy for contemporary Democrats, enclosed as they are in their insular, bristling, psychical citadels, from where they unloose volleys of supercilious scorn upon those who remain unmoved by their partisan casuistry and are rankled by the condescension they direct at those who are not graced with their privileged status.

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Sorting Out the Russia Mess

Exclusive: The U.S. mainstream media finally has its "smoking gun" on Russia-gate – incriminating information from a junior Trump campaign adviser – but a closer look reveals serious problems with the "evidence," writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Russia-gate special prosecutor Robert Mueller has turned up the heat on President Trump with the indictment of Trump's former campaign manager for unrelated financial crimes and the disclosure of a guilty plea from a low-level foreign policy adviser for lying to the FBI.

While longtime Republican fixer Paul Manafort, who helped guide Trump's campaign to the GOP nomination in summer 2016, was the big name in the news on Monday, the mainstream media focused more on court documents related to George Papadopoulos, a 30-year-old campaign aide who claims to have heard about Russia possessing Hillary Clinton's emails before they became public on the Internet, mostly via WikiLeaks.

While that would seem to bolster the Russia-gate narrative – that Russian intelligence “hacked” Democratic emails and President Vladimir Putin ordered the emails be made public to undermine Clinton’s campaign – the evidentiary thread that runs through Papadopoulos’s account remains tenuous.

That’s in part because his credibility has already been undermined by his guilty plea for lying to the FBI and by the fact that he now has a motive to provide something the prosecutors might want in exchange for leniency. Plus, there is the hearsay and contested quality of Papadopoulos’s supposed information, some of which already has turned out to be false.

According to the court documents, Papadopoulos 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, a little-known academic associated with the University of Stirling in Scotland.

The first contact 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.

The ‘Email’ Breakfast

But Papadopoulos continued his outreach to Russia, according to the court documents, which depict the most explosive meeting as an April 26 breakfast in London with the professor (Mifsud) supposedly saying he had been in Moscow and “learned that the Russians had obtained ‘dirt’ on then-candidate Clinton” and possessed “thousands of emails.” Mainstream press accounts concluded that Mifsud must have been referring to the later-released emails.

However, Mifsud told The Washington Post in an email last August that he had “absolutely no contact with the Russian government” and described his ties to Russia as strictly in academic fields.

In an interview with the U.K. Daily Telegraph after Monday’s disclosures, Mifsud acknowledged meeting with Papadopoulos but disputed the contents of the conversations as cited in the court papers. Specifically, he denied knowing anything about emails containing “dirt” on Clinton and called the claim that he

introduced Papadopoulos to a “female Russian national” as a “laughingstock.”

According to the Telegraph interview, Mifsud said he tried to put Papadopoulos in touch with experts on the European Union and introduced him to the director of a Russian think tank, the Russian International Affairs Council.

It was the latter contact that the court papers presumably referred to in saying that on May 4, the Russian contact with ties to the foreign ministry wrote to Papadopoulos and Mifsud, reporting that ministry officials were “open for cooperation,” a message that Papadopoulos forwarded to a senior campaign official, asking whether the contacts were “something we want to move forward with.”

However, even an article in The New York Times, which has aggressively pushed the Russia-gate “scandal” from the beginning, noted the evidentiary holes that followed from that point.

The Times’ Scott Shane wrote: “A crucial detail is still missing: Whether and when Mr. Papadopoulos told senior Trump campaign officials about Russia’s possession of hacked emails. And it appears that the young aide’s quest for a deeper connection with Russian officials, while he aggressively pursued it, led nowhere.”

Shane added, “the court documents describe in detail how Mr. Papadopoulos continued to report to senior campaign officials on his efforts to arrange meetings with Russian officials, ... the documents do not say explicitly whether, and to whom, he passed on his most explosive discovery – that the Russians had what they considered compromising emails on Mr. Trump’s opponent.

“J.D. Gordon, a former Pentagon official who worked for the Trump campaign as a national security adviser and helped arrange the March 31 foreign policy meeting, said he had known nothing about Mr. Papadopoulos’ discovery that Russia had obtained Democratic emails or of his prolonged pursuit of meetings with Russians.”

Reasons to Doubt

If prosecutor Mueller had direct evidence that Papadopoulos had informed the Trump campaign about the Clinton emails, you would assume that the proof would have been included in Monday’s disclosures. Further, since Papadopoulos was flooding the campaign with news about his Russian outreach, you might have expected that he would say something about how helpful the Russians had been in publicizing the Democratic emails.

The absence of supporting evidence that Papadopoulos conveyed his hot news on

the emails to campaign officials and Mifsud's insistence that he knew nothing about the emails would normally raise serious questions about Papadopoulos's credibility on this most crucial point.

At least for now, those gaps represent major holes in the storyline. But Official Washington has been so desperate for "proof" about the alleged Russian "election meddling" for so long, that professional skepticism has been unwelcome in most media outlets.

There is also another side of the story that rarely gets mentioned in the U.S. mainstream media: that WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange has repeatedly denied that he received the two batches of purloined Democratic emails – one about the Democratic National Committee and one about Clinton's campaign chairman John Podesta – from the Russians. While it is surely possible that the Russians might have used cutouts to pass on the emails, Assange and associates have suggested that at least the DNC emails came from a disgruntled insider.

Also, former U.S. intelligence experts have questioned whether at least one batch of disclosed emails could have come from an overseas "hack" because the rapid download speed is more typical of copying files locally onto a memory stick or thumb drive.

What I was told by an intelligence source several months ago was that Russian intelligence did engage in hacking efforts to uncover sensitive information, much as U.S. and other nations' intelligence services do, and that Democratic targets were included in the Russian effort.

But the source said the more perplexing question was whether the Kremlin then ordered release of the data, something that Russian intelligence is usually loath to do and something that in this case would have risked retaliation from the expected winner of the 2016 election, Hillary Clinton.

But such questions and doubts are clearly not welcome in the U.S. mainstream media, most of which has embraced Mueller's acceptance of Papadopoulos's story as the long-awaited "smoking gun" of Russia-gate.

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).
