

A USS Liberty's Hero's Passing

On the 52nd anniversary of the attack on the USS Liberty, Ray McGovern focuses on Terry Halbardier, who sent the SOS that saved the ship from Israeli destruction.

This article was written in 2014 on the occasion of Halbardier's death.

By Ray McGovern

Special to Consortium News

Terry Halbardier, who as a 23-year old seaman in 1967 thwarted Israeli attempts to sink the USS Liberty, died on Aug. 11 in Visalia, California. It took the U.S. government 42 years after the attack to recognize Halbardier's heroism by awarding him the Silver Star, a delay explained by Washington's determination to downplay Israeli responsibility for the 34 Americans killed and the 174 wounded.

On June 8, 1967, during the Six-Day War, the Israeli military attacked the USS Liberty, an American spy ship which had been monitoring Israeli transmissions about the conflict. Intercepted Israeli communications indicated that the goal was to sink the Liberty and leave no survivors.

Warplanes and torpedo boats had already killed 34 and wounded 174, when Halbardier slid over the Liberty's napalm-glazed deck to jury-rig an antenna and get an SOS off to the Sixth Fleet. The Israelis intercepted the SOS and broke off the attack immediately. In effect, Halbardier prevented the massacre of all 294 onboard. Still, the infamy of the attack

on the Liberty was two-fold.

First, the Liberty, a virtually defenseless intelligence collection platform prominently flying an American flag in international waters, came under deliberate attack by Israeli aircraft and three 60-ton Israeli torpedo boats off the coast of the Sinai on a cloudless June afternoon during the six-day Israeli-Arab war. Second, President Lyndon Johnson called back carrier aircraft dispatched to defend the Liberty lest Israel be embarrassed, the start of an unconscionable cover-up, including top Navy brass, that persists to this day.

Given all they have been through, the Liberty survivors and other veterans who joined Halbardier to celebrate his belated receipt of the Silver Star on May 27, 2009 can be forgiven for having doubted that the day of the hero's recognition would ever come.

In the award ceremony at the Visalia (California) office of Rep. Devin Nunes, the Republican congressman pinned the Silver Star next to the Purple Heart that Halbardier found in his home mailbox three years ago. Nunes said, "The government has kept this quiet I think for too long, and I felt as my constituent he [Halbardier] needed to get recognized for the services he made to his country."

Nunes got that right. Despite the many indignities the Liberty crew has been subjected to, the mood in Visalia was pronouncedly a joyous one of Better (42 years) Late Than Never. And, it did take some time for the moment to sink in: Wow, a gutsy congressman not afraid to let the truth hang out on this delicate issue.

Treatment Accorded the Skipper

I was present that day and I could not get out of my head the contrast between this simple, uncomplicated event and the earlier rigmarole that senior Navy officers went through to pin a richly deserved Medal of Honor on another hero of that day, the Liberty's skipper, Captain William McGonagle.

Although badly wounded by Israeli fire on June 8, 1967, McGonagle was able to keep the bombed, torpedoed, napalmed Liberty afloat and limping toward Malta, where what was left of the bodies of the 34 crewmen killed and the 174 wounded could be attended to. Do the math: yes, killed and wounded amounted to more than two-thirds of the Liberty crew of 294.

I remembered what a naval officer involved in McGonagle's award ceremony told one of the Liberty crew: "The government is pretty jumpy about Israel the State Department even asked the Israeli ambassador if his government had any objections to McGonagle getting the medal."

When McGonagle received his award, the White House (the normal venue for a Medal of Honor award) was all booked up, it seems, and President Lyndon Johnson (who would have been the usual presenter) was unavailable.

So it fell to the Secretary of the Navy to sneak off to the Washington Navy Yard on the banks of the acrid Anacostia River, where he presented McGonagle with the Medal of Honor and a citation that described the attack but not the identity of the attackers.

Please don't misunderstand. The Liberty crew is not big on ceremony. They are VERY-not-big on politicians who wink when

Navy comrades are killed and wounded at sea. The Liberty survivors are big on getting the truth out about what actually happened that otherwise beautiful day in June 1967.

The award of the Silver Star to Terry Halbardier marked a significant step in the direction of truth telling. Halbardier said he accepted his Silver Star on behalf of the entire 294-man crew. He and fellow survivor Don Pageler expressed particular satisfaction at the wording of the citation, which stated explicitly – with none of the usual fudging – the identity of the attackers: “The USS Liberty was attacked by Israeli aircraft and motor torpedo boats in the East Mediterranean Sea.”

In the past, official citations, like Captain McGonagle’s, had avoided mentioning Israel by name when alluding to the attack. I think former U.S. Ambassador Edward Peck put it best in condemning this kind of approach as “obsequious, unctuous subservience to the peripheral interests of a foreign nation at the cost of the lives and morale of our own service members and their families.” Strong words for a diplomat. But right on.

Just a Guy From Texas

Were it not for Halbardier’s bravery, ingenuity, and technical expertise, the USS Liberty would surely have sunk, taking down much if not all of the crew.

You see, the first thing the Israeli aircraft bombed and strafed were the Liberty’s communications antennae and other equipment. They succeeded in destroying all the antennae that were functional. One antenna on the port side, though, had been out of commission and had escaped damage.

In receiving the Silver Star, Halbardier made light of his heroism, claiming that he was just a guy from Texas who could do a whole lot with simple stuff like baling wire. (In the infantry we called this kind of thing a "field expedient.")

In any case, with his can-do attitude and his technical training, he figured he might be able to get that particular antenna working again. But first he would have to repair a cable that had been destroyed on deck and then connect the antenna to a transmitter.

The deck was still being strafed, but Halbardier grabbed a reel of cable, ran out onto the deck, and attached new cable to the antenna so a radioman could get an SOS out to the Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean.

Voila. "Mayday" went out; almost immediately the Israeli aircraft and torpedo ships broke off the attack and went back to base; the Israeli government sent a quick apology to Washington for its unfortunate "mistake;" and President Johnson issued orders to everyone to make believe the Israelis were telling the truth, or at least to remain silent.

To their discredit, top Navy brass went along, and the Liberty survivors were threatened with court martial and prison if they so much as mentioned to their wives what had actually happened. They were enjoined as well from discussing it with one another.

As Liberty crewman Don Pageler put it, "We all headed out after that, and we didn't talk to each other." The circumstances were ready-made for serious Post-Traumatic

Stress Disorder.

The stories shared by Liberty survivors after the award ceremony, including descriptions of the macabre but necessary effort to reassemble torpedoed body parts, and the plague of survivor's guilt, were as heart-rending as any I have heard. They are stories that should be shared more widely for those muzzled far too long.

These were the deep emotional scars to supplement the ones all over Halbardier's body, some of which he uncovered when asked by the local press gathered there in Visalia. Typically, Halbardier made light of the shrapnel that had to be plucked out of his flesh, emphasizing that he was lucky compared to some of the other crew.

No Mistake

Despite Israeli protestations, the accumulated evidence, including intercepted voice communications, is such that no serious observer believes Israel's "Oops" excuse of a terrible mistake. The following exchanges are excerpts of testimony from U.S. military and diplomatic officials given to Alison Weir, founder of "If Americans Knew" and author of *American Media Miss the Boat*:

Israeli pilot to ground control: "This is an American ship. Do you still want us to attack?"

Ground control: "Yes, follow orders."

"But sir, it's an American ship, I can see the flag!"

Ground control: "Never mind; hit it!"

Haviland Smith, a CIA officer stationed in Beirut during the

Six-Day War, says he was told that the transcripts were "deep-sixed," because the U.S. government did not want to embarrass Israel.

Equally telling is the fact that the National Security Agency (NSA) destroyed voice tapes seen by many intelligence analysts, showing that the Israelis knew exactly what they were doing. I asked a former CIA colleague, who was also an analyst at that time, what he remembered of those circumstances. Here is his e-mail reply:

"The chief of the analysts studying the Arab-Israeli region at the time told me about the intercepted messages and said very flatly and firmly that the pilots reported seeing the American flag and repeated their requests of confirmation of the attack order. Whole platoons of Americans saw those intercepts. If NSA now says they do not exist, then someone ordered them destroyed."

One need hardly add at this point that the destruction of evidence without investigation is an open invitation to repetition in the future. Think the more recent torture-interrogation videotapes.

As for the legal side: the late Captain Ward Boston, unburdened himself on his accomplice role as the Navy lawyer appointed as senior counsel to Adm. Isaac Kidd, who led a one-week (!) investigation and then followed orders to pronounce the attack on the Liberty a case of "mistaken identity." Boston signed a formal declaration on Jan. 8, 2004, in which he said he was "outraged at the efforts of the apologists for Israel in this country to claim that this attack was a case of 'mistaken identity.'" Boston continued:

“The evidence was clear. Both Adm. Kidd and I believed with certainty that this attack was a deliberate effort to sink an American ship and murder its entire crew. Not only did the Israelis attack the ship with napalm, gunfire, and missiles, Israeli torpedo boats machine-gunned three lifeboats that had been launched in an attempt by the crew to save the most seriously wounded, a war crime

“I know from personal conversations I had with Adm. Kidd that President Lyndon Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara ordered him to conclude that the attack was a case of ‘mistaken identity’ despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary.”

W. Patrick Lang, Col., USA (ret.), who was the Defense Intelligence Agency’s top analyst for the Middle East for eight years, recounted the Israeli air attacks as follows: “The flight leader spoke to his base to report that he had the ship in view, that it was the same ship he had been briefed on, and that it was clearly marked with the U.S. flag

“The flight commander was reluctant. That was very clear. He didn’t want to do this. He asked them a couple of times, ‘Do you really want me to do this?’ I’ve remembered it ever since. It was very striking. I’ve been harboring this memory for all these years.”

Lang, of course, is not alone. So too Terry Halbardier, who told those assembled at his Silver Medal award ceremony, “I think about it [the attack on the Liberty] every day.”

Why Sink the Ship?

What we know for sure is, as the independent commission headed by former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. Thomas Moorer put it, the attack "was a deliberate attempt to destroy an American ship and kill her entire crew."

What we do not know for sure is why the Israelis wanted that done. Has no one dared ask the Israelis? One view is that the Israelis did not want the United States to find out they were massing troops to seize the Golan Heights from Syria and wanted to deprive the U.S. of the opportunity to argue against such a move.

James Bamford offers an alternative view in his excellent book, *Body of Secrets*. Bamford adduces evidence, including reporting from an Israeli journalist eyewitness and an Israeli military historian, of wholesale killing of Egyptian prisoners of war at the coastal town of El Arish in the Sinai.

The Liberty was patrolling directly opposite El Arish in international waters but within easy range to pick up intelligence on what was going on there. And the Israelis were well aware of that. But the important thing here is not to confuse what we know (the deliberate nature of the Israeli attack) with the ultimate purpose behind it, which remains open to speculation.

Also worth noting is the conventional wisdom prevalent in our Fawning Corporate Media (FCM) that Egypt forced Israel into war in June 1967. An excellent, authoritative source has debunked that, none other than former Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin! In an unguarded moment in 1982, when he was prime minister, he admitted publicly:

“In June 1967, we had a choice. The Egyptian army concentrations in the Sinai approaches do not prove that [Egyptian President] Nasser was really about to attack us. We must be honest with ourselves. We decided to attack him.”

Thus, the Israeli attack admittedly amounted to starting a war of aggression, and the occupied West Bank territories and the Golan Heights gained by the Israelis in the 1967 war remain occupied to this day. The post World War II tribunal at Nuremberg distinguished a “war of aggression” from other war crimes, terming it the “supreme international crime, differing from other war crimes only in that it contains the accumulated evil of the whole.”

Perhaps the attempt to sink the Liberty and finish off all survivors qualifies as one of those accumulated evils. Terry Halbardier summed it up this way when he was awarded his Silver Star: “There’s lots of theories but let’s just say they didn’t want us listening in to what they wanted to do.”

Getting Away With Murder

In sum, on June 8, 1967, the Israeli government learned that it could get away with murder, literally, and the crime would be covered up, so strong is the influence of the Israel Lobby in our Congress, and indeed, in the White House. And those USS Liberty veterans who survived well enough to call for an independent investigation have been hit with charges of, you guessed it, anti-Semitism.

Does all this have relevance today? Of course. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu understands that there is little

that Israel could do that would earn the opprobrium of the U.S. Congress or retaliation from the White House, whether it's building illegal settlements or slaughtering civilians in Gaza. The Israelis seem convinced they remain in the catbird's seat, largely because of the Israel Lobby's influence with U.S. lawmakers and opinion makers.

One of the few moments when a U.S. official has had the audacity to face Israel down came from significantly a U.S. Navy admiral. In early July 2008, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. Mike Mullen, was sent to Israel to read the riot act to then-Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who seemed to be itching to start hostilities with Iran while President George W. Bush was in office.

We learned from the Israeli press that Mullen, fearing some form of Israeli provocation, went so far as to warn the Israelis not to even think about another incident like the attack on the USS Liberty on June 8, 1967, that the Israelis should disabuse themselves of the notion that U.S. military support would be knee-jerk automatic if Israel somehow provoked open hostilities with Iran.

This is the only occasion I am aware of in which a U.S. official of such seniority braced Israel about the Liberty incident. A gutsy move, especially with Vice President Dick Cheney and national security aide Elliott Abrams then in the White House, two hawks who might well bless, or even encourage, an Israeli provocation that would make it very difficult for Washington to avoid springing to the defense of its "ally."

The Israelis know that Mullen knows that the attack on the

Liberty was deliberate. Mullen could have raised no more neuralgic an issue to take a shot across an Israeli bow than to cite the attack on the Liberty. The *Jerusalem Post* reported that Mullen cautioned that a Liberty-type incident must be avoided in any future military actions in the Middle East.

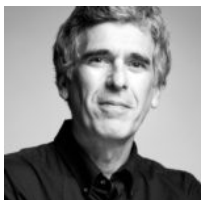
Perhaps Mullen had learned something from the heroism of Terry Halbardier

Ray McGovern works with Tell the Word, the publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. After serving as an Army infantry/intelligence officer, he spent a 27-year career as a CIA analyst. He is co-founder of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS).

Missile Attack on Syria: a Salute to the 'Russia-gate' Faithful

Proponents of the Russia-gate conspiracy got what they wished for when Donald Trump risked war with Russia with his Syria strike, comments Norman Solomon.

By Norman Solomon



Politicians, pundits and activists who've routinely denounced President Donald Trump as a tool of Vladimir Putin can now mull over a major indicator of their cumulative impact: The U.S.-led missile attack on Syria before dawn Saturday is the latest benchmark for gauging the effects of continually baiting Trump as a puppet of Russia's president.

Heavyweights of U.S. media – whether outlets such as CNN and MSNBC or [key newspapers](#) like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* – spent most of last week [clamoring](#) for Trump to order air strikes on Syria. Powerful news organizations have led the way in goading Trump to prove that he's not a Putin

lackey after all.

One of the clearest ways that Trump can offer such proof is to recklessly show he's willing to risk a catastrophic military confrontation with Russia.

In recent months, the profusion of "[war hawks, spies and liars](#)" on national television has been part of a media atmosphere that barely acknowledges what's at stake with games of chicken between the world's two nuclear superpowers. Meanwhile, the dominant U.S. news media imbue their reporting with a nationalistic sense of impunity.

On Saturday morning, the top headline on the *Times* website was "U.S. Attacks Syria in Retaliatory Strike," while the subhead declared that "Western resolve" was at work. The story led off by reporting that Trump "sought to punish President Bashar al-Assad for a suspected chemical attack near Damascus on [April 7] that killed more than 40 people."

Try putting the shoe on the other foot for a moment. Imagine that Russia, with a similar rationale, fired missiles at U.S. ally Saudi Arabia because the Kremlin "sought to punish King Salman for his country's war crimes in Yemen" – with such reportage appearing under a headline that described the Russian attack as a "retaliatory strike."

The latest U.S. air attack on Russia's close ally Syria was as much politically aimed at Moscow as at Damascus. And afterwards, the televised adrenalin-pumped glee was as much an expression of pleasure about striking a blow at Putin as at Assad. After all, ever since Trump took office, the U.S. media and political elites have been exerting enormous pressures on him to polarize with Russia.

But let's be clear: The pressures have not only been generated by corporate media and the political establishment. Across the United States, a wide range of people including self-described liberals and progressives – as individuals and organizations – have enthusiastically participated in the baiting, cajoling and denouncing of Trump as a Putin tool. That participation has stoked bellicose rhetoric by congressional Democrats, fueling the overall pressure on Trump to escalate tensions with Russia.

What's really at issue here is not the merits of the Russian government in 2018, any more than the issue was the merits of the Soviet government in 1967 – when President Lyndon Johnson hosted an [extensive summit meeting](#) in Glassboro, New Jersey, with Soviet Premier Alexi Kosygin, reducing the chances of nuclear war in the process.

If you keep heading toward a destination, you're likely to get there. In 2018, by any realistic measure, the escalating conflicts between the United States and Russia – now ominously reaching new heights in Syria – are moving us closer to World War III. It's time to fully recognize the real dangers and turn around.

This commentary originally appeared on Truthdig.com.

Norman Solomon is the coordinator of the online activist group RootsAction.org and the executive director of the Institute for Public Accuracy. He is the author of a dozen books including “War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death.”

The Indonesia Massacre's Historic Message

Exclusive: The U.S. mainstream media's credulity toward today's Official Narratives is especially troubling given the false storylines from the past, such as the cover-up of Washington's hand in the Indonesia massacres, as Jonathan Marshall describes.

By Jonathan Marshall

Fifty-four years after the assassination of President Kennedy, historians are still waiting to see whether President Trump will approve the final release of secret records related to that crime by the Oct. 26 deadline set by a unanimous Congress in 1992 with the JFK Records Act.

Senior Republicans in both the House and Senate have called on the President to “reject any claims for the continued postponement” of declassification. “Transparency in government is critical not only to ensuring accountability; it's also essential to understanding our nation's history,” said Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, who chairs the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Just days before the scheduled release of JFK records, the National Archives – with much less fanfare – declassified nearly 30,000 pages of documents from the U.S. embassy in Jakarta from 1964 to 1968. That might seem in contrast like an obscure matter of interest only to a handful of specialists, but the period covers what the CIA once called “one of the worst mass murders of the 20th century”: the massacre of half a million Indonesians, and the arrest of a million more, by the country's army and its supporters in the name of wiping out Communism.

Whether and how the U.S. government abetted that bloodbath is as “essential to understanding our nation’s history” as learning what transpired two years earlier on the streets of Dallas. Indeed, the two events are related, as the murder of Kennedy prompted a hardline shift in U.S. policy to support a military coup in Indonesia. Yet despite the worthy new release of documents, Washington has been neither transparent nor accountable when it comes to the Indonesia massacre of 1965-66.

In particular, the U.S. government has yet to declassify any but a handful of operational files from the CIA or Defense Department. As a result, “we have only the barest outlines of what covert campaigns the CIA was undertaking and what assistance the United States was providing,” historian Bradley Simpson, founder and director of the Indonesia and East Timor Documentation Project, told me.

The Prelude to a Slaughter

The frightful massacres in Indonesia followed years of growing social, economic and political strife. Following a disastrously botched CIA coup attempt in 1958, Indonesia’s leader and independence hero, Sukarno, treated Washington with deep suspicion. All through the early 1960s, Sukarno adopted an increasingly strident nationalist stance. He flirted with Soviet Russia and even with Communist China while he threatened military confrontations with the Dutch and British, legacy colonial powers. At home, he encouraged the rising influence of Indonesia’s communist party, the PKI.

President Kennedy tried to work with Sukarno. One of JFK’s first acts as president was to invite the Indonesian leader to the White House. Kennedy’s assassination, however, “unquestionably changed the direction of U.S. policy toward Indonesia,” writes Simpson in his authoritative account of U.S.-Indonesia relations, *Economists With Guns*. Whereas Kennedy was willing to expend political capital to work with Sukarno, President Lyndon Johnson dismissed him as a “bully” who, if appeased one day, would “run you out of your bedroom the next night.”

Administration leaders increasingly looked to Indonesia’s U.S.-trained-and-supplied army as a political alternative to Sukarno.

In the fall of 1964, as relations with Jakarta soured, the CIA proposed a covert action program to “build up strength” among anti-communist groups and instigate “internal strife between communist and non-communist elements.” The Agency raised the possibility of fomenting riots or other disorders that “might force the Army to assume broad powers in restoring order.”

U.S. and other Western intelligence agencies began planting stories about PKI

plots to assassinate army leaders and import weapons from Communist China, elements of a “strategy of tension” that the Agency would later use in Chile to provoke the 1973 military coup.

The Johnson administration curbed economic aid – intensifying the country’s economic crisis – while continuing to train and assist the military. “When Sukarno leaves the scene, the military will probably take over,” one senior State Department official told a congressional committee in executive session. “We want to keep the door open.”

Bitter Fruit

In the fall of 1965, Washington’s strategy bore fruit when several junior Indonesian military officers, apparently with the support of certain PKI leaders, killed six Indonesian army generals in a bungled power play that remains poorly understood. The military struck back decisively. It rounded up the alleged plotters, accused them (falsely) of sexually mutilating the murdered generals, and then unleashed a nationwide campaign to murder PKI cadre and sympathizers.

The U.S. ambassador, Marshall Green, was thrilled by the opportunity to crush the communists. “It’s now or never,” he told Washington.

Green proposed fanning anti-communist violence by a covert propaganda campaign to “spread the story of PKI’s guilt, treachery and brutality (this priority effort is perhaps most-needed immediate assistance we can give army if we can find way to do it without identifying it as solely or largely US effort).”

He instructed to U.S. Information Agency to use all its resources to “link this horror and tragedy with Peking and its brand of communism; associate diabolical murder and mutilation of the generals with similar methods used against village headmen in Vietnam.”

As reports filtered in of the execution or arrest of thousands of PKI supporters by the army and allied Muslim death squads, Green said he had “increasing respect for [the army’s] determination and organization in carrying out this crucial assignment.”

The killings occurred on such a vast scale that “the disposal of the corpses has created a serious sanitation problem in East Java and Northern Sumatra where the humid air bears the reek of decaying flesh,” reported *Time* magazine in December 1965, in one of the first U.S. stories on the massacre.

“Travelers from these areas tell of small rivers and streams that have been literally clogged with bodies. River transportation has at places been seriously

impeded.”

Previously classified documents from the U.S. embassy in Jakarta released this week add details to this story.

We learn, for example, from one cable that as prison overcrowding became a problem, “Many provinces appear to be successfully meeting this problem by executing their P.K.I. prisoners, or by killing them before they are captured, a task in which Moslem youth groups are providing assistance.”

By December 1965, the embassy was reporting on the “striking Army success” in taking power, noting its killing of at least 100,000 people in just 10 weeks.

Yet we also learn that U.S. officials had reliable information that the PKI as an organization had no advance knowledge of or involvement in the murder of the six generals that triggered the nationwide bloodbath. A senior embassy officer also reported on the army’s “widespread falsification of documents” to implicate the PKI in various crimes.

We owe these and other revelations to the persistent efforts of human rights activists, scholars, and politicians like Senators Tom Udall, D-New Mexico, and Patrick Leahy, D-Vermont, to promote full disclosure of U.S. involvement in Indonesia’s mass killings.

Following in their footsteps, Steve Aftergood, head of the Project on Government Secrecy at the Federation of American Scientists, contacted the National Declassification Center (established by President Obama), to urge the release of more Indonesia records. Historian Bradley Simpson and the non-profit National Security Archive then teamed with the U.S. National Archives to digitize 30,000 pages of decades-old embassy files to facilitate public access to the documents.

But without CIA and military operational files, the full, ugly story of Washington’s complicity will remain obscured. Previous administrations have released deeply troubling CIA files on coups in Chile, Guatemala and Iran. Those files cast a terrible stain on our history but their release powerfully demonstrated the commitment of at least some American leaders to learn from the past. In that spirit, the time has come to open up our history with Indonesia as well.

Jonathan Marshall is author or co-author of five books on international relations and history.

PBS' 'Vietnam War' Tells Some Truths

Exclusive: The PBS 10-part Vietnam War series offers valuable insights into the horrific conflict but still treads lightly on U.S. leaders' guilt as they lied and connived to start and extend the slaughter, as war correspondent Don North describes.

By Don North (Correction: An earlier version incorrectly stated that the PBS series did not address the issue of Nixon's sabotage of Johnson's 1968 peace talks. The topic is mentioned.)

Vietnamese-American author Viet Thanh Nguyen observed in his 2016 book, *Nothing Ever Dies*, that "All wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory." That is surely true of the Vietnam War, which – although it ended four decades ago – continues as a battle of memory, history and truth.

And, the stakes are still high since honest narratives about important past events can shape the future, even national destinies, and – perhaps most importantly – whether there will be more wars or possibly peace.

When PBS announced that it was broadcasting a 10-part, 18-hour series, entitled "The Vietnam War," I wasn't sure what to expect. As a network news correspondent who covered the war for five years through many of its bloodiest chapters, I have had mixed feelings about some of the other attempts to recount and explain the war.

Many of the previous efforts were colored by the political pressures of the moment, especially from policymakers and journalists who had career stakes in how assessments of the failed war would make them look. So, with some trepidation, I watched the entire 10-part series and read the companion book by writer Geoffrey C. Ward over the past week. To my pleasant surprise, I found many reasons to applaud the effort and my criticisms were relatively minor.

In my view, the PBS series, directed by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, represents the most honest and thorough account available to the general public. Over those 18 hours, the series reveals so much duplicity and mendacity that this real history makes even the most cynical movies about the war, such as "Apocalypse Now," and "The Deer Hunter," look tame by comparison.

I think that all Americans and Vietnamese who experienced the years of that war will find watching the series at least an educational experience, at best an inspiring one, and for some of us – who witnessed, fought or protested the war –

a profoundly emotional experience as well. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has recognized the series may bring up such stressful memories for combat veterans that it has offered a crisis line for counseling at 1-800-273-8255.

A Clear Narrative

The cement that holds together the interviews of some 80 participants is a clear narration written by Ward and performed by Peter Coyote without the “voice of God” style used in so many documentaries. Ward’s prologue to the first program is a sort of mission statement for the series, which I would criticize mostly because it still contains a residue of the longstanding desire to put a well-meaning gloss on the war’s justifications even when the evidence points elsewhere:

“America’s involvement in Vietnam began in secrecy. It ended thirty years later in failure witnessed by the entire world. It was begun in good faith by decent people out of fateful misunderstandings, American overconfidence, and cold war miscalculation. And it was prolonged because it seemed easier to muddle through than to admit it had been caused by tragic decisions, made by five American presidents, belonging to both political parties ... For those Americans who fought in it, and for those who fought against it back home – as well as those who merely glimpsed it on the nightly news – the Vietnam War was a decade of agony, the most divisive period since the Civil War.”

Yet, when you hear some of the secret telephone recordings of White House conversations by President Lyndon Johnson, Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara, President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, you’re not left with the impression that there was so much “good faith” by “decent people.”

For instance, one phone conversation between Johnson and National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy reflected how Johnson really felt about Vietnam, contrary to the optimistic assessments that he was selling to the public and belying his assurances that the blood and treasure were worth the cost.

Johnson: I don’t know what in hell ... it looks like we’re getting into another Korea. I don’t think it’s worth fighting for and I don’t think we can get out. And it’s just the biggest damn mess.

Bundy: It is an awful mess.

Johnson: What in hell is Vietnam worth to me? What is it worth to the country?

Past the Talking Points

The PBS series interviews some 80 people on camera, including about 20 Vietnamese from both North and South. Drawing heavily from writers and poets, the series presents intelligent thoughts from all sides of the conflict. Novick, who is reported to have conducted most of the interviews, succeeded in getting people to go beyond the usual talking points.

When I returned to Vietnam shortly after the war to interview Vietnamese participants, there was always a government “minder” present. The results were hours of hearing Communist party dogma of little news value. That control seems to have broken down.

Foremost among the Vietnamese interviewed in the PBS series is Bao Ninh, a former North Vietnamese soldier and author of *The Sorrow of War*, a brutal and emotional novel about the war in the jungle and his bitter re-entry into society.

Bao remembers, “At the recruiting station they had singers and poets, working up the spirit of those signing up. There were two types of people – those full of anti-American spirit. And those like me. We were told to go and went.” Of 500 recruits in his brigade sent to fight in the South in 1969, he is one of ten who survived.

Duong Van Mai, now Duong Van Mai Elliot, was the daughter of a high official in the French colonial administration in Hanoi before fleeing south with her family after North and South were split. Mai later studied at Georgetown University and became an American. She is author of *Sacred Willows: Four Generations of a Vietnamese Family*.

One of the most articulate and compelling American witnesses is former U.S. Marine John Musgrave, so badly wounded in Vietnam that doctors rated him as expected to die. We follow Musgrave from his early training through battle, dropping out, alcoholism and war protesting, a veteran who still struggles with effects of his wounds.

Another Marine, Roger Harris, who pops up in almost every program, served in the deadly Con Thien base adjacent to the Demilitarized Zone. Harris recalls: “You go over there with one mind-set and then you adapt. You adapt to the atrocities of war. You adapt to the killing and dying, whatever. ... When I first arrived I questioned some of the Marines. I was made to realize this is war – and this is what we do.”

Karl Marlantis, a Rhodes scholar at Oxford, dropped out of school to join the U.S. Marines and led a platoon near the DMZ. Marlantis wrote *Matterhorn*, a Vietnam War classic. His frequent interview segments are articulate and

thoughtful as when he discusses his anger: "I can understand policy errors that kill a lot of people by mistake, but my bitterness is with the lying. Robert McNamara knew by 1965 the war was unwinnable and covering up killing people for your own ego and that's what makes me mad."

Secretary of Defense McNamara is often portrayed as a villain, but a very poignant interview is included with McNamara's son Craig who recalls his appeal to his father to provide him with information for a college debate supporting the war. He never receives it and concludes his father didn't believe in it himself.

Lack of Accountability

Tim O'Brian, another writer and author of *The Things They Carried*, served in the U.S Army's Americal Division and was familiar with the village the troops called "Pinkville," which became the scene of a massacre of Vietnamese civilians at My Lai. O'Brian is critical that no soldiers involved in the massacre were ever sent to prison.

Lt. Commander Everett Alvarez, flying from the carrier USS Constellation, was the first American pilot to be shot down over North Vietnam and the first POW.

"When we approached the target coming down from altitude," recalled Alvarez, "it was obvious they could pick us up on their radar. I was a bit scared. But once we went in and they started firing at us, the fear went away. My plane, an A-4 Skyhawk, was like a ballet in the sky, and I was just performing. And then I got hit."

Alvarez spent eight years as a POW in the infamous "Hanoi Hilton." In 1990 on a visit to Hanoi, I found that ironically a new Hilton Hotel had been built over what remained of the prison. Walking into the hotel bar, I was hailed by a middle-age man sitting on a barstool.

"Hey, you're an American aren't you?" he said. "Let me buy you a drink. I'm sitting over what used to be my prison cell for eight years."

The anti-war movement merits substantial time throughout the series and features many articulate protesters. Bill Zimmerman carries the protesters narrative from 1963 when he was a senior at the University of Chicago and member of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) working for civil rights in Mississippi.

"We had watched the civil rights movement in the South to stand up against injustice, allow yourself to be beaten up or hit by a policeman," he recalled. "Then one day we saw on TV a picture of a burning monk in Saigon. I asked myself

what were we doing in Vietnam. Ending the war in Vietnam became my constant pre-occupation.”

The anti-war movement is not always portrayed in a favorable light, particularly in later years when bombings occurred and violent demonstrations became frequent. The hostility of many Americans toward the protesters is also captured in an interview with Jan Howard of Tennessee who describes her reaction to a student demonstrator asking her if she would join an anti-war march:

“I said ... my son is dead. One of the reasons he died was so you’d have the right to do this, so go ahead and demonstrate. Have at it. No, I won’t be joining you. But I tell you what, if you ever ring my doorbell again I’ll blow your damned head off with a .357 Magnum.”

Upsetting Hanoi

The series succeeds in cutting through the fog of the often secretive North Vietnamese leadership. Although the series includes interesting footage and photos of Ho Chi Minh, considered the father of modern Vietnam, and General Vo Nguyen Giap, the hero of Dien Bien Phu, the battle which effectively ended French colonial rule, the real power later shifted to Le Duan, a hard-line Communist of the Politburo and mastermind of the Tet offensive.

Newsweek reports that powerful figures in the Hanoi government are not happy with the series to such an extent that they ousted foreign ministry press officers who helped Burns and Novick set up interviews. The leaders’ primary complaint is reported to be that the series exposed the dissension and rivalries throughout the war at the top levels of the Hanoi regime.

They are also annoyed that several Vietnamese who were interviewed spoke frankly about the massacre of civilians in Hue during the Tet offensive. In the past, the North Vietnamese blamed the deaths on American bombs and artillery. (Although PBS devoted considerable time and expense to create a Vietnamese-language version of the series, no one expects the government to allow it to be shown in Vietnam.)

Despite how ambitious the 18-hour series is, there were a few subjects and individuals conspicuous by their absence. For instance, you see Colonel Edward Lansdale meeting with South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem in Saigon but no mention of Lansdale’s years running a psy-war program against the North Vietnamese.

Also, missing is a thorough examination of Nixon’s decision to have 30,000 American soldiers and 50,000 South Vietnamese troops storm across the Cambodian border in April 1970, an invasion that contributed to the Khmer Rouge’s

overthrow of the Cambodian government and the unleashing of one more Vietnam War-related tragedy, the deaths of as many as two million Cambodians from 1975 to 1979. Nixon's decision to expand the war merited only 2 minutes and 50 seconds in episode six.

But even in an 18-hour series, editorial judgments must be made about what works toward telling the necessary narrative and what doesn't make the cut (though I would disagree with some of those choices). I also found it confusing when Burns succumbed to some film school techniques, such as "foreshadowing" in episode one entitled "Déjà Vu" that juxtaposed black-and-white archival footage of the failed French colonial occupation of Vietnam with later color film of American troops on patrol.

But a powerful element of the series is the impact of photographs and film from both sides of the conflict. Most film in Vietnam was shot silent, so the sound of bombs and gunshots was mixed in along with popular music. Vietnam, after all, was the first war fought to a rock 'n roll beat. [Full disclosure: I provided some photographs for the series.]

There is no identification of the photographers who at great risk took many of the photos. Apparently, the producers thought jamming the screen with constant credits for photos and film would be distracting. But the classic photos, many of which have become icons of the war, are readily recognized as the work of Horst Faas, Larry Burrows, Eddie Adams, Tim Page, Don McCullin, Henri Huet and Nick Ut, among many others.

The war claimed the lives of 135 photojournalists. A special tribute to Vietnam photojournalists is included in the closing credits.

Publicity Campaign

For the past month, directors Burns and Novick have spearheaded a massive publicity campaign to promote the series. Last week, the Kennedy Center Opera House was filled for an advance screening of program highlights followed by a panel discussion. Before the screening, Burns asked anyone who served in the military during the war to stand and be recognized with applause. He then asked anyone who protested Vietnam to stand. At that point, two of the war's most famous veterans, Sen. John McCain and former Secretary of State John Kerry, joined in applauding the anti-war demonstrators, too.

It was a moment that set the tone of reconciliation and harmony the series producers said they had hoped for in documenting one of the most divisive chapters in American history. In the ensuing panel discussion, the 81-year-old McCain, who was a bomber pilot shot down over Hanoi and held as a POW for more

than five years, said, "Maybe we can look back on Vietnam and make sure we don't make the same mistakes again. We can learn lessons today because the world is in such turmoil: Tell the American people the truth!"

Winston Churchill once said, "The longer you look back, the farther you can look forward." That would surely be true for any careful study of the Vietnam War, an unwinnable war fought against a country that Americans knew virtually nothing about and in which the U.S. had no vital interests. It was a lesson in how arrogance, ignorance, ideology and political cowardice can be a deadly mix.

The war took the lives of more than 58,000 American soldiers. Although Vietnamese casualty estimates vary widely, the Vietnamese government tallied more than 1 million soldiers dead along with 2 million civilians.

In 2001, I interviewed historian Arthur Schlesinger at the Bay of Pigs in Cuba and asked him if we were learning from our history. "History is an argument without end," Schlesinger told me. "No historian would use the word definitive because new times bring new preoccupations and we historians realize we are prisoners of our own experience. As Oscar Wilde used to say 'One duty we owe to history is to re-write it.'"

As upsetting as the Vietnam War series may be, it holds out hope that we might still learn from history.

Don North is a veteran war correspondent who covered the Vietnam War and many other conflicts around the world. He is the author of *Inappropriate Conduct*, the story of a World War II correspondent whose career was crushed by the intrigue he uncovered.

Respecting a Courageous American

In a dreary era when politicians play predictable roles and avoid courageous stands, it is worth remembering former Attorney General Ramsey Clark, now 89, who dared challenge U.S. foreign policies, says Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

A new documentary about former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark explores his lifetime commitment to human rights and his deep and abiding belief in democratic principles.

As President Lyndon Johnson's chief law enforcement official, Clark was in charge of enforcing the court order that protected the historic Poor People's

March, led by Martin Luther King Jr., from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama in 1965. Clark also oversaw the drafting and passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and Civil Rights Act of 1968.

After his stint as Attorney General, Clark provided legal support for the late antiwar activist, Father Philip Berrigan, and Native American political prisoner, Leonard Peltier. An unrelenting and outspoken critic of U.S. foreign policy, Clark, now 89, has called for an end to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as a ban on depleted uranium weapons. Clark also risked his life to travel to Iraq and defend Saddam Hussein after his capture.

On May 2, I spoke with Joseph Stillman, the writer and director of *Citizen Clark: A Life of Principle*.

DB: How did this all begin? Where did this start?

JS: Well, I did a film about a returning Iraq veteran some 12 years ago, and Ramsey was in the film. And an organization asked me to show that film and they wanted to honor Ramsey, because he was in it. And they asked me to bring him with me to that screening and I did. And afterwards someone in the audience asked Ramsey what he thought [that] the possibility of a nuclear war in this country might be. And he thought about it for a second, and gave this very elaborate and incredible sort of description of how such a horrific event, like that, would play out.

And then afterwards that same person that asked the question in the Q & A at the end of the screening said, "It sounds to me like you're not too optimistic about the future of the United States." To which Ramsey replied, "Quite the contrary, I'm an optimist. Because without optimism there is no hope. But I'm not just talking about the ramifications for the United States. I'm talking about the survival of mankind, on the face of this planet, as we know it."

And that night as we drove back to New York City from the Catskills we had a long discussion about that. And I thought, "What an incredible man with such an important perspective of not only the past and the present, but the future. What a great film it might make if somebody told his story." And so I asked him, had anybody ever done a film on his life. And he said "No, why would anyone want to?" Typical Ramsey response.

And then, eventually, I asked him if I could do it and he sort of hemmed and hawed and then he said "Yes." I think he said yes because his late wife is from my home town in Corpus Christi, Texas. He lived a couple of houses down from my grandparents. So, I think that's the reason he said yes.

But Ramsey's story is a really remarkable tale of a man that grew up in

privilege, that could have written his own ticket, and instead chose to fight for the oppressed, and, really, a lot of groups, organizations and individuals who are unrepresented, and who needed a voice and he shed light on their plight.

DB: Well, he took the constitution seriously, and the right for everybody to have a vigorous defense in this world. Talk a little bit about ... I mean this is the son of a supreme court justice [Tom C. Clark], the former highest law enforcement official in the United States, the attorney general, who all of a sudden does, it seems, it's like a 180 [degree flip]. You want to talk about his early career and how that evolved?

JS: Sure. Well, when you're the highest law enforcement officer of the land, you traditionally, or in the past anyway, you take a position with a prestigious law firm, you write expensive coffee table books, you get tens of thousands of dollars for speeches. Well, Ramsey, when he got out of public service, the first thing he did was go to North Vietnam, at the height of the war, which was very controversial at the time. He wrote a book called *Crime in America*, about the connection between poverty and crime, and solutions for that.

And then he chose instead [...] to go into various interventions throughout the world, to see what was actually going on, to report back about the real things that were happening in these various wars that our country got involved with.

[...] Martin Sheen, I think, said it best, in Los Angeles last year at another screening of this film, when he said that Ramsey Clark was the conscience of our country when we needed one: an individual who said the things that everyone knew was true but nobody wanted to be on record as saying. And that was Ramsey, a fearless advocate of the truth, and what was happening within our democratic process.

DB: [...] Talk about some of the major cases, controversial cases, he's taken on, set that up for us.

JS: Well, there's quite a few. I think he was involved in about 32 U.S. interventions across the world. And he offered ... just as an example, he offered to take the place of the Iran hostages [in 1980], very interesting story there. President Carter calls him up and says "Can you go and talk to the Ayatollah?" who Ramsey had a relationship with for twenty-something years. He said "Sure." He flies to Barcelona, then to Moscow. He's getting ready to go to Tehran the next day, and that night there was a failed attempt to rescue the hostages, by two helicopters, I think, that get caught in a sand storm and Ramsey's trip gets canceled, as a result of that.

But, you know, Ramsey was always in the midst of numerous interventions, because

he knew a lot of the people. He had a relationship with Saddam. He represented Saddam Hussein. He was one of three international lawyers on his team. Six Iraqi lawyers were killed in the course of that trial. Ramsey was getting threatened every day. It was a very tense and difficult situation. And what's in it for someone like Ramsey, other than if you're going to talk about a country being a democracy, then you have to represent everybody, not just the people that can afford to be represented, or that you want to. So Ramsey was an individual of principle.

DB: And just to say a little bit more about the courage there, because he's...I'm sure he didn't have a lot of friends in the U.S. Marines or the U.S. government when he's there getting death threat[s], and putting his life on the line. So, he's not counting on the kind of protection, let's say, U.S. journalists get when they look like soldiers. He has always been out there in his suit and tie.

JS: Yep, absolutely. I think that a really good example is the first night of the Selma to Montgomery March in 1965, Ramsey was assigned to protect the marchers by LBJ [President Lyndon Baines Johnson]. And the very first night, it was getting late, eleven o'clock or so, everybody was getting ready to go to bed, Ramsey had known Martin Luther King for a while. Martin Luther King turns to Ramsey and says, "You know Ramsey, never be afraid because fear will corrupt your soul. And you can never do what's right."

And I think that has been one of the themes of this film. There are many, but Ramsey was a fearless individual, just like the Kennedys, and Martin Luther King, and others who [knew] you cannot seek justice or truth if you are not fearless. And I think, actually, the message of this film, in many ways, is to empower all of us as citizens of, not only our communities and our country and the world, but we have to, all of us have to be fearless, if we expect to protect the rights of others and really to do the right thing for all of humanity. I think that's what Ramsey has done all his life. And I'm so honored to be able to tell, in a small way, his incredible story.

DB: What were a couple of the most surprising things that perhaps you weren't suspecting?

JS: About Ramsey?

DB: Yeah.

JS: Well, you know [...] when I first asked Ramsey if I could do this film, he reluctantly agreed to let me do it. And then he added one other caveat. He said, "You know, my life has been complicated." Well, if there was ever an understatement in the world, that was it. But I found so many instances where

the situations that he found himself in were amazing.

Saddam Hussein, as an example, one day – [Hussein] was very curious about LBJ because of the Great Society programs, and the things that LBJ did for his country. And he said “Tell me about LBJ.”

LBJ was the type of person that would walk into your office and start telling you a story about Mexican-American kids coming to school, when he was a school teacher, having no shoes, having bloody feet. And LBJ would begin to cry. This is a story that Ramsey told me about his experience with LBJ.

So when Saddam wanted to know about LBJ, Ramsey related this story about poor kids without shoes, and LBJ crying and Saddam thinks about it for a second and he says, “You know, that doesn’t seem quite right, because how can he be concerned about kids with bloody shoes on their feet, when he’s dropping bombs that are killing 2 million people in Vietnam?”

And so there were instances, many, many instances of that little story between Ramsey and Saddam that tell you a lot about the individuals that Ramsey came in contact with, or Ramsey knew. And I think that they all respected Ramsey because he was a person that always told the truth. You weren’t going to get some kind of political smart kind of response to something. You were going to get an honest reflection of what Ramsey thought. And that was one of the reasons why I think LBJ trusted Ramsey because he always knew that he could get an answer that was forthright and not looking at it from a political standpoint of any sort, because Ramsey was apolitical.

DB: Apolitical. Like...but he’s been called a communist, a traitor. People suggested that he be hung from the rafters.

JS: Sure.

DB: So, explain that. One would think that he’s an extreme leftist.

JS: Yeah. I think that...I would get, in the course of the five years of this film [...] I would be talking to people and they would say “How can you...how could Ramsey justify representing someone like Saddam?” as an example. And Ramsey never said that Saddam was a good guy or a bad guy, or anything. He just said “You know, if you’re a leader with three warring factions that are trying to destroy each other, you have to do whatever you have to do in order to keep your country together. And that doesn’t mean that it’s a good thing. It just means that that’s what this individual had to do.”

And Ramsey was always looking at the sort of geo-political kind of ramifications of various world leaders and events, because he was very much a student of

history. [...] He said, "You have to go back, this started 900 years ago." So he was a person that had a very deep and committed insight into the various histories of those countries and what brought them to a certain point. And I think ultimately the one thing that Ramsey has been consistent with all his life is the fact of the influence of wealth, special interests, big money on government.

And I think that that's a universal theme with everything that Ramsey has done. He's always looked at policies that have happened in this country and said "Well, who is it that benefits from this intervention into this country or that? Is it representing the people that compose our democracy or is it representing some corporation that we had decided to go into this part of the world?" So Ramsey has always looked at whatever we have done as a country from the standpoint of, "Does this fit into our constitution? Is it legal? Does it fall into the rule of law?" And he's always analyzed these various things through that perspective.

DB: Indeed, he's somebody who has loved the law, and really respected the first amendment, and made it real by standing up for people who were always under attack by taking controversial stands. Ramsey Clark is certainly an extraordinary human being. It is a great service that you made this film about, as you say, somebody who comes out of the high places of power, the son of a supreme court justice, former attorney general, fighting in some of the most controversial legal battles, trying to hold the United States government accountable under international law. I think that's a pretty interesting part of Ramsey Clark's history, his love for the law, and his dedication to holding U.S. officials accountable for the things that they were accusing folks around the world of doing.

JS: Absolutely. It's amazing. When he was in the Justice Department as Attorney General, he was fighting Hoover, because Ramsey had made wiretapping illegal. And Hoover was, behind his back, still wiretapping members of the Civil Rights Movement. And it was just one of many, many things.

Ramsey put a stay on executions, and that held until 1994, [from] 1968 until 1994, when Timothy McVeigh was executed for the Oklahoma City Bombings. But he did numerous things like that. He helped to draft the Civil Rights Acts of '64 and '68 and the Voting Rights Act of '65, among other things. So, you could say that this is a man who really fought to make humanity and the lives of everyday people a more fair and just kind of a world. And I hope people get a chance to see this.

DB: Let me interrupt you here now, and let people know that they will have an opportunity to be part of an East Bay media presentation of *Citizen Clark: A*

Life of Principle. That's going to be happening here for folks in the [San Francisco] Bay Area. It's going to be happening Wednesday, May 10th, 7 p.m., and it's going to be happening at the East Bay Media Center, 1939 Addison Street, if you're in the Bay Area. It's in Berkeley. It's a work in progress. You can be a part of this visionary film. You can learn more about Ramsey Clark. You can meet the film maker, and have an experience.

If you don't know who Ramsey Clark is, or if you're a young person whose tuned in in recent years to Pacifica radio and KPFA, and you don't know this extraordinary human being, if you're a member of Black Lives Matter, or the various brown revolutionary groups, and the immigrants' rights groups, you should know, you should meet Ramsey Clark as an example of a way to live, an example of the way to, if you will, enforce the law, in an equal way. [...]

By the way, have you heard his response to Jefferson Beauregard Sessions III being appointed to Attorney General? Has he mentioned...?

JS: You know, I haven't.

DB: What a contrast!

JS: I did ask him what he thought about Donald Trump, though. Well, he said "Donald Trump wants to take Lady Liberty and tear her up in pieces, and toss her into the Hudson."

DB: I'm surprised he hasn't made that into a Trump Tower. It's coming.

JS: [Ramsey] did, after all, lead the movement to impeach George Bush, that got 1.5 million signatures for that.

[...]

But, when I did first ask him about what he thought about Donald Trump, he said "Not much." So, those were his two comments. It's interesting that Ramsey is not typically a person that will say a lot of bad things about individuals. It's mostly about the deeds that they do, or the policies that they try to enact. So, he never tries to take it to a personal level.

DB: Right, he focuses on the wars, and the breaking of international law that lead to massive destruction and illegal operations.

JS: Well, especially the loss of life. The sanctions in Iraq killed 1/2 million women and children, more so than any of the casualties from combatants. It's always about the women and children who are the real casualties of any war, that Ramsey tries to address.

DB: Yes, it is. [...]

Dennis J Bernstein is a host of “Flashpoints” on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.

How Israel Out-Foxed US Presidents

From the Archive: President Trump hosts Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu this week with the new U.S. administration expected to fall in line as so many “out-foxed” predecessors have, as Morgan Strong described in 2010.

By Morgan Strong (Originally published May 31, 2010)

At the end of a news conference on April 13, 2010, President Barack Obama made the seemingly obvious point that the continuing Middle East conflict pitting Israel against its Arab neighbors will end up “costing us significantly in terms of both blood and treasure.”

Obama’s remark followed a similar statement in congressional testimony by Gen. David Petraeus on March 16, linking the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the challenges that U.S. troops face in the region.

“The conflict foments anti-American sentiment, due to a perception of U.S. favoritism for Israel,” Petraeus said in prepared testimony. “Arab anger over the Palestinian question limits the strength and depth of U.S. partnerships with governments and peoples in the [region] and weakens the legitimacy of moderate regimes in the Arab world. Meanwhile, al-Qaeda and other militant groups exploit that anger to mobilize support.”

[Petraeus later tried to back away from this implicit criticism of Israel, fearing that it would hurt his political standing with his neoconservative allies. He began insisting that the analysis was only part of his written testimony, not his oral remarks.]

Yet, the truth behind the assessments from Obama and Petraeus is self-evident to anyone who has spent time observing the Middle East for the past six decades. Even the staunchly pro-Israeli Bush administration made similar observations.

In 2007 in Jerusalem, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice termed the Israeli/Palestinian peace process of “strategic interest” to the United States and expressed empathy for the beleaguered Palestinian people. “The prolonged experience of deprivation and humiliation can radicalize even normal people,”

Rice said, referring to acts of Palestinian violence.

But the recent statement by Obama and Petraeus aroused alarm among some Israeli supporters who reject any suggestion that Israel's harsh treatment of Palestinians might be a factor in the anti-Americanism surging through the Islamic world.

After Petraeus's comment, the pro-Israeli Anti-Defamation League said linking the Palestinian plight and Muslim anger was "dangerous and counterproductive."

"Gen. Petraeus has simply erred in linking the challenges faced by the U.S. and coalition forces in the region to a solution of the Israeli-Arab conflict, and blaming extremist activities on the absence of peace and the perceived U.S. favoritism for Israel," ADL national director Abraham Foxman said.

However, the U.S. government's widespread (though often unstated) recognition of the truth behind the assessment in Petraeus's testimony has colored how the Obama administration has reacted to the intransigence of Israel's Likud government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The U.S. government realizes how much it has done on Israel's behalf, even to the extent of making Americans the targets of Islamic terrorism such as the 9/11 attacks (as the 9/11 Commission discovered but played down) and sacrificing the lives of thousands of U.S. troops fighting in Middle East conflicts.

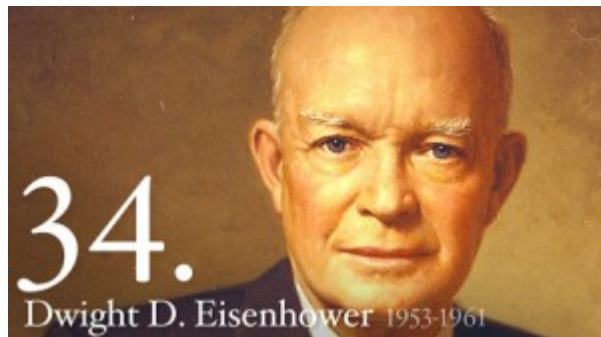
That was the backdrop in March 2009 for President Obama's outrage over the decision of the Netanyahu government to continue building Jewish housing in Arab East Jerusalem despite the fact that the move complicated U.S. peace initiatives and was announced as Vice President Joe Biden arrived to reaffirm American support for Israel.

However, another little-acknowledged truth about the U.S.-Israeli relationship is that Israeli leaders have frequently manipulated and misled American presidents out of a confidence that U.S. politicians deeply fear the political fallout from any public battle with Israel.

Given that history, few analysts who have followed the arc of U.S.-Israeli relations since Israel's founding in 1948 believe that the Israeli government is likely to retreat very much in its confrontation with President Obama. [Now, nearly seven years into Obama's presidency after Netanyahu's persistent obstruction of Palestinian peace talks and his steady expansion of Jewish settlements that assessment has proved out.]

Manipulating Eisenhower

In the 1950s, President Dwight Eisenhower was a strong supporter of the fledgling Jewish state and had supplied Israel with advanced U.S. weaponry. Yet, despite Eisenhower's generosity and good intentions, Israel sided with the British and French in 1956 in a conspiracy against him. Israeli leaders joined a secret arrangement that involved Israel invading Egypt's Sinai, which then allowed France and Great Britain to introduce their own forces and reclaim control of the Suez Canal.



In reaction to the invasion, the Soviet Union threatened to intervene on the side of Egypt by sending ground troops. With Cold War tensions already stretched thin by the crises in Hungary and elsewhere, Eisenhower faced the possibility of a showdown between nuclear-armed adversaries. Eisenhower demanded that the Israeli-spearheaded invasion of the Sinai be stopped, and he brought financial and political pressures to bear on Great Britain and France.

A ceasefire soon was declared, and the British and French departed, but the Israelis dragged their heels. Eisenhower finally presented Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion with an ultimatum, a threat to cut off all U.S. aid. Finally, in March 1957, the Israelis withdrew. [For details, see *Eisenhower and Israel* by Isaac Alteras.]

Even as it backed down in the Sinai, Israel was involved in another monumental deception, a plan for building its own nuclear arsenal. In 1956, Israel had concluded an agreement with France to build a nuclear reactor in the Negev desert. Israel also signed a secret agreement with France to build an adjacent plutonium reprocessing plant.

Israel began constructing its nuclear plant in 1958. However, French President Charles de Gaulle was worried about nuclear weapons destabilizing the Middle East and insisted that Israel not develop a nuclear bomb from the plutonium processing plant. Prime Minister Ben-Gurion assured de Gaulle that the processing plant was for peaceful purposes only.

After John F. Kennedy became President, he also wrote to Ben-Gurion explicitly calling on Israel not to join the nuclear-weapons club, drawing another pledge from Ben-Gurion that Israel had no such intention. Nevertheless, Kennedy

continued to press, forcing the Israelis to let U.S. scientists inspect the nuclear reactor at Dimona. But the Israelis first built a fake control room while bricking up and otherwise disguising parts of the building that housed the plutonium processing plant.

In return for allowing inspectors into Dimona, Ben-Gurion also demanded that the United States sell Hawk surface-to-air missiles to the Israeli military. Kennedy agreed to the sale as a show of good faith. Subsequently, however, the CIA got wind of the Dimona deception and leaked to the press that Israel was secretly building a nuclear bomb.

After Kennedy's assassination, President Lyndon Johnson also grew concerned over Israel's acquiring nuclear weapons. He asked then-Prime Minister Levi Eshkol to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Eshkol assured Johnson that Israel was studying the matter and would sign the treaty in due course. However, Israel has never signed the treaty and never has admitted that it developed nuclear weapons. [For details, see *Israel and The Bomb* by Avner Cohen.]

Trapping Johnson

As Israel grew more sophisticated and more confident in its dealings with U.S. presidents, it also sought to secure U.S. military assistance by exaggerating its vulnerability to Arab attacks. One such case occurred after the Egyptians closed off the Gulf of Aqaba to Israel in May 1967, denying the country its only access to the Red Sea. Israel threatened military action against Egypt if it did not re-open the Gulf.

Israel then asked President Johnson for military assistance in the event war broke out against the Egyptians. Johnson directed Richard Helms, the newly appointed head of the CIA to evaluate Israel's military capability in the event of war against the surrounding Arab states.

On May 26, 1967, Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban met with Johnson, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, and Helms. Eban presented a Mossad estimate of the capability of the Arab armies, claiming that Israel was seriously outgunned by the Arab armies which had been supplied with advanced Soviet weaponry. Israel believed that, owing to its special relationship with the United States, the Mossad intelligence assessment would be taken at face value.

However, Helms was asked to present the CIA estimate of the Arabs' military capabilities versus the Israeli army. The CIA's analysts concluded that Israel could "defend successfully against simultaneous Arab attacks on all fronts, or hold on any three fronts while mounting a successful major offensive on the fourth." [See "C.I.A. Analysis of the 1967 Arab Israeli War," Center for the

Study of Intelligence.]

“We do not believe that the Israeli appreciation was a serious estimate of the sort they would submit to their own high officials,” the CIA report said. “It is probably a gambit intended to influence the U.S. to provide military supplies, make more public commitments to Israel, to approve Israeli military initiatives, and put more pressure on Egyptian President Nasser.” [See *A Look Over My Shoulder* by Richard Helms.]

The CIA report stated further that the Soviet Union would probably not interfere militarily on behalf of the Arab states and that Israel would defeat the combined Arab armies in a matter of days. As a consequence, Johnson refused to airlift special military supplies to Israel, or to promise public support for Israel if Israel went to war.

The Six-Day Success

Despite Johnson’s resistance, Israel launched an attack on its Arab neighbors on June 5, 1967, claiming that the conflict was provoked when Egyptian forces opened fire. (The CIA later concluded that it was Israel that had first fired upon Egyptian forces.)

On June 8, at the height of the conflict, which would become known as the Six-Day War, Israeli fighter/bombers attacked the USS Liberty, a lightly armed communications vessel sent on a mission to relay information on the course of the war to U.S. naval intelligence.

The attack killed 34 Americans sailors, and wounded 171 others. Israeli leaders have always claimed that they had mistaken the U.S. vessel for an enemy ship, but a number of U.S. officials, including Secretary of State Dean Rusk, believed the attack was deliberate, possibly to prevent the United States from learning about Israel’s war plans. [See *As I Saw It* by Dean Rusk.]

However, in deference to Israel, the U.S. government did not aggressively pursue the matter of the Liberty attack and even issued misleading accounts in medal citations to crew members, leaving out the identity of the attackers.

Meanwhile, on land and in the air, Israel’s powerful military advanced, shredding the Arab defenses. Soon, the conflict escalated into another potential showdown between nuclear-armed superpowers, the Soviet Union and the United States. On June 10, President Johnson received a “Hot Line” message from Soviet Premier Alexi Kosygin. The Kremlin warned of grave consequences if Israel continued its military campaign against Syria by entering and/or occupying that country.

Johnson dispatched the Sixth Fleet to the Mediterranean, in a move to convince the Soviets of American resolve. But a ceasefire was declared later the same day, with Israel ending up in control of Syria's Golan Heights, Egypt's Sinai, and Palestinian lands including Gaza and East Jerusalem.

But a wider war was averted. Johnson's suspicions about Israel's expansionist intent had kept the United States from making an even bigger commitment that might have led to the Soviets countering with an escalation of their own.

Nixon and Yom Kippur

Israeli occupation of those additional Arab lands set the stage for a resumption of hostilities six years later, on Oct. 6, 1973, with the Yom Kippur War, which began with a surprise attack by Egypt against Israeli forces in the Sinai.

The offensive caught Israel off guard and Arab forces were close to overrunning Israel's outer defenses and entering the country. According to later accounts based primarily on Israeli leaks, Prime Minister Golda Meir and her "kitchen cabinet" ordered the arming of 13 nuclear weapons, which were aimed at Egyptian and Syrian targets.

Israeli Ambassador to the United States Simha Dintz warned President Richard Nixon that very serious repercussions would occur if the United States did not immediately begin an airlift of military equipment and personnel to Israel. Fearing that the Soviet Union might intervene and that nuclear war was possible, the U.S. military raised its alert level to DEFCON-3. U.S. Airborne units in Italy were put on full alert, and military aid was rushed to Israel.

Faced with a well-supplied Israeli counteroffensive and possible nuclear annihilation, the Arab forces fell back. The war ended on Oct. 26, 1973, but the United States had again been pushed to the brink of a possible superpower confrontation due to the unresolved Israeli-Arab conflict.

Nuclear 'Ambiguity'

On Sept. 22, 1979, after some clouds unexpectedly broke over the South Indian Ocean, a U.S. intelligence satellite detected two bright flashes of light that were quickly interpreted as evidence of a nuclear test. The explosion was apparently one of several nuclear tests that Israel had undertaken in collaboration with the white-supremacist government of South Africa. But President Jimmy Carter at the start of his reelection bid didn't want a showdown with Israel, especially on a point as sensitive as its secret nuclear work with the pariah government in Pretoria.

So, after news of the nuclear test leaked a month later, the Carter

administration followed Israel's longstanding policy of "ambiguity" about the existence of its nuclear arsenal, a charade dating back to Richard Nixon's presidency with the United States pretending not to know for sure that Israel possessed nuclear bombs.

The Carter administration quickly claimed that there was "no confirmation" of a nuclear test, and a panel was set up to conclude that the flashes were "probably not from a nuclear explosion." However, as investigative reporter Seymour Hersh and various nuclear experts later concluded, the flashes were most certainly an explosion of a low-yield nuclear weapon. [For details, see Hersh's *Samson Option*.]

Getting Carter

Despite Carter's helpful cover-up of the Israeli-South African nuclear test, he was still viewed with disdain by Israel's hard-line Likud leadership. Indeed, he arguably was the target of Israel's most audacious intervention in U.S. politics.

Prime Minister Menachem Begin was furious at Carter over the 1978 Camp David accords in which the U.S. President pushed the Israelis into returning the Sinai to the Egyptians in exchange for a peace agreement. The next year, Carter failed to protect the Shah of Iran, an important Israeli regional ally who was forced from power by Islamic militants. Then, when Carter acceded to demands from the Shah's supporters to admit him to New York for cancer treatment, Iranian radicals seized the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and held 52 Americans hostage.

In 1980, as Carter focused on his reelection campaign, Begin saw both dangers and opportunities. High-ranking Israeli diplomat/spy David Kimche described Begin's thinking in the 1991 book, *The Last Option*, recounting how Begin feared that Carter might force Israel to withdraw from the West Bank and accept a Palestinian state if he won a second term.

"Begin was being set up for diplomatic slaughter by the master butchers in Washington," Kimche wrote. "They had, moreover, the apparent blessing of the two presidents, Carter and [Egyptian President Anwar] Sadat, for this bizarre and clumsy attempt at collusion designed to force Israel to abandon her refusal to withdraw from territories occupied in 1967, including Jerusalem, and to agree to the establishment of a Palestinian state."

Begin's alarm was driven by the prospect of Carter being freed from the pressure of having to face another election, according to Kimche.

"Unbeknownst to the Israeli negotiators, the Egyptians held an ace up their sleeves, and they were waiting to play it," Kimche wrote. "The card was

President Carter's tacit agreement that after the American presidential elections in November 1980, when Carter expected to be re-elected for a second term, he would be free to compel Israel to accept a settlement of the Palestinian problem on his and Egyptian terms, without having to fear the backlash of the American Jewish lobby."

So, by spring 1980, Begin had privately sided with Carter's Republican rival, Ronald Reagan, a reality that Carter soon realized. Questioned by congressional investigators in 1992 regarding allegations about Israel conspiring with Republicans in 1980 to help unseat him, Carter said he knew by April 1980 that "Israel cast their lot with Reagan," according to notes found among the unpublished documents in the files of a House task force that looked into the so-called October Surprise case.

Carter traced the Israeli opposition to his reelection to a "lingering concern [among] Jewish leaders that I was too friendly with Arabs." [For details, see Robert Parry's *Secrecy & Privilege*.]

Doing What Was Necessary

Begin was an Israeli leader committed to do whatever he felt necessary to advance Israeli security interests and the dream of a Greater Israel with Jews controlling the ancient Biblical lands. Before Israel's independence in 1948, he had led a Zionist terrorist group, and he founded the right-wing Likud Party in 1973 with the goal of "changing the facts on the ground" by placing Jewish settlements in Palestinian areas.

Begin's anger over the Sinai deal and his fear of Carter's reelection set the stage for secret collaboration between Begin and the Republicans, according to another former Israeli intelligence official, Ari Ben-Menashe.

"Begin loathed Carter for the peace agreement forced upon him at Camp David," Ben-Menashe wrote in his 1992 memoir, *Profits of War*. "As Begin saw it, the agreement took away Sinai from Israel, did not create a comprehensive peace, and left the Palestinian issue hanging on Israel's back."

Ben-Menashe, an Iranian-born Jew who had immigrated to Israel as a teen-ager, became part of a secret Israeli program to reestablish its Iranian intelligence network that had been decimated by the Islamic revolution. Ben-Menashe wrote that Begin authorized shipments to Iran of small arms and some military spare parts, via South Africa, as early as September 1979 and continued them despite Iran's seizure of the U.S. hostages in November 1979.

Extensive evidence also exists that Begin's preference for Reagan led the Israelis to join in a covert operation with Republicans to contact Iranian

leaders behind Carter's back, interfering with the President's efforts to free the 52 American hostages before the November 1980 elections.

That evidence includes statements from senior Iranian officials, international arms dealers, intelligence operatives (including Ben-Menashe), and Middle East political figures (including a cryptic confirmation from Begin's successor Yitzhak Shamir). But the truth about the October Surprise case remains in dispute to this day. [For the latest details, see Robert Parry's *America's Stolen Narrative*.]

It is clear that after Reagan defeated Carter, and the U.S. hostages were released immediately upon Reagan being sworn in on Jan. 20, 1981, Israeli-brokered weapons shipments flowed to Iran with the secret blessing of the new Republican administration.

Dealing with Reagan

The Israel Lobby had grown exponentially since its start in the Eisenhower years. Israel's influential supporters were now positioned to use every political device imaginable to lobby Congress and to get the White House to acquiesce to whatever Israel felt it needed.

President Reagan also credentialed into the Executive Branch a new group of pro-Israeli American officials the likes of Elliott Abrams, Richard Perle, Michael Ledeen and Jeane Kirkpatrick who became known as the neocons.

Yet, despite Reagan's pro-Israel policies, the new U.S. President wasn't immune from more Israeli deceptions and additional pressures. Indeed, whether because of the alleged collusion with Reagan during the 1980 campaign or because Israel sensed its greater clout within his administration, Begin demonstrated a new level of audacity.

In 1981, Israel recruited Jonathan Pollard, an American Navy intelligence analyst, as a spy to acquire American intelligence satellite photos. Eventually, Pollard purloined massive amounts of intelligence information, some of which was reportedly turned over to Soviet intelligence by Israel to win favors from Moscow.

Prime Minister Begin sensed, too, that the time was ripe to gain the upper hand on other Arab enemies. He turned his attention to Lebanon, where the Palestine Liberation Organization was based. When U.S. intelligence warned Reagan that Israel was massing troops along the border with Lebanon, Reagan sent a cable to Begin urging him not to invade. But Begin ignored Reagan's plea and invaded Lebanon the following day, on June 6, 1982. [See *Time*, Aug. 16, 1982.]

As the offensive progressed, Reagan sought a cessation of hostilities between Israel and the PLO, but Israel was intent on killing as many PLO fighters as possible. Periodic U.S.-brokered ceasefires failed as Israel used the slightest provocation to resume fighting, supposedly in self-defense.

“When PLO sniper fire is followed by fourteen hours of Israeli bombardment that is stretching the definition of defensive action too far,” complained Reagan, who kept the picture of a horribly burned Lebanese child on his desk in the Oval Office as a reminder of the tragedy of Lebanon.

The American public nightly witnessed the Israeli bombardment of Beirut on television news broadcasts. The pictures of dead, mutilated children caught in the Israeli artillery barrages, were particularly wrenching. Repulsed by the carnage, the U.S. public decidedly favored forcing Israel to stop.

When Reagan warned Israel of possible sanctions if its forces continued to indiscriminately attack Beirut, Israel launched a major offensive against West Beirut the next day. In the United States, Israeli supporters demanded a meeting with Reagan to press Israel’s case. Though Reagan declined the meeting, one was set up for 40 leaders of various Jewish organizations with Vice President George H.W. Bush, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and Secretary of State George Shultz.

Reagan wrote once again to Begin, reminding him that Israel was allowed to use American weapons only for defensive purposes. He appealed to Begin’s humanitarianism to stop the bombardment.

The next day, in a meeting with Israeli supporters from the United States, Begin fumed that he would not be instructed by an American president or any other U.S. official. “Nobody is going to bring Israel to her knees. You must have forgotten that Jews do not kneel but to God,” Begin said. “Nobody is going to preach to us humanitarianism.”

More Tragedy

Begin’s government also used the tragedy in Lebanon as an opportunity to provide special favors for its American backers.

In *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, New York Times correspondent Thomas L. Friedman wrote that the Israeli Army conducted tours of the battlefield for influential U.S. donors. On one occasion, women from Hadassah were taken to the hills surrounding Beirut and were invited to look down on the city as Israeli artillery put on a display for them. The artillery began an enormous barrage, with shells landing throughout the densely populated city. The shells struck and destroyed apartments, shops, homes and shacks in the squalid refugee camps of

the Palestinians.

A ceasefire was finally agreed upon by Israel and the PLO, requiring Yasser Arafat and all PLO fighters to leave Lebanon. The Palestinians were assured, as part of the agreement brokered by the United States, that their wives and children living in Lebanese refugee camps would be safe from harm. The PLO then left Lebanon by ship in August 1982, moving the PLO headquarters to Tunisia.

On Sept. 16, Israel's Christian militia allies, with Israeli military support, entered the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps, and conducted a three-day campaign of rape and murder. Most of the dead with estimates varying from Israel's count of 400 to a Palestinian estimate of nearly 1,000 were women and children.

American Marines, who had been dispatched to Lebanon as peacekeepers to oversee the PLO evacuation but then had departed, hastily returned after the Sabra and Shatila massacres. They were housed in a large warehouse complex near Beirut's airport.

Over the next year, American forces found themselves drawn into the worsening Lebanese civil war. A key moment occurred on Sept. 18, 1983, when Reagan's national security adviser Robert McFarlane, who was considered a staunch supporter of Israel, ordered U.S. warships to bombard Muslim targets inside Lebanon.

As Gen. Colin Powell, then a top aide to Defense Secretary Weinberger, wrote in his memoir, "When the shells started falling on the Shiites, they assumed the American 'referee' had taken sides." [See Powell's *My American Journey*.]

Muslim attacks on the Marines in Beirut soon escalated. On Oct. 23, 1983, two Shiite Muslims drove explosives-laden trucks into two buildings in Beirut, one housing French forces and the other the Marines. The blasts killed 241 Americans and 58 French.

Over the ensuing weeks, American forces continued to suffer losses in skirmishes with Muslim militiamen near the Beirut airport and American civilians also became targets for execution and hostage-taking. On Feb. 7, 1984, Reagan announced that the Marines would be redeployed from Lebanon. Within a couple of weeks, the last of the Marines had departed Lebanon, having suffered a total of 268 killed.

However, the hostage-taking of Americans continued, ironically creating an opportunity for Israel to intercede again through its contacts in Iran to seek the help of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's regime in getting the Lebanese Shiite militants to release captured Americans.

Israeli arms dealers and neocon Americans, such as Michael Ledeen, were used as middlemen for the secret arms-for-hostages deals, which Reagan approved and McFarlane oversaw. However, the arms deliveries via Israel failed to reduce the overall number of Americans held hostage in Lebanon and were eventually exposed in November 1986, becoming Reagan's worst scandal, the Iran-Contra Affair.

Noriega and Harari

Though Israel's government had created some headaches for Reagan, it also provided some help, allowing its arms dealers and intelligence operatives to assist some of Reagan's favorite covert operations, particularly in Central America where the U.S. Congress had objected to military assistance going to human rights violators, like the Guatemalan military, and to the Nicaraguan Contra rebels.

As Vice President, George H.W. Bush met with Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega and considered him a compliant partner. Noriega subsequently funneled financial and other help to Reagan's beloved Contras and once even volunteered to arrange the assassinations of leaders of the Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

One of Noriega's top operatives was Michael Harari, who had led Israeli assassination teams and who had served as the Israeli Mossad station chief in Mexico. In Panama, Harari became a key intermediary for Israeli contributions to the Contras, supplying them with arms and training, while Noriega handed over cash.

But Noriega and Harari were conducting other business in the region, allegedly working as middlemen and money launderers for the lucrative smuggling of cocaine into the United States. When that information surfaced in the U.S. news media and Noriega became notorious as an unstable thug George H.W. Bush as President found himself under enormous political pressure in 1989 to remove Noriega from power.

So, Bush prepared to invade Panama in December 1989. However, the Israeli government was concerned about the possible capture of Harari, whom U.S. prosecutors regarded as Noriega's top co-conspirator but who also was someone possessing sensitive information about Israeli clandestine activities.

Six hours before U.S. troops were to invade Panama, Harari was warned of the impending attack, an alert that enabled him to flee and may have compromised the safety of American paratroopers and Special Forces units preparing to begin the assault, units that took surprisingly heavy casualties.

Tipped off by Israeli intelligence agents, Harari was whisked away by an Israeli embassy car, flying a diplomatic flag, with diplomatic license plates to ensure

he would not be stopped and held, according to an interview that I had in January 1990 with Col. Edward Herrera Hassen, commander of Panama Defense Forces.

Harari soon was on his way back to Israel, where the government has since rebuffed U.S. requests that Harari be extradited to the United States to stand trial in connection with the Noriega case. For his part, Noriega was captured and brought to the United States where he was convicted of eight drug and racketeering charges. [Hariri died on Sept. 21, 2014, in Tel Aviv at the age of 87.]

The Lobby

The one constant in Israel's endless maneuverings both with and against the U.S. government has been the effectiveness of the Israel Lobby and its many allies to fend off sustained criticism of Israel, sometimes by smearing critics as anti-Semitic or by mounting aggressive cover-ups when investigations threatened to expose ugly secrets.

Given this long record of success, U.S. presidents and other politicians have demonstrated a declining capacity to press Israel into making concessions, the way Eisenhower, Kennedy and Carter tried to do. For instance, when President Bill Clinton first met with Netanyahu in 1996, Clinton was surprised to find himself getting a lecture from Israel's Likud prime minister. "Who the f**k does he think he is? Who's the superpower here?" a peeved Clinton was quoted as saying. [See *The Much Too Promised Land*, by Aaron Miller, an aide to Clinton.]

Joe Lockhart, then White House spokesman, told Clayton Swisher, author of *The Truth About Camp David*, that Netanyahu was "one of the most obnoxious individuals you're going to come into just a liar and a cheat. He could open his mouth and you could have no confidence that anything that came out of it was the truth."

Faced with these difficulties and fending off Republican attempts to drive him from office Clinton put off any serious push for a Middle East peace accord until the last part of his presidency. Clinton negotiated the Wye River memorandum with Netanyahu and Arafat on Sept. 23, 1999, calling for reciprocal undertakings by both sides. The agreement called for the freezing of Israeli settlements on Palestinian land, but Netanyahu failed to stop the settlement activity. Demolition of Palestinian homes, restrictions on movement by Palestinians, and settlement building continued.

Ultimately, Clinton failed to achieve any breakthrough as his final efforts collapsed amid finger-pointing and distrust between the Palestinians and the

Israelis.

Handling Bush

Israel's hopes were buoyed further when George W. Bush entered the White House in 2001. Unlike his father who looked on the Israelis with suspicion and felt some kinship with the Arab oil states, the younger Bush was unabashedly pro-Israel.



Though Reagan had credentialed many young neocons in the 1980s, he had kept them mostly away from Middle East policy, which usually fell to less ideological operatives such as Philip Habib and James Baker. However, George W. Bush installed the neocons in key jobs for Mideast policy, with the likes of Elliott Abrams at the National Security Council, Paul Wolfowitz and Douglas Feith at the Pentagon, and Lewis Libby inside Vice President Dick Cheney's office.

The neocons arrived with a plan to transform the Middle East based on a scheme prepared by a group of American neocons, including Perle and Feith, for Netanyahu in 1996. Called "A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm," the idea was to bring to heel all the antagonistic states confronting Israel.

The "clean break" was to abandon the idea of achieving peace in the region through mutual understanding and compromise. Instead, there would be "peace through strength," including violent removal of leaders who were viewed as hostile to Israel's interests.

The plan sought the ouster of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, which was called "an important Israeli strategic objective in its own right." After Hussein's ouster, the plan envisioned destabilizing the Assad dynasty in Syria with hopes of replacing it with regime more favorable to Israel. That, in turn, would push Lebanon into Israel's arms and contribute to the destruction of Hezbollah, Israel's tenacious foe in South Lebanon.

The removal of Hezbollah in Lebanon would, in turn, weaken Iran's influence, both in Lebanon and in the occupied territories of Gaza and the West Bank, where Hamas and other Palestinian militants would find themselves cornered.

But what the “clean break” needed was the military might of the United States, since some of the targets like Iraq were too far away and too powerful to be overwhelmed even by Israel’s highly efficient military. The cost in Israeli lives and to Israel’s economy from such overreach would have been staggering.

The only way to implement the strategy was to enlist a U.S. president, his administration and the Congress to join Israel in this audacious undertaking. That opportunity presented itself when Bush ascended to the White House and the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, created a receptive political climate in the United States.

Turning to Iraq

After a quick strike against al-Qaeda and its allies in Afghanistan, the Bush administration turned its attention to conquering Iraq. However, even after the 9/11 attacks, the neocons and President Bush had to come up with rationales that were sellable to the American people, while playing down any suggestion that the coming conflicts were partially designed to advance Israel’s interests.

So, the Bush administration put together tales about Iraqi stockpiles of WMD, its “reconstituted” nuclear weapons program, and its alleged ties to al-Qaeda and other terrorists determined to strike at the United States. The PR operation worked like a charm. Bush rallied Congress and much of the American public behind an unprovoked invasion of Iraq, which began on March 19, 2003, and drove Saddam Hussein’s government from power three weeks later.

At the time, the joke circulating among neocons was where to go next, Syria or Iran, with the punch line: “Real men go to Tehran!”

Meanwhile, Israel continued collecting as much intelligence as possible from the United States about the next desired target, Iran. On Aug. 27, 2004, CBS News broke a story about an FBI investigation into a possible spy working for Israel as a policy analyst for Under Secretary of Defense Wolfowitz. The official was identified as Lawrence Franklin.

Franklin pled guilty to passing a classified Presidential Directive and other sensitive documents pertaining to U.S. foreign policy regarding Iran to the powerful Israeli lobbying group, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, which shared the information with Israel.

According to FBI surveillance tapes, Franklin relayed top secret information to Steve Rosen, AIPAC’s policy director, and Keith Weissman, a senior policy analyst with AIPAC. On Aug. 30, 2004, Israeli officials admitted that Franklin had met repeatedly with Naor Gilon, head of the political department at the Israeli Embassy in Washington, and a specialist on Iran’s nuclear programs.

Franklin was sentenced to 12 years and seven months in prison for passing classified information to a pro-Israel lobby group and an Israeli diplomat. No charges were brought against the AIPAC executives or the Israeli diplomat.

Bloody Chaos

Meanwhile, back in the Middle East, it turned out that occupying Iraq was more difficult than the Bush administration had anticipated. Ultimately, more than 4,400 American soldiers died in the conflict along with hundreds of thousands of Iraqis.

The bloody chaos in Iraq also meant that the neocon “real men” couldn’t go either to Syria or Iran, at least not right away. They were forced into a waiting game, counting on the short memories of the American people before revving up the fear machine again to justify moving to the next phase.

When the U.S. death toll finally began to decline in Iraq, the neocons stepped up their alarms about Iran becoming a danger to the world by developing nuclear weapons (although Iran has disavowed any desire to have nukes and U.S. intelligence expressed confidence in 2007 that Iran had stopped work on a warhead four years earlier).

Still, while trying to keep the focus away from its own nuclear arsenal, Israel has pushed the international community to bring pressure on Iran, in part by threatening to mount its own military attack on Iran if the U.S. government and other leading powers don’t act aggressively.

The neocon anti-Iran plans were complicated by the victory of Barack Obama, who promised to reach out in a more respectful way to the Muslim world. Inside Israel and in U.S. neocon circles, complaints quickly spread about Obama’s coziness with Muslims (even claims that he was a secret Muslim or anti-Semitic). Obama further antagonized the neocons and Israeli hardliners by suggesting a linkage between the festering Palestinian problem and dangers to U.S. national security, including violence against U.S. troops in the Middle East.

Netanyahu, who again had assumed the post of prime minister, and the neocons wanted U.S. policy refocused on Iran, with little attention on Israel as it continued its longstanding policy of building more and more Jewish settlements on what was once Palestinian land.

In reaction to Netanyahu’s unwillingness to curb those settlements and with the announcement of more housing units during Biden’s visit Obama retaliated by subjecting Netanyahu to several slights, including refusing to have photographs taken of the two of them meeting at the White House.

Obama walked out of one meeting with Netanyahu after failing to get his written promise for a concession on halting further settlement construction. Obama went to dinner alone, a very pointed insult to Netanyahu. As Obama left the meeting, he said, "Let me know if there is anything new," according to a member of Congress who was present.

Secret Pacts

For his part, Netanyahu has claimed that secret agreements with the Bush administration allow for the continued building of settlements. However, Obama said on National Public Radio that he does not consider himself bound by secret oral agreements that may have been made by President Bush.

Instead, Obama claims Israel is bound by the 2003 "Road Map" agreement which prohibits building more settlements. "I've said clearly to the Israelis both privately and publicly that a freeze on settlements, including natural growth, is part of these obligations," Obama said.

Still, Obama has shied away from publicly challenging Israel on some of its most sensitive issues, such as its undeclared nuclear-weapons arsenal. Like presidents back to Nixon, Obama has participated in the charade of "ambiguity." Even as he demanded "transparency" from other countries, Obama continued to dance around questions regarding whether Israel has nuclear weapons.

Netanyahu and Israel surely have vulnerabilities. Without America's military, diplomatic and economic support, Israel could not exist in its present form. One-quarter of Israeli wage incomes are derived from American aid money, German reparations and various charities. Without that outside assistance, Israel's standard of living would sink dramatically.

According to the Congressional Research Service, Israel receives \$2.4 billion a year in U.S. government grants, military assistance, loan guarantees, and sundry other sources. The United States also pays Egypt another \$2 billion to keep the peace with Israel. The combined assistance to both countries comprises nearly one half of all U.S. foreign aid assistance worldwide.

In a sense, Israel can't be blamed for standing up for itself, especially given the long history of brutality and oppression directed against Jews. However, Israeli leaders have used this tragic history to justify their own harsh treatment of others, especially the Palestinians, many of whom were uprooted from their ancestral homes.

Over the past six decades, Israeli leaders also have refined their strategies for taking advantage of their staunchest ally, the United States. Today, with many powerful friends inside the United States and with Obama facing intense

political pressure over his domestic and national security policies the Israeli government has plenty of reasons to believe that it can out-fox and outlast the current U.S. president as it did many of his predecessors.

Morgan Strong is a former professor of Middle Eastern history, and was an advisor to CBS News “60 Minutes” on the Middle East. He is author of ebook, *The Israeli Lobby and Me*, *Bush Family History*, and *Hoodwinking American Presidents*.

How the NYT Plays with History

Special Report: By failing to tell the hard truth about Establishment wrongdoing, The New York Times – along with other mainstream U.S. media outlets – has destabilized American democracy, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Whenever The New York Times or some other mainstream news outlet holds itself out as a paragon of professional journalism – by wagging a finger at some pro-Trump “fake news” or some Internet “conspiracy theory” – I cringe at the self-delusion and hypocrisy.

No one hates fake news and fact-free conspiracy theories more than I do, but the sad truth is that the mainstream press has opened the door to such fantasies by losing the confidence of the American people and becoming little more than the mouthpiece for the Establishment, which spins its own self-serving narratives and tells its own lies.

Rather than acting as a watchdog against these deceptions, the Times and its mainstream fellow-travelers have transformed themselves into little more than the Establishment’s apologists and propagandists.

If Iraq is the “enemy,” we are told wild tales about how Iraq’s non-existent WMD is a danger to us all. If Syria is in Washington’s crosshairs, we are given a one-sided account of what’s happening there, black hats for the “regime” and white hats for the “rebels”?

If the State Department is backing a coup in Ukraine to oust an elected leader, we are regaled with tales of his corruption and how overthrowing a democratically chosen leader is somehow “democracy promotion.” Currently, we are getting uncritical stenography on every conceivable charge that the U.S. government lodges against Russia.

Yet, while this crisis in American journalism has grown more severe in recent years, the pattern is not entirely new. It is reflected in how the mainstream media has missed many of the most significant news stories of modern history and has, more often than not, been an obstacle to getting at the truth.

Then, if the evidence finally becomes so overwhelming that continued denials are no longer tenable, the mainstream media tries to reclaim its tattered credibility by seizing on some new tidbit of evidence and declaring that all that went before were just rumors but now we can take the long whispered story seriously – because the Times says so.

For instance, we have the case of Richard Nixon's sabotage of President Lyndon Johnson's Vietnam War peace talks in 1968 to give himself a crucial boost in a tight presidential race against Vice President Hubert Humphrey. In "real time" – both as Nixon was executing his maneuver and in the years immediately afterwards – there was reporting by second-tier newspapers and independent journalists into what Johnson privately called Nixon's "treason," but the Times and other "newspapers of record" treated the story as little more than a conspiracy theory.

As the years went on and the case of Nixon's guilt grew stronger and stronger, the story still never managed to cross the threshold for the Big Media to take it seriously.

Definitive Evidence

Several years ago, I compiled a detailed narrative of the 1968 events from material declassified by Johnson's presidential library and I published the material at Consortiumnews.com. Not only did I draw from newly available recordings of Johnson's phone calls but from a file of top secret wiretaps – labeled "The 'X' envelope" – which Johnson had ordered his national security adviser, Walt Rostow, to remove from the White House before Nixon's inauguration.

I also traced how Nixon's paranoia about the missing White House file and who might possess it led him to assemble a team of burglars, known as the Plumbers, whose activities later surfaced in the Watergate scandal.

In other words, by unraveling the mystery of Nixon's 1968 "treason," you change the narratives of the Vietnam War and Watergate, two of the pivotal issues of modern American history. But the mainstream U.S. media studiously ignored these new disclosures.

Just last November, in [a review](#) of past "October Surprise" cases – in the context of FBI Director James Comey telling Congress that the FBI had reopened

its investigation of Hillary Clinton's emails – the Times offered this summary of the 1968 affair:

“President Lyndon Baines Johnson announced a halt to bombing of North Vietnam, based on his claim that peace talks had ‘entered a new and a very much more hopeful phase,’ and he invited the government of South Vietnam and the Viet Cong to take part in negotiations. Raising hopes that the war might end soon, the announcement appeared to bolster the standing in the polls of Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey, the Democratic presidential nominee, but Humphrey still fell short in the election against former Vice President Richard M. Nixon, the Republican.”

In other words, the Times treated Johnson's bombing halt and claim of peace-talk progress as the “October Surprise” to try to influence the election in favor of Humphrey. But the evidence now is clear that a peace agreement was within reach and that the “October Surprise” was Nixon's sabotage of the negotiations by persuading South Vietnamese President Nguyen van Thieu to boycott the Paris talks.

The Times got the story upside-down by failing to reexamine the case in light of convincing new evidence that had been available for years, albeit circulating outside the mainstream.

However, finally, that disdain for the story may be dissipating. Earlier this month, the Times highlighted in [an op-ed](#) and [a follow-up news article](#) cryptic [notes](#) from Nixon's 1968 campaign revealing Nixon's instructions to top aide H.R. Haldeman.

Haldeman's notes – discovered at the Nixon presidential library by historian John A. Farrell – reveal Nixon telling Haldeman “Keep Anna Chennault working on SVN,” meaning South Viet Nam and referring to the campaign's chief emissary to the South Vietnamese government, right-wing Chinese émigré Anna Chennault.

Nixon's gambit was to have Chennault pass on word to South Vietnamese President Thieu that if he boycotted Johnson's Paris peace talks – thus derailing the negotiations – Nixon would assure Thieu continued U.S. military support for the war.

Monkey Wrench It

Another Haldeman note revealed Nixon's intent to get Senate Minority Leader Everett Dirksen, R-Illinois, to berate Johnson about a planned bombing halt while Nixon looked for “Any other way to monkey wrench it? Anything RN [Richard Nixon] can do.”

Though Haldeman's scribbling is sometimes hard to decipher, the next entry makes reference to "SVN" and adds: "tell him hold firm" – the same message that Anna Chennault later passed on to senior South Vietnamese officials in the last days of the 1968 campaign.

Though Farrell's discovery is certainly newsworthy, its greatest significance may be that it has served as a tipping point that finally has forced the Times and the mainstream media to move past their longstanding dismissals of this "conspiracy theory."

The Times gave Farrell space on its op-ed page of Jan. 1 to explain his discovery and the Times followed up with an inside-the-paper story about the Haldeman notes. That story included some favorable comments from mainstream writers, such as former Newsweek bureau chief Evan Thomas saying Farrell "nailed down what has been talked about for a long time."

Of course, the story of Nixon's Vietnam peace-talk sabotage has been more than "talked about for a long time." A series of journalists have pieced together the evidence, including some as the scheme was unfolding and others from digging through yellowed government files as they became available over the past couple of decades.

But the major newspapers mostly brushed aside this accumulation of evidence apparently because it challenged their "authoritative" narrative of that era. As strange and vicious as some of Nixon's paranoid behavior may have been, it seems to have been a bridge too far to suggest that he put his political ambitions ahead of the safety of a half million U.S. soldiers in the Vietnam war zone in 1968.

For the American people to have been told that troubling truth might have profoundly shaken their trust in the Establishment, given the deaths of 58,000 U.S. soldiers in the Vietnam War, plus the killing of several million Vietnamese. (Nearly half of the dead were killed after Johnson's peace talks failed and as Nixon lived up to his commitment to Thieu by extending the direct U.S. combat role for four more years.)

[For more details, see Consortiumnews.com's "[LBJ's 'X-File' on Nixon's 'Treason'](#)" and "[The Heinous Crime Behind Watergate.](#)"]

A Reprise

But the mainstream media's concealment of Nixon's "treason" was not a stand-alone problem in terms of distorting recent U.S. history. If the American people had realized how far some top U.S. officials would go to achieve their political ambitions, they might have been more willing to believe other serious

allegations of government wrongdoing.

For instance, the evidence is now almost as overwhelming that Ronald Reagan's campaign reprised Nixon's 1968 gambit in 1980 by undermining President Jimmy Carter's negotiations to free 52 American hostages then held in Iran, another well-documented "October Surprise" case that the mainstream media still labels a "conspiracy theory."

With more than two dozen witnesses – including U.S., Iranian, Israeli and other officials – describing aspects of that Republican behind-the-scenes deal, the reality of this "prequel" to Reagan's later Iran-Contra arms-for-hostages scandal should be widely accepted as a real piece of modern American history.

But a half-hearted congressional investigation in 1991-93 naively gave then-President George H.W. Bush the crucial job of assembling internal U.S. government records to confirm the allegations – despite the fact that Bush was a principal suspect in the 1980 operation.

Several years ago, I uncovered documents from the Bush presidential library in College Station, Texas, showing how Bush's White House staff organized a cover-up to conceal key evidence and hide a key witness from the investigation.

One memo by one of Bush's lawyers disclosed that the White House had received confirmation of a key October Surprise allegation – a secret trip by campaign chairman (and later CIA Director) William Casey to Madrid – but then withheld that information from congressional investigators. Documents also showed the White House frustrating attempts to interview former CIA officer Donald Gregg, a key witness.

Another document bluntly set out the White House's goal: "kill/spike this story" to protect Bush's reelection chances in 1992.

After I discovered the Madrid confirmation several years ago – and sent the document to former Rep. Lee Hamilton, who had headed the congressional inquiry which had concluded that there was no credible evidence supporting the allegations – he was stunned by the apparent betrayal of his trust.

"The [Bush-41] White House did not notify us that he [Casey] did make the trip" to Madrid, Hamilton told me in an interview. Asked if knowledge that Casey had traveled to Madrid might have changed the investigation's dismissive October Surprise conclusion, Hamilton said yes, because the question of the Madrid trip was central to the inquiry.

Yet, to this day, both right-wing and mainstream media outlets cite the investigation's inconclusive results as their central argument for defending

Reagan and his legacy. However, if Nixon's 1968 gambit – jeopardizing the lives of a half million U.S. soldiers – had been accepted as genuine history earlier, the evidence that Reagan endangered 52 U.S. embassy personnel might have seemed a lot easier to believe.

As these longstanding cover-ups slowly crack and begin to crumble, the serious history behind them has started to show through in the mainstream media. For instance, on Jan. 3, during a CNN panel discussion about interference in U.S. presidential elections, popular historian Doug Brinkley added, "One point: 1980, Ronald Reagan was taking on Jimmy Carter, and there was the October Surprise meeting keeping the hostages in Iran. William Casey, people in the Reagan administration were interfering with foreign policy then saying, 'Keep the hostages in until after the election.' So it has happened before. It's not just Nixon here or Donald Trump."

[For more details on the 1980 case, see Robert Parry's *America's Stolen Narrative* or *Trick or Treason: The 1980 October Surprise Mystery* or Consortiumnews.com's "Second Thoughts on October Surprise."]

Contra-Cocaine Scandal

But the denial of serious Establishment wrongdoing dies hard. For instance, The New York Times, The Washington Post and other major news outlets have long refused to accept the overwhelming evidence that Reagan's beloved Nicaraguan Contra rebels engaged in cocaine trafficking under the benevolent gaze of the White House and the CIA.

My Associated Press colleague Brian Barger and I assembled a lot of that evidence in 1985 for the first story about this scandal, which undermined Reagan's claims that he was fighting a relentless war on drugs. Back then, the Times also went to bat for the Establishment. Based on self-serving information from Reagan's Justice Department, the Times knocked down our AP reporting. And, once the Times got taken in by its official sources, it and other mainstream publications carried on vendettas against anyone who dared contradict the accepted wisdom.

So, when San Jose Mercury News reporter Gary Webb revived the Contra-cocaine story in 1996 – with evidence that some of that cocaine had fed into the "crack epidemic" – the Times and other big newspapers savaged Webb's articles and destroyed his career. Not even an institutional confession by the CIA in 1998 that it had been aware of widespread Contra drug smuggling and looked the other way was enough to shake the mainstream media's false conventional wisdom about the Contras' and the CIA's innocence.

After the CIA inspector general reached his damning conclusions admitting knowledge of the drug-running, the Times did run a story acknowledging that there may have been more to the allegations than the newspaper had previously believed, but the same article kept up the bashing of Webb, who was drummed out of journalism and, nearly penniless, committed suicide in 2004.

Despite the CIA admissions, The Washington Post also continued to deny the Contra-cocaine reality. When a movie about Webb's ordeal, "Kill the Messenger," was released in 2014, the Post's investigative editor Jeff Leen kept up the paper's long-running denial of the reality with a nasty new attack on Webb.

Leen's story was endorsed by the Post's former executive editor Leonard Downie Jr., who circulated Leen's take-down of Webb with the added comment: "I was at The Washington Post at the time that it investigated Gary Webb's stories, and Jeff Leen is exactly right. However, he is too kind to a movie that presents a lie as fact."

[For more on Leen's hit piece, see Consortiumnews.com's "WPost's Slimy Assault on Gary Webb." For more on the Contra-cocaine story, see "The Sordid Contra-Cocaine Saga."]

Lies as Truth

The fact that mainstream media "stars" lie in calling facts a lie – or they can't distinguish between facts and lies – has contributed to a dangerous breakdown in the public's ability to sort out what is and what is not real.

Essentially, the problem is that the mainstream media has sought to protect the integrity of the Establishment by dismissing real cases of institutional criminality and abuse of power. However, by shoring up these defenses – rather than challenging systemic wrongdoing – the mainstream media has watched its own credibility erode.

One might hope that someone in a position of power within the major news organizations would recognize this danger and initiate a sweeping reform, which might start by acknowledging some of the long-buried historical realities even if it puts Establishment icons, such as Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, in a negative light.

But that is clearly not the direction that the mainstream U.S. news media is heading. Instead, the Times, the Post and other mainstream outlets continue to take whatever Establishment sources hand out – now including dubious and bizarre U.S. intelligence allegations about Russia and President-elect Donald Trump.

Rather than join in demanding real evidence to support these claims, the

mainstream media seems intent on simply channeling the Establishment's contempt for both Russia and Trump. So, whatever is said – no matter how unlikely – merits front-page headlines.

The end result, however, is to push more and more Americans into a state of confusion regarding what to believe. While some citizens may seek out honest independent journalism to get what they're missing, others will surely fall prey to fake news and conspiracy theories.

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](#)).

New York Times: Apologist for Power

Special Report: Over the past couple of decades, America's preeminent newspaper, The New York Times, has lost its journalistic way, becoming a propaganda platform and an apologist for the powerful, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

In recent years, The New York Times has behaved as if whatever the Establishment claims is true must be true, failing to show thoughtful skepticism whether the findings are coming from a congressional report, an intelligence assessment, a criminal investigation or even an outfit as disreputable as the National Football League.

If some powerful institution asserts a conclusion, the Times falls in line and expects everyone else to do so as well. Yet, that is not journalism; it is mindless submission to authority; and it indirectly pushes many people into the swamps of conspiracy theories. After all, if professional journalists simply ratify whatever dubious claims are coming from powerful institutions, inquisitive citizens will try to fill in the blanks themselves and sometimes buy into outlandishly false speculations.

In my journalistic career, I have found both extremes troubling: the Times' assumption that the authorities are almost always right and the conspiracy theorists who follow up some "what I can't understand" comment with a patently absurd explanation and then get angry when rational people won't go along.

Though both attitudes have become dangerous for a functioning democracy, the

behavior of the Times deserves the bulk of the blame, since the “newspaper of record” carries far more weight in setting public policy and also is partly to blame for creating this blight of conspiracism.

Some of the Times’ failures are well known, such as its 2002 front-page acceptance of claims from officials and allies of George W. Bush’s administration that Iraq was reconstituting its nuclear weapons program and had purchased some aluminum tubes to do so. The Times’ bogus story allowed Bush’s top aides to go on Sunday talk shows to warn that “we must not allow the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud.”

But the “aluminum tube” story was only part of a long-developing pattern. As an investigative reporter in Washington since 1980, I had seen the Times engage in similar publications of false stories planted by powerful insiders.

For instance, based on self-serving information from Ronald Reagan’s Justice Department in the mid-1980s, the Times knocked down the original reporting that my Associated Press colleague Brian Barger and I did on Nicaraguan Contra rebels getting involved in cocaine smuggling.

And, once the Times got snookered by its official sources, it and other mainstream publications carried on vendettas against anyone who contradicted the accepted wisdom, unwilling to admit that they were wrong even at the expense of historical truth.

So, when San Jose Mercury News reporter Gary Webb revived the Contra-cocaine story in 1996 – with evidence that some of that cocaine had fed into the “crack epidemic” – the Times (along with other major newspapers) savaged Webb’s articles and destroyed his career.

Finally, in 1998 when the CIA’s Inspector General Frederick Hitz confirmed that the Contras indeed had engaged in extensive cocaine trafficking, the Times only published a grudging and limited admission that maybe there was a bit more to the story than the vaunted Times had previously accepted. But Webb’s career and life remained in ruins. He eventually committed suicide in 2004 (and please, conspiracists, don’t go on about how he was “murdered” by the CIA).

[For details, see Consortiumnews.com’s [“The Sordid Contra-Cocaine Saga.”](#)]

Hiding Gore’s Victory

By the time of Webb’s destruction, the Times was neck-deep in a troubling pattern of getting virtually every major story wrong or sitting on important information that some of its own journalists had dug up.

In 2000, after five partisan Republicans on the U.S. Supreme Court shut down the vote count in Florida to ensure George W. Bush's "election," Times executives resisted calls from lower-level editors to join in a media counting of the discarded votes, only grumpily agreeing to take part.

However, when that vote count was completed in November 2001, the Times executives decided to misreport the findings, which revealed that if all legal votes in Florida had been counted Al Gore would have won (because the so-called "over-votes" – when a voter both marks and writes in the same name – broke heavily for Gore and are legal under Florida law which is based on the clear intent of the voter).

You might have thought that the obvious lede would be that the wrong guy was in the White House, but the 9/11 attacks had intervened between the start and the end of the media recount. So, the Times and other major news organizations buried their own findings so as not to undermine Bush's authority amid a crisis. The big media focused on various hypotheticals of partial counts that still had Bush "winning."

While one might sympathize with the Times' reasons for misleading the public, what the Times did was not journalism, nor was it a case of treating the American citizens as the true sovereigns of the nation who have a right to know the truth. It was a case of protecting the legitimacy of the Establishment. Those of us who noted the actual vote tabulations were dismissed as "conspiracy theorists," though we were not.

[For the details of how a full Florida recount would have given Gore the White House, see Consortiumnews.com's "[Gore's Victory](#)," "[So Bush Did Steal the White House](#)," and "[Bush v. Gore's Dark American Decade](#)."]

Rationalizing War

So, when we got to Bush's plans for invading Iraq in 2002, the Times had already shown its commitment to play ball with whatever the government was saying, no matter how dubious the claims. And, even the humiliation of having been caught publishing a false story about aluminum tubes being evidence of Iraq reconstituting its nuclear weapons program didn't get the Times to change course.

Although one of the reporters on that story, Judy Miller, eventually did leave the newspaper (and landed on her feet at Fox News), the lead author, Michael Gordon, continued as the Times' national security correspondent. Even more stunning, columnist Bill Keller, who wrote an influential article rallying "liberals" to the cause of invading Iraq, was elevated to the top job of

executive editor after his Iraq gullibility had been exposed.

Even in the rare moments when the Times claimed it was standing up to the Bush administration, such as publishing James Risen's article in December 2005 exposing the warrantless wiretapping of Americans, the reality was not exactly a new chapter in Profiles in Courage.

It turned out that the Times had been sitting on Risen's story for more than a year – it could have been published before the 2004 election – but Bush demanded the story's suppression. The information was finally shared with the public in late 2005 only because Risen's book, *State of War*, was scheduled for publication in January 2006 and included the disclosure, a prospective embarrassment for the Times.

The pattern of the Times bowing down to the White House continued into the Obama administration. Whenever there has been a dubious claim that the U.S. government directs against some foreign "adversary," the Times dutifully takes the side of Official Washington, rather than applying the objectivity and impartiality that are supposed to be at the heart of U.S. journalism.

For instance, on Aug. 21, 2013, when a mysterious sarin gas attack outside Damascus, Syria, killed several hundred people, the Times simply fell in line behind the U.S.-driven rush to judgment blaming the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

There were immediate reasons to doubt that conclusion – Assad had just invited in United Nations inspectors to investigate cases of Syrian jihadists using chemical weapons – but the Times and other major Western outlets simply fingered the already demonized Assad.

Though we now know that U.S. intelligence analysts did not consider Assad's guilt a "slam dunk" – and later key elements of the case against Assad collapsed, such as the Times' miscalculation of the maximum range of the sarin-laden rocket – the Assad-did-it stampede almost led to a major U.S. military retaliation against what now appears to have been the wrong people.

Current evidence points to a likely provocation by radical jihadists trying to trick the West into entering the war in a big way on their side, but the Times has never fully retracted its false claim that the rocket was fired from a Syrian military base, which was four times outside the rocket's range.

Indeed, to this day, Times' columnists and other Western journalists routinely cite Assad's guilt – and President Obama's supposed failure to enforce his "red line" against chemical attacks – as flat fact.

The MH-17 Case

There has been a similar lack of skepticism toward the propaganda case that has been built around the July 17, 2014 shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over eastern Ukraine killing 298 people. We saw another rush to judgment, this time blaming ethnic Russian rebels and Russian President Vladimir Putin, but there were problems with that claim from the start.

I was told by a source briefed by U.S. intelligence analysts that their evidence pointed to a rogue element of the Ukrainian military under the direction of a hard-line, anti-Russian Ukrainian oligarch with the hoped-for goal of shooting down Putin's plane returning from a state visit to South America. According to this account, MH-17 just became the substitute target.

But the international investigation was put under the effective control of Ukraine's unsavory SBU intelligence service, although technically called "Dutch-led." As the Joint Investigation Team's own progress report noted this year, the inquiry relied both on the Ukrainian government's hospitality and "evidence" supplied by the SBU, which has been implicated in concealing Ukrainian torture centers. Far from objective, the investigation became part of the West's anti-Russian propaganda war.

So, when the JIT issued its initial findings in September 2016, skepticism should have been in order. Indeed, there wasn't really a "report" as such, more a brief summary accompanied by several videos that used computer-generated graphics and cryptic telephone intercepts, provided by the SBU, to create the impression of Russian guilt.

A critical examination of the material revealed that the inquiry ignored evidence that went against the desired conclusion, including intercepts revealing that a Ukrainian convoy was pressing deep inside what was called "rebel-controlled" territory, an important point because it showed that a Ukrainian missile battery could have traveled eastward toward the alleged firing point since rebel forces were mostly massed to the north fighting a government offensive.

The alleged route of the supposed Russian Buk battery also made no sense because there was a much more direct and discreet route from the Russian border to the alleged firing location in the southeast than the circuitous wandering all the way west to Donetsk before backtracking to the east. But the SBU-dominated investigation needed to explain why all the "social media" photos showed a Buk battery traveling east toward Russia, not westward from Russia.

And, there was the JIT's silence on a Dutch intelligence report from October

2015 saying that the only powerful anti-aircraft missiles in eastern Ukraine on July 17, 2014, were under the control of the Ukrainian military. Plus, the supposed firing location for the alleged purpose of protecting rebel fighters operating far to the north made no sense from a tactical perspective either. Placing a Buk battery far to the southeast would not help shoot down Ukraine's military planes firing missiles into the rebel lines.

Indeed, much of the evidence fit better with what I had been told, second-hand, from those U.S. intelligence analysts – because any scheme to shoot down Putin's plane would need the deniability that would come from pushing the battery as far into “rebel-controlled” territory as possible so as to manage the political fallout by creating a cover story that Putin was killed by his own supporters. The same cover story also would work for killing the passengers on MH-17 and blaming it on Russia.

But whatever you might think about who was responsible for the MH-17 atrocity – and I agree that the mystery has not been solved – the job of a professional news organization is to examine skeptically the various accounts and the available pieces of evidence, not just embrace the “official” version. But that is what the Times has done regarding MH-17 and pretty much every other case.

Concealing History

The Times' journalistic negligence does not only affect current issues of war and peace, but how the American people understand their recent history. In effect, the false “group thinks” – accepted by the Times – have a long after-life of decay contaminating the public's thinking whenever the Times recycles a bogus account as historical narrative.

For instance, in a recent summary of “October Surprise” cases, the Times misled its readers on two of the most important incidents, 1968 and 1980.

Regarding the election of 1968 between Richard Nixon and Hubert Humphrey, the evidence is now overwhelming that Nixon's operatives went behind President Lyndon Johnson's back to sabotage the Paris peace talks that Johnson felt could end the Vietnam War, a development that also would likely have helped fellow Democrat Humphrey.

That evidence now includes declassified FBI wiretaps of Nixon's conspirators and Johnson's own taped phone conversations – as well as various admissions and other corroborations from participants – but the Times has always turned up its nose toward this important story. So, the history doesn't exist in New York Times World.

Thus, when the Times addressed this 1968 episode in a Nov. 1, 2016 review of

past “October Surprise” cases – in the context of FBI Director James Comey telling Congress that the FBI had reopened its investigation of Hillary Clinton’s emails – the Times offered this summary:

“President Lyndon Baines Johnson announced a halt to bombing of North Vietnam, based on his claim that peace talks had ‘entered a new and a very much more hopeful phase,’ and he invited the government of South Vietnam and the Viet Cong to take part in negotiations. Raising hopes that the war might end soon, the announcement appeared to bolster the standing in the polls of Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey, the Democratic presidential nominee, but Humphrey still fell short in the election against former Vice President Richard M. Nixon, the Republican.”

In other words, the Times treated Johnson’s bombing halt and claim of peace-talk progress as the “October Surprise” to try to influence the election in favor of Humphrey. But the evidence now is clear that a peace agreement was within reach and that the “October Surprise” was Nixon’s sabotage of the negotiations by persuading South Vietnamese President Nguyen van Thieu to boycott the Paris meeting.

The Times got the story upside-down and inside-out by failing to reexamine this case in light of convincing evidence now available in the declassified record. [For details, see Consortiumnews.com’s [“LBJ’s ‘X-File’ on Nixon’s ‘Treason’”](#) and [“The Heinous Crime Behind Watergate.”](#)]

Reagan’s Victory

The Times botched the 1980 “October Surprise” case even worse. The currently available evidence supports the case that Ronald Reagan’s campaign – mostly through its director (and future CIA Director) William Casey and its vice presidential nominee (and former CIA Director) George H.W. Bush – went behind President Jimmy Carter’s back and undermined his negotiations to free 52 American hostages then held in Iran.

Carter’s failure became a central factor in his repudiation for reelection and a core reason for Reagan’s landslide victory – that also carried the Republicans to control of the U.S. Senate. But the later congressional investigation into the 1980 October Surprise case – a follow-on to the Iran-Contra scandal which exposed the Reagan-Bush secret dealings with Iran – was stymied in 1992.

Naively, the inquiry trusted President George H.W. Bush’s administration to collect the evidence and provide the witnesses for what would amount to Bush’s political suicide. Documents from Bush’s presidential library reveal that his White House quickly set out to “kill/spike this story” in order to protect his

reelection chances.

For instance, a memo by one of Bush's lawyers revealed that the White House had received confirmation of a key October Surprise allegation – a secret trip by Casey to Madrid – but then withheld that information from congressional investigators. Documents also show the White House frustrating attempts to interview a key witness.

After I discovered the Madrid confirmation several years ago – and sent the document to former Rep. Lee Hamilton, who had headed the House inquiry which concluded that there was no credible evidence supporting the allegations – he was stunned by the apparent betrayal of his trust.

“The [Bush-41] White House did not notify us that he [Casey] did make the trip” to Madrid, Hamilton told me in an interview. Asked if knowledge that Casey had traveled to Madrid might have changed the investigation's dismissive October Surprise conclusion, Hamilton said yes, because the question of the Madrid trip was central to the inquiry.

So, a great deal is now known about the 1980 October Surprise case since the Times accepted the misguided conclusion of Hamilton's inquiry. But none of that is reflected in how the Times recounted the history in its review of past October Surprise cases:

“The Republican nominee, Ronald Reagan, and his aides repeatedly warned that President Jimmy Carter, a Democrat, would try an October surprise, probably in the form of winning the release of American hostages held for more than a year in Iran. The Reagan campaign's frequent use of the term helped popularize it. Some people have since charged that Reagan aides actually tried to prevent a hostage release before the election, through back-channel communications with Iran, a claim that has been widely refuted. The hostages were freed in January 1981 – on the day Reagan was inaugurated.”

Yet, rather than being “widely refuted,” the most recent evidence tends to confirm the allegations that have been made by some two dozen witnesses including a detailed account of the Reagan campaign's interference by then-Iranian President Abolhassan Bani-Sadr. But the Times seems more interested in reinforcing the false conventional wisdom than informing the American people.

[For details, see Robert Parry's [America's Stolen Narrative](#) or [Trick or Treason: The 1980 October Surprise Mystery](#) or Consortiumnews.com's [“Second Thoughts on October Surprise.”](#)]

Crazy Deflategate

Even on more trivial matters, the Times simply can't escape its pattern of accepting the word from the powerful, even when those powers-that-be are as disreputable as the executives of the National Football League.

When the NFL decided to accuse New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady of cheating in a bizarre scheme to slightly deflate footballs in the January 2015 AFC Championship game, the Times again showed no skepticism despite the flimsiness of the accusations as well as the absence of any direct evidence – and the official denials from Brady (under oath) and two equipment employees.

The so-called Deflategate case was also marred by the sloppiness of the halftime measurements of the footballs and the ignorance of many NFL executives about the laws of physics and how weather affects the internal air pressure of footballs, as determined by the Ideal Gas Law.

But the “scandal” took on a life of its own with the NFL leaking exaggerations about the discrepancies in the initial air-pressure measurements and false claims about the proper air pressure in the footballs of the other team, the Indianapolis Colts (the one accurate gauge, used by the NFL officials, showed that the Colts' footballs were underinflated for both the first half and second half).

Eventually, even NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell recognized many of the flaws in the case as he concluded that the only game where the footballs could have been deflated was the AFC Championship game when the Patriots' ball boy carried the footballs to the field unattended (rather than the normal practice of being accompanied by an official) and stopped briefly in a bathroom.

But this NFL conspiracy theory – that the ball boy used his bathroom break to slightly deflate footballs rather than urinating as he claimed – made no sense because the only reason the ball boy ended up unattended was because the preceding NFC Championship game had gone into overtime and the NFL decided to delay the start of the AFC game so the public could see both games.

The sudden-death ending of the NFC game caused confusion among the officials and the ball boy took it upon himself to take the balls to the field.

To suggest that Brady somehow anticipated that series of unlikely events so a tiny bit of air could be removed from the footballs, which would have no discernible effect except to make the balls travel slightly slower and thus easier to defend, is absurd on its face.

But the NFL would have lost face by admitting that it had acted so absurdly – and rival owners saw a chance to damage the Patriots' ability to compete – so the Deflategate story moved on with Brady suspended for four games and the

Patriots stripped of two valuable draft choices.

A Puff Piece

While you might say that this “scandal” surely didn’t deserve the attention that it got (and you’d be right), the Times, which treated the NFL claims as fact, didn’t let go even after Brady dropped his appeals and accepted his four-game suspension.

The Times devoted 2½ pages on Sept. 25, 2016, to a puff piece by correspondent John Branch about the “Deflategate Scientists” from the corporate-friendly science firm, Exponent, which was hired by the NFL to produce the “science” to justify Brady’s punishment.

Though Exponent discovered that all or virtually all the air-pressure drop could be attributable to the cold, wet weather on the night of the game (and the imprecise process of the halftime measurements further muddled the picture), Exponent still composed some scientific-sounding jargon to give the NFL the cover that it needed to go after Brady.

The firm said, “we conclude that within the range of game characteristics most likely to have occurred on Game Day, we have identified no set of credible environmental or physical factors that completely accounts for the additional loss of air pressure exhibited by the Patriots game balls as compared to the loss in air pressure exhibited by the Colts game balls.”

But Exponent’s phrasing obscured the fact that an innocent explanation did exist on Exponent’s range of measurements though the firm ruled it out by applying “accepted error margins” and fudging the facts around the sequence of the football testing at halftime (a key point because in a warmer environment, the air pressure would rise naturally).

Armed with Exponent’s phrasing, NFL investigators then took some unrelated text messages from the two equipment employees describing how NFL officials had over-inflated footballs in a prior game to claim they had the “smoking gun” regarding a plot to under-inflate footballs.

However, rather than show any skepticism about this “evidence” and the larger absurdity of the Deflategate claims, the Times simply treated the NFL’s case as solid and fawned over Exponent as if it were a temple of noble scientists seeking nothing but the truth. The Times dismissed critics who cited the firm’s reputation as a hired-gun to give powerful industries useful conclusions, such as disparaging the danger from second-hand cigarette smoke.

Instead of any serious journalism examining Deflategate’s logical flaws and

Exponent's dubious role in the scandal-mongering, the Times presented Exponent as the real martyrs in the case, reporting "Exponent still receives emails from adamant critics, and its role in Deflategate has cost it several prospective clients, the company said."

A Troubling Pattern

Granted, the Deflategate silliness is minor compared to other cases when the Times misrepresented key chapters of U.S. history, concealed government wrongdoing and generated propaganda used to justify wars. But all these examples point to a pattern of journalistic behavior that is not journalistic.

Today's Times is not the brave newspaper that published the Pentagon Papers, the secret history of the Vietnam War. It is no longer the place where a Seymour Hersh could expose the CIA's "crown jewels" of scandals or where a Raymond Bonner could reveal massacres of civilians by U.S.-backed militaries in Central America.

Not that those earlier days were by any means perfect – and not that there isn't some quality journalism that still appears in the newspaper – but it is hard to imagine the Times today going against the grain in any significant or consistent way.

Instead, the Times has become an apologist for the powerful, conveying to its readers and to the world a dangerous and dubious insistence that the Establishment knows best.

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 Modern History of 'Rigged' US Elections

Special Report: Donald Trump claims the U.S. presidential election is "rigged," drawing condemnation from the political/media establishment which accuses him of undermining faith in American democracy. But neither side understands the real problem, says Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The United States is so committed to the notion that its electoral process is the world's "gold standard" that there has been a bipartisan determination to maintain the fiction even when evidence is overwhelming that a U.S. presidential election has been manipulated or stolen. The "wise men" of the system simply insist otherwise.

We have seen this behavior when there are serious questions of vote tampering (as in Election 1960) or when a challenger apparently exploits a foreign crisis to create an advantage over the incumbent (as in Elections 1968 and 1980) or when the citizens' judgment is overturned by judges (as in Election 2000).

Strangely, in such cases, it is not only the party that benefited which refuses to accept the evidence of wrongdoing, but the losing party and the establishment news media as well. Protecting the perceived integrity of the U.S. democratic process is paramount. Americans must continue to believe in the integrity of the system even when that integrity has been violated.

The harsh truth is that pursuit of power often trumps the principle of an informed electorate choosing the nation's leaders, but that truth simply cannot be recognized.

Of course, historically, American democracy was far from perfect, excluding millions of people, including African-American slaves and women. The compromises needed to enact the Constitution in 1787 also led to distasteful distortions, such as counting slaves as three-fifths of a person for the purpose of representation (although obviously slaves couldn't vote).

That unsavory deal enabled Thomas Jefferson to defeat John Adams in the pivotal national election of 1800. In effect, the votes of Southern slave owners like Jefferson counted substantially more than the votes of Northern non-slave owners.

Even after the Civil War when the Constitution was amended to give black men voting rights, the reality for black voting, especially in the South, was quite different from the new constitutional mandate. Whites in former Confederate states concocted subterfuges to keep blacks away from the polls to ensure continued white supremacy for almost a century.

Women did not gain suffrage until 1920 with the passage of another constitutional amendment, and it took federal legislation in 1965 to clear away legal obstacles that Southern states had created to deny the franchise to blacks.

Indeed, the alleged voter fraud in Election 1960, concentrated largely in Texas, a former Confederate state and home to John Kennedy's vice presidential running

mate, Lyndon Johnson, could be viewed as an outgrowth of the South's heritage of rigging elections in favor of Democrats, the post-Civil War party of white Southerners.

However, by pushing through civil rights for blacks in the 1960s, Kennedy and Johnson earned the enmity of many white Southerners who switched their allegiance to the Republican Party via Richard Nixon's Southern strategy of coded racial messaging. Nixon also harbored resentments over what he viewed as his unjust defeat in the election of 1960.

Nixon's 'Treason'

So, by 1968, the Democrats' once solid South was splintering, but Nixon, who was again the Republican presidential nominee, didn't want to leave his chances of winning what looked to be another close election to chance. Nixon feared that – with the Vietnam War raging and the Democratic Party deeply divided – President Johnson could give the Democratic nominee, Vice President Hubert Humphrey, a decisive boost by reaching a last-minute peace deal with North Vietnam.

The documentary and testimonial evidence is now clear that to avert a peace deal, Nixon's campaign went behind Johnson's back to persuade South Vietnamese President Nguyen van Thieu to torpedo Johnson's Paris peace talks by refusing to attend. Nixon's emissaries assured Thieu that a President Nixon would continue the war and guarantee a better outcome for South Vietnam.

Though Johnson had strong evidence of what he privately called Nixon's "treason" – from FBI wiretaps in the days before the 1968 election – he and his top advisers chose to stay silent. In a Nov. 4, 1968 conference call, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, National Security Advisor Walt Rostow and Defense Secretary Clark Clifford – three pillars of the Establishment – expressed that consensus, with Clifford explaining the thinking:

"Some elements of the story are so shocking in their nature that I'm wondering whether it would be good for the country to disclose the story and then possibly have a certain individual [Nixon] elected," Clifford said. "It could cast his whole administration under such doubt that I think it would be inimical to our country's interests."

Clifford's words expressed the recurring thinking whenever evidence emerged casting the integrity of America's electoral system in doubt, especially at the presidential level. The American people were not to know what kind of dirty deeds could affect that process.

To this day, the major U.S. news media will not directly address the issue of Nixon's treachery in 1968, despite the wealth of evidence proving this

historical reality now available from declassified records at the Johnson presidential library in Austin, Texas. In a puckish recognition of this ignored history, the library's archivists call the file on Nixon's sabotage of the Vietnam peace talks their "X-file." [For details, see Consortiumnews.com's "[LBJ's 'X-File' on Nixon's 'Treason.'](#)"]

The evidence also strongly suggests that Nixon's paranoia about a missing White House file detailing his "treason" – top secret documents that Johnson had entrusted to Rostow at the end of LBJ's presidency – led to Nixon's creation of the "plumbers," a team of burglars whose first assignment was to locate those purloined papers. The existence of the "plumbers" became public in June 1972 when they were caught breaking into the Democratic National Committee's headquarters at the Watergate in Washington.

Although the Watergate scandal remains the archetypal case of election-year dirty tricks, the major U.S. news media never acknowledge the link between Watergate and Nixon's far more egregious dirty trick four years earlier, sinking Johnson's Vietnam peace talks while 500,000 American soldiers were in the war zone. In part because of Nixon's sabotage – and his promise to Thieu of a more favorable outcome – the war continued for four more bloody years before being settled along the lines that were available to Johnson in 1968. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[The Heinous Crime Behind Watergate.](#)"]

In effect, Watergate gets walled off as some anomaly that is explained by Nixon's strange personality. However, even though Nixon resigned in disgrace in 1974, he and his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, who also had a hand in the Paris peace talk caper, reappear as secondary players in the next well-documented case of obstructing a sitting president's foreign policy to get an edge in the 1980 campaign.

Reagan's 'October Surprise' Caper

In that case, President Jimmy Carter was seeking reelection and trying to negotiate release of 52 American hostages then held in revolutionary Iran. Ronald Reagan's campaign feared that Carter might pull off an "October Surprise" by bringing home the hostages just before the election. So, this historical mystery has been: Did Reagan's team take action to block Carter's October Surprise?

The testimonial and documentary evidence that Reagan's team did engage in a secret operation to prevent Carter's October Surprise is now almost as overwhelming as the proof of the 1968 affair regarding Nixon's Paris peace talk maneuver.

That evidence indicates that Reagan's campaign director William Casey organized a clandestine effort to prevent the hostages' release before Election Day, after apparently consulting with Nixon and Kissinger and aided by former CIA Director George H.W. Bush, who was Reagan's vice presidential running mate.

By early November 1980, the public's obsession with Iran's humiliation of the United States and Carter's inability to free the hostages helped turn a narrow race into a Reagan landslide. When the hostages were finally let go immediately after Reagan's inauguration on Jan. 20, 1981, his supporters cited the timing to claim that the Iranians had finally relented out of fear of Reagan.

Bolstered by his image as a tough guy, Reagan enacted much of his right-wing agenda, including passing massive tax cuts benefiting the wealthy, weakening unions and creating the circumstances for the rapid erosion of the Great American Middle Class.

Behind the scenes, the Reagan administration signed off on secret arms shipments to Iran, mostly through Israel, what a variety of witnesses described as the payoff for Iran's cooperation in getting Reagan elected and then giving him the extra benefit of timing the hostage release to immediately follow his inauguration.

In summer 1981, when Assistant Secretary of State for the Middle East Nicholas Veliotes learned about the arms shipments to Iran, he checked on their origins and said, later in a PBS interview:

"It was clear to me after my conversations with people on high that indeed we had agreed that the Israelis could transship to Iran some American-origin military equipment. ... [This operation] seems to have started in earnest in the period probably prior to the election of 1980, as the Israelis had identified who would become the new players in the national security area in the Reagan administration. And I understand some contacts were made at that time."

Those early covert arms shipments to Iran evolved into a later secret set of arms deals that surfaced in fall 1986 as the Iran-Contra Affair, with some of the profits getting recycled back to Reagan's beloved Nicaraguan Contra rebels fighting to overthrow Nicaragua's leftist government.

While many facts of the Iran-Contra scandal were revealed by congressional and special-prosecutor investigations in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the origins of the Reagan-Iran relationship was always kept hazy. The Republicans were determined to stop any revelations about the 1980 contacts, but the Democrats were almost as reluctant to go there.

A half-hearted congressional inquiry was launched in 1991 and depended heavily

on then-President George H.W. Bush to collect the evidence and arrange interviews for the investigation. In other words, Bush, who was then seeking reelection and who was a chief suspect in the secret dealings with Iran, was entrusted with proving his own guilt.

Tired of the Story

By the early 1990s, the mainstream U.S. news media was also tired of the complex Iran-Contra scandal and wanted to move on. As a correspondent at Newsweek, I had battled senior editors over their disinterest in getting to the bottom of the scandal before I left the magazine in 1990. I then received an assignment from PBS Frontline to look into the 1980 "October Surprise" question, which led to a documentary on the subject in April 1991.

However, by fall 1991, just as Congress was agreeing to open an investigation, my ex-bosses at Newsweek, along with The New Republic, then an elite neoconservative publication interested in protecting Israel's exposure on those early arms deals, went on the attack. They published matching cover stories deeming the 1980 "October Surprise" case a hoax, but their articles were both based on a misreading of documents recording Casey's attendance at a conference in London in July 1980, which he seemed to have used as a cover for a side trip to Madrid to meet with senior Iranians regarding the hostages.

Although the bogus Newsweek/New Republic "London alibi" would eventually be debunked, it created a hostile climate for the investigation. With Bush angrily denying everything and the congressional Republicans determined to protect the President's flanks, the Democrats mostly just went through the motions of an investigation.

Meanwhile, Bush's State Department and White House counsel's office saw their jobs as discrediting the investigation, deep-sixing incriminating documents, and helping a key witness dodge a congressional subpoena.

Years later, I discovered a document at the Bush presidential library in College Station, Texas, confirming that Casey had taken a mysterious trip to Madrid in 1980. The U.S. Embassy's confirmation of Casey's trip was passed along by State Department legal adviser Edwin D. Williamson to Associate White House Counsel Chester Paul Beach Jr. in early November 1991, just as the congressional inquiry was taking shape.

Williamson said that among the State Department "material potentially relevant to the October Surprise allegations [was] a cable from the Madrid embassy indicating that Bill Casey was in town, for purposes unknown," Beach noted in a "memorandum for record" dated Nov. 4, 1991.

Two days later, on Nov. 6, Beach's boss, White House counsel C. Boyden Gray, convened an inter-agency strategy session and explained the need to contain the congressional investigation into the October Surprise case. The explicit goal was to ensure the scandal would not hurt President Bush's reelection hopes in 1992.

At the meeting, Gray laid out how to thwart the October Surprise inquiry, which was seen as a dangerous expansion of the Iran-Contra investigation. The prospect that the two sets of allegations would merge into a single narrative represented a grave threat to George H.W. Bush's reelection campaign. As assistant White House counsel Ronald vonLembke, put it, the White House goal in 1991 was to "kill/spike this story."

Gray explained the stakes at the White House strategy session. "Whatever form they ultimately take, the House and Senate 'October Surprise' investigations, like Iran-Contra, will involve interagency concerns and be of special interest to the President," Gray declared, according to minutes. [Emphasis in original.]

Among "touchstones" cited by Gray were "No Surprises to the White House, and Maintain Ability to Respond to Leaks in Real Time. This is Partisan." White House "talking points" on the October Surprise investigation urged restricting the inquiry to 1979-80 and imposing strict time limits for issuing any findings.

Timid Democrats

But Bush's White House really had little to fear because whatever evidence that the congressional investigation received – and a great deal arrived in December 1992 and January 1993 – there was no stomach for actually proving that the 1980 Reagan campaign had conspired with Iranian radicals to extend the captivity of 52 Americans in order to ensure Reagan's election victory.

That would have undermined the faith of the American people in their democratic process – and that, as Clark Clifford said in the 1968 context, would not be "good for the country."

In 2014 when I sent a copy of Beach's memo regarding Casey's trip to Madrid to former Rep. Lee Hamilton, D-Indiana, who had chaired the October Surprise inquiry in 1991-93, he told me that it had shaken his confidence in the task force's dismissive conclusions about the October Surprise issue.

"The [Bush-41] White House did not notify us that he [Casey] did make the trip" to Madrid, Hamilton told me. "Should they have passed that on to us? They should have because they knew we were interested in that."

Asked if knowledge that Casey had traveled to Madrid might have changed the task

force's dismissive October Surprise conclusion, Hamilton said yes, because the question of the Madrid trip was key to the task force's investigation.

"If the White House knew that Casey was there, they certainly should have shared it with us," Hamilton said, adding that "you have to rely on people" in authority to comply with information requests. But that trust was at the heart of the inquiry's failure. With the money and power of the American presidency at stake, the idea that George H.W. Bush and his team would help an investigation that might implicate him in an act close to treason was naïve in the extreme.

Arguably, Hamilton's timid investigation was worse than no investigation at all because it gave Bush's team the opportunity to search out incriminating documents and make them disappear. Then, Hamilton's investigative conclusion reinforced the "group think" dismissing this serious manipulation of democracy as a "conspiracy theory" when it was anything but. In the years since, Hamilton hasn't done anything to change the public impression that the Reagan campaign was innocent.

Still, among the few people who have followed this case, the October Surprise cover-up would slowly crumble with admissions by officials involved in the investigation that its exculpatory conclusions were rushed, that crucial evidence had been hidden or ignored, and that some alibis for key Republicans didn't make any sense.

But the dismissive "group think" remains undisturbed as far as the major U.S. media and mainstream historians are concerned. [For details, see Robert Parry's *America's Stolen Narrative* or *Trick or Treason: The 1980 October Surprise Mystery* or Consortiumnews.com's "Second Thoughts on October Surprise."]

Past as Prologue

Lee Hamilton's decision to "clear" Reagan and Bush of the 1980 October Surprise suspicions in 1992 was not simply a case of miswriting history. The findings had clear implications for the future as well, since the public impression about George H.W. Bush's rectitude was an important factor in the support given to his oldest son, George W. Bush, in 2000.

Indeed, if the full truth had been told about the father's role in the October Surprise and Iran-Contra cases, it's hard to imagine that his son would have received the Republican nomination, let alone made a serious run for the White House. And, if that history were known, there might have been a stronger determination on the part of Democrats to resist another Bush "stolen election" in 2000.

Regarding Election 2000, the evidence is now clear that Vice President Al Gore

not only won the national popular vote but received more votes that were legal under Florida law than did George W. Bush. But Bush relied first on the help of officials working for his brother, Gov. Jeb Bush, and then on five Republican justices on the U.S. Supreme Court to thwart a full recount and to award him Florida's electoral votes and thus the presidency.

The reality of Gore's rightful victory should have finally become clear in November 2001 when a group of news organizations finished their own examination of Florida's disputed ballots and released their tabulations showing that Gore would have won if all ballots considered legal under Florida law were counted.

However, between the disputed election and the release of those numbers, the 9/11 attacks had occurred, so The New York Times, The Washington Post, CNN and other leading outlets did not want the American people to know that the wrong person was in the White House. Surely, telling the American people that fact amid the 9/11 crisis would not be "good for the country."

So, senior editors at all the top news organizations decided to mislead the public by framing their stories in a deceptive way to obscure the most newsworthy discovery – that the so-called "over-votes" in which voters both checked and wrote in their choices' names broke heavily for Gore and would have put him over the top regardless of which kinds of chads were considered for the "under-votes" that hadn't registered on antiquated voting machines. "Over-votes" would be counted under Florida law which bases its standards on "clear intent of the voter."

However, instead of leading with Gore's rightful victory, the news organizations concocted hypotheticals around partial recounts that still would have given Florida narrowly to Bush. They either left out or buried the obvious lede that a historic injustice had occurred.

On Nov. 12, 2001, the day that the news organizations ran those stories, I examined the actual data and quickly detected the evidence of Gore's victory. In a story that day, I suggested that senior news executives were exercising a misguided sense of patriotism. They had hid the reality for "the good of the country," much as Johnson's team had done in 1968 regarding Nixon's sabotage of the Paris peace talks and Hamilton's inquiry had done regarding the 1980 "October Surprise" case.

Within a couple of hours of my posting the article at Consortiumnews.com, I received an irate phone call from The New York Times media writer Felicity Barringer, who accused me of impugning the journalistic integrity of then-Times executive editor Howell Raines. I got the impression that Barringer had been on the look-out for some deviant story that didn't accept the Bush-won conventional

wisdom.

However, this violation of objective and professional journalism – bending the slant of a story to achieve a preferred outcome rather than simply giving the readers the most interesting angle – was not simply about some historical event that had occurred a year earlier. It was about the future.

By misleading Americans into thinking that Bush was the rightful winner of Election 2000 – even if the media’s motivation was to maintain national unity following the 9/11 attacks – the major news outlets gave Bush greater latitude to respond to the crisis, including the diversionary invasion of Iraq under false pretenses. The Bush-won headlines of November 2001 also enhanced the chances of his reelection in 2004. [For the details of how a full Florida recount would have given Gore the White House, see Consortiumnews.com’s [“Gore’s Victory,”](#) [“So Bush Did Steal the White House,”](#) and [“Bush v. Gore’s Dark American Decade.”](#)]

A Phalanx of Misguided Consensus

Looking back on these examples of candidates manipulating democracy, there appears to be one common element: after the “stolen” elections, the media and political establishments quickly line up, shoulder to shoulder, to assure the American people that nothing improper has happened. Graceful “losers” are patted on the back for not complaining that the voters’ will had been ignored or twisted.

Al Gore is praised for graciously accepting the extraordinary ruling by Republican partisans on the Supreme Court, who stopped the counting of ballots in Florida on the grounds, as Justice Antonin Scalia said, that a count that showed Gore winning (when the Court’s majority was already planning to award the White House to Bush) would undermine Bush’s “legitimacy.”

Similarly, Rep. Hamilton is regarded as a modern “wise man,” in part, because he conducted investigations that never pushed very hard for the truth but rather reached conclusions that were acceptable to the powers-that-be, that didn’t ruffle too many feathers.

But the cumulative effect of all these half-truths, cover-ups and lies – uttered for “the good of the country” – is to corrode the faith of many well-informed Americans about the legitimacy of the entire process. It is the classic parable of the boy who cried wolf too many times, or in this case, assured the townspeople that there never was a wolf and that they should ignore the fact that the livestock had mysteriously disappeared leaving behind only a trail of blood into the forest.

So, when Donald Trump shows up in 2016 insisting that the electoral system is rigged against him, many Americans choose to believe his demagoguery. But Trump isn't pressing for the full truth about the elections of 1968 or 1980 or 2000. He actually praises Republicans implicated in those cases and vows to appoint Supreme Court justices in the mold of the late Antonin Scalia.

Trump's complaints about "rigged" elections are more in line with the white Southerners during Jim Crow, suggesting that black and brown people are cheating at the polls and need to have white poll monitors to make sure they don't succeed at "stealing" the election from white people.

There is a racist undertone to Trump's version of a "rigged" democracy but he is not entirely wrong about the flaws in the process. He's just not honest about what those flaws are.

The hard truth is that the U.S. political process is not democracy's "gold standard"; it is and has been a severely flawed system that is not made better by a failure to honestly address the unpleasant realities and to impose accountability on politicians who cheat the voters.

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 Israel Stole the Bomb

Exclusive: When Israel launched a covert scheme to steal material and secrets to build a nuclear bomb, U.S. officials looked the other way and obstructed investigations, as described in a book reviewed by James DiEugenio.

By James DiEugenio

In 1968, CIA Director Richard Helms was presented with a disturbing National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) stating that Israel had obtained atomic weapons, a dangerous development that occurred earlier than the CIA had anticipated.

It was particularly dangerous because just the year before, the Six Day War had marked the beginning of open hostilities between the Israelis and Arab nation states. To prevail, Israel had launched preemptive air attacks against Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Iraq at the start of the conflict. Considering that violent backdrop, Helms immediately arranged a meeting with President Lyndon Johnson to

inform him of this troubling milestone.

The man who had prepared the NIE and gave it to Helms was the CIA's chief science and technology officer, Carl Duckett. After Helms met with Johnson, the CIA Director told Duckett about the President's rather odd reaction. LBJ did not get upset, and he did not order an investigation into how it happened. Further, he did not tell Helms to let both the Defense Department and State Department know about it so they could establish intelligence inquiries or consider sanctions.

Instead, Johnson did the opposite. He told Helms to keep the news secret and specifically told the Director *not* to let the secretaries of State or Defense know about it.

Helms obeyed the orders of his Commander in Chief, but he decided to talk to the FBI about how this development had occurred earlier than expected. Thus begins Roger Mattson's *Stealing the Atom Bomb: How Denial and Deception Armed Israel*, the riveting story of duplicity, betrayal, cover-ups and deceit.

As the book shows, the cover-ups and duplicity did not just come from Israel and its agents in America. The deceit also came from men inside the American government who, for whatever reasons, decided to cast a blind eye on what was really happening under their jurisdiction, even after they had been alerted to it.

What Mattson reveals is no less than an atomic heist – one that could have been prevented if men in high positions had done their duty.

Highly Enriched Uranium

After Johnson told Helms not to tell State or Defense, the CIA Director called Attorney General Ramsey Clark, because what made this news even more ominous – and a potential crime – was what the CIA had discovered when it conducted a chemical test around the Israeli nuclear reactor at Dimona, in the Negev desert.

Duckett had concluded that Israel had something that they should not have possessed at that time: HEU, or highly enriched uranium, which could only be produced by one of the five major powers that already had nuclear weapons.

But the test had also revealed characteristics that showed the material had originated in the United States. (Mattson, p. 97) Specifically, the HEU came from Portsmouth, Ohio and then was further processed at a plant in Apollo, Pennsylvania.

The importance of this information was that the HEU was processed to such a

degree – well over 90 percent U 235 – that it was classified as weapons grade uranium. The technical term for it is the acronym SNM, or Special Nuclear Material, meaning that it is fissile: it can easily be split with neutrons. Although the Portsmouth plant is shut down today, beginning in 1956 it did produce weapons-grade uranium.

It was in Apollo, Pennsylvania, that the trail of the SNM and the crime of its diversion becomes exceedingly suspect. The plant that did the further processing of HEU, and the ultimate shipping, was named Nuclear Materials and Equipment Corporation, or NUMEC, and there were a number of reasons why suspicion had centered on NUMEC even before Helms called Clark.

First, NUMEC had a rather unreliable record when it came to keeping track of HEU and other materials that had been given to it through the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC). The way the system worked is that the particular company would forward its business requests – from either private or governmental agencies – to the AEC. The AEC would then estimate how much nuclear material NUMEC would need to fulfill the contract. If a company was using up more material than the AEC properly estimated, that company would be fined quite a lot of money. If the shortages persisted, the AEC and the FBI could then open up an investigation.

With CIA's discoveries, the possibility presented itself that a diversion of the nuclear material could be taking place. Either someone from the outside was stealing the material, or someone on the inside was embezzling it.

As Mattson shows with charts, graphs and testimony, NUMEC had an extraordinarily bad record in this regard. The company was eventually fined over \$2 million for missing materials, which, with inflation factored in, would be about \$15 million today. Mattson adduces that from 1959 to 1977, about 345 kilograms of HEU went missing from NUMEC, which translates to well over 700 pounds. (ibid, p. 286)

Explaining the Deficits

In just one year, there was a loss of over 56 kilograms (or about 123 pounds). The company made up all sorts of rationales as to why this much HEU was missing, including losses during the mechanical processing. But as the author points out, there are two problems with this accounting.

First, no other plant in America reported losses of this magnitude. The AEC concluded that the losses at Apollo were more than double what they were at any other comparably sized atomic plant in the U.S. (ibid, p. 65)

Secondly, even if one chalks up some of the missing HEU to a processing loss, that still does not account for the entire record of NUMEC. Mattson figures that, even giving the company the benefit of the doubt, it still leaves about

200 pounds of missing HEU. (ibid, p. 67) That's enough for about six atomic bombs, larger than the one used on Hiroshima.

As Mattson reports, what makes NUMEC an even more intriguing suspect is the fact that the company had some legitimate business transactions with Israel, concerning the irradiation of plants. And these legitimate packages were sent at about the time the HEU went missing. Further, the inventory records at NUMEC were extremely sloppy and some appear to have been destroyed in direct violation of the AEC code, meaning NUMEC should have been cited, but wasn't. (ibid, p. 75)

That brings us to the founders of the NUMEC plant in Apollo, Pennsylvania, a small town of approximately 1,600 people that lies about 30 miles northeast of Pittsburgh. In 1955, the Apollo Steel Plant was purchased by David Lowenthal. Two years later, Lowenthal and Zalman Shapiro cooperated in forming NUMEC.

Shapiro, a very accomplished metallurgist who lived next door to Lowenthal, had been employed for a number of years at the nearby Bettis Atomic Power Laboratory, which supported the AEC's Office of Naval Reactors.

In May 1958, Lowenthal merged Apollo Steel with the San Toy Mining Company in Maine. San Toy then changed its name to Apollo Industries, with the main operating officers of this new corporation Morton Chatkin, Ivan Novick and Lowenthal. (ibid, p. 43)

The board comprised these three men plus Shapiro, and later others. In the early 1960s, the steel plant's name was changed to Raychord Steel, but with the decline of the steel industry, Raychord became a subsidiary company to Apollo.

Ties to Zionist Groups

Novick, one of Apollo's officers, later served as national president of the Zionist Organization of America, in which Chatkin, another officer, also held a leadership role. The ZOA was a member group of the American Zionist Council, which later became the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, which today is considered to be the leading lobbying group for Israel and one of the most powerful lobbying groups in Washington.

Novick also later served as a personal liaison between Ronald Reagan's White House and the administration of Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin.

Lowenthal, who was born in Poland in 1921, came to America in 1932 and served in the American armed forces in World War II, eventually becoming a citizen in 1945. After the war, he worked with the Haganah, the Jewish paramilitary force inside Palestine, on the Zionist mission to ferry Jews into Palestine in 1947 on board the boat SS Exodus.

Since almost none of the passengers had legal immigration certificates to enter Palestine, the British Royal Navy, which ran the Palestinian Mandate, seized the ship and deported its passengers back to Europe. Lowenthal's mission was a practical failure, but a tremendous propaganda success for the Zionist cause. The event was novelized by author Leon Uris in the number-one best-selling book *Exodus*, which was published in 1958 and was made into a movie two years later by director Otto Preminger, starring Paul Newman.

Lowenthal later served on board the ship Pan York, which also attempted to evade the British quarantine but was captured in Cyprus with the crew arrested, including Lowenthal. He escaped and fled to Palestine where he served with the Haganah during the war that broke out there in 1948 after the British abandoned the mandate early. (ibid, p. 44)

Lowenthal ended up serving under the legendary Meir Amit, the leading intelligence officer in Israel during the 1960s. Lowenthal was also personally acquainted with future prime ministers David Ben Gurion and Golda Meir.

Nuclear Experience

Shapiro, who had advanced degrees in chemistry and metallurgy from Johns Hopkins, worked for Westinghouse and the Navy on the nuclear reactor that powered America's first atomic submarine, the Nautilus. Shapiro also helped develop the fuel for the first commercial nuclear reactor, the Shippingport Atomic Power Station in Pennsylvania.

Like Lowenthal, Novick and Chatkin, Shapiro also was active in supporting Israeli causes, although his activities had a slightly educational tone. He was a member of the Technion Society, which supported advances in Israeli science and technology. Indeed, he became an Honorary Life Member of the group.

He also was a Director of Hillel, an international organization that tries to acquaint Jewish students with each other on campuses and organize student trips to Israel. Like Novick and Chatkin, he was a member of the Zionist Organization of America. Many years later, it was discovered that Shapiro was on the Board of Governors of the Israeli Intelligence Center, which honors spies for Israel who clandestinely advanced the interests of the state. (Mattson, p. 84)

Beyond the individual backgrounds of these four men, there was also something else which should have attracted the U.S. intelligence community's attention prior to Helms's meeting with President Johnson. While running NUMEC, both men – Shapiro and Lowenthal – were taking trips to Israel and had contacts with high officials of Israeli intelligence as well as Israel's version of the AEC.

Further, NUMEC had a guest worker, an Israeli metallurgist, in its plant, as

part of an agreement NUMEC had with Israel to serve as a training consultancy which resulted in the formation of a joint company with Israel called ISORAD that initially was to deal with irradiation of citrus fruits through gamma rays. But the FBI later discovered that NUMEC also had contracts with Israel for the development of plutonium oxide as fuel elements in nuclear reactors. (Mattson, pgs. 80-81)

Since Lowenthal had so many acquaintances in high positions, he often visited Israel, including a most curious instance at about the time he purchased Apollo Steel in 1956. It was at this time that Israel was making decisions about foreign sourcing for nuclear materials and technology.

A year later, NUMEC was formed and Shapiro immediately applied for a license from the AEC to process uranium fuel in a building formerly occupied by Apollo Steel. John Hadden, CIA station chief in Tel Aviv, later noted the unusual coincidence of these events on two continents. (ibid, p. 45)

Israeli Visits

But declassified FBI files reveal that the visitations were not just one way, i.e. from Apollo, Pennsylvania, to Israel. There were also visits and meetings of Israeli officials who went to Apollo.

At the time of those meetings, there were four main branches of Israeli intelligence. The Shin Bet corresponded with the Federal Bureau of Investigation; the Mossad with the Central Intelligence Agency; the Aman roughly with the Defense Intelligence Agency; and the LAKAM, which was responsible for security at Dimona and for procuring scientific and technological data from Western sources. (Mattson, p. 108)

In the mid-1960s, France started scaling back its support for the Dimona reactor, which was supposedly a research facility. With France's pullback, LAKAM began seeking out and purchasing parts and supplies from other sources to complete the project.

LAKAM's job included concealing the reactor's true function – the development of a nuclear bomb – from American inspections. (ibid) During an American inspection in 1964, LAKAM even created a "Potemkin village" control room to deceive the visitors.

Unlike American intelligence, Israel also had a special operations unit that served all branches. Established in 1957, it was run by Rafi Eitan and his deputy, Avraham Bendor. (In the 1980s, Eitan became notorious for the Jonathan Pollard spy case, in which Pollard, a navy intelligence employee, was paid tens of thousands of dollars to spy for Israel in the United States with Eitan his

ultimate control agent.)

In September 1968, the AEC told the FBI that they were giving permission to NUMEC for a visit by four Israelis, including Eitan and Bendor. However, in the application to the AEC, the occupations of the two were disguised. Eitan was said to be a chemist in the Defense Ministry; Bendor supposedly worked for the electronics division. (ibid, p. 110)

The other two men were Avraham Hermoni, who was billed as a Scientific Counselor in the Israeli Embassy in Washington, and Dr. Ephraim Biegun, described as working in the Division of Electronics for Defense. Again, this was misleading. Hermoni did, at times, work out of Washington's Israeli Embassy, but his prime and most important function was overseeing and planning Israel's nuclear weapons program, which he did from 1959-69. Biegun was actually head of the technical division of the Mossad from 1960-70.

CIA Suspicions

After the visit, NUMEC reported that the four men were in Apollo to buy thermo-electrical generator systems. (ibid, p. 119) Why Eitan and Bendor had to be there for that purpose is not readily apparent.

CIA officer John Hadden thought the real reason for the visit was that Shapiro was divulging top-secret technical information about plutonium manufacture – and that he was aided in this by the visiting Israeli scientist working at NUMEC. The FBI later came to agree that this was most likely the true reason for the visit. (ibid, p. 120)

Hermoni revisited Shapiro in November 1968, but the capstone to the visits to Apollo came later that month. As noted previously, France had cut back on its support for Dimona in the mid-1960s, halting the supply of uranium fuel in 1967.

In late November 1968, the Mossad arranged a covert operation called Operation Plumbat, which employed a front company in West Germany to purchase 200 tons of uranium yellowcake from Belgium. The transaction was approved by Euratom, the European organization controlling such transactions, but once the transport ship set sail for the port of Genoa, Italy, it was intercepted by another ship used by the Mossad. When the original ship reached port, the hull was empty.

The timing of this operation, on the heels of the mysterious visits by Israeli intelligence agents to Apollo, seems to constitute powerful circumstantial evidence of Israeli intentions.

Then, right after the completion of the Plumbat mission, who arrived in Israel? None other than Zalman Shapiro. The FBI discovered that in November 1968, in

addition to the personal visits, Shapiro was in frequent phone contact with a number of Israeli intelligence agents, including Hermoni. (Mattson, p. 126)

A Longstanding Goal

Israel's long trail of subterfuge and duplicity was part of a longstanding goal. As early as 1948, David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, stated that what Einstein, Teller and Oppenheimer did for America, they could easily do for Israel, since they were all Jews. In fact, he offered Einstein Israeli citizenship, which the great man declined. (ibid, p. 22) Ben-Gurion then had two meetings with Oppenheimer and numerous ones with Teller.

Ultimately, Israel settled on David Bergmann, a brilliant chemist whom Ben-Gurion appointed first chief of the Israel Atomic Energy Commission in 1952. By 1955, Bergmann was essentially running the day-to-day operations of Israel's atomic program.

In a conversation with the American ambassador, Bergmann said the Israeli science education program was adequate in physics and chemistry but weak in engineering and non-existent in metallurgy. He also revealed that the design he had laid out for a reactor was the same as the one at Shippingport, Pennsylvania, an intriguing clue because Shapiro was a metallurgist and had worked on the Shippingport power station.

Indeed, Shapiro eventually met Bergmann and the two became close friends and colleagues, serving on the board of ISORAD, which was a joint venture of NUMEC and the IAEC. Bergmann made his first visit to America for IAEC in 1956, the year before Lowenthal turned Apollo Steel into NUMEC.

There were two significant investigations of Shapiro and NUMEC. The first was instigated by Dick Helms's call to Ramsey Clark in 1968 and the discovery of the highly enriched uranium at Dimona. (Mattson, p. 99) The second began in 1976 when Jim Conran, a whistleblower at the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, voiced complaints about the background and actions of Shapiro. Conran was a security officer and his warnings eventually got the attention of the White House. (ibid, p. 161)

During the first investigation, the FBI could not find enough evidence to justify a violation by Shapiro of the Foreign Agents Registration Act, which mandates that any person in the U.S. who is representing a foreign country's interests has to register with the Justice Department. But the FBI did recommend cancelling Shapiro's security clearances, based on wiretaps that revealed Shapiro in close contact with Israeli intelligence officials and with members of the IAEC. (ibid, p. 138)

During these calls Shapiro reportedly said he would help Israel in any way that he could. He also expressed frustration with the new ownership at NUMEC, which had been purchased by ARCO. But his Israeli contacts said he was too valuable to leave and encouraged him to stay there. (ibid, p. 139)

FBI Surveillance

One of the most curious episodes that the FBI surveillance revealed was a meeting between Shapiro and a man named Jeruham Kafkafi, a suspected Mossad officer working under diplomatic cover. He had left Washington by air on the morning of June 20, 1969, and met Shapiro at the Pittsburgh airport for about an hour. He then left and flew back to Washington.

As a result of that surveillance, Shapiro was interviewed by the AEC in August 1969, with some of Shapiro's answers to questions rather dubious. For instance, he said he did not know Hermoni was in charge of the Israeli nuclear development program and thought he was a university professor. Shapiro said his discussions in September and October 1968 with the Israeli officers were about water contamination, saboteur detection and military activities.

When asked why the Israelis could not have talked to the Defense Department about those topics, Shapiro had no answer. The interviewer wrote in his summary that Shapiro was cool and calm throughout except when the Kafkafi meeting was brought up. At first, Shapiro said he could not recall it, even though it happened just two months earlier. He then said he did remember it, claiming it was about an overdue invoice and a power supply resource. (p. 142)

The AEC investigators did not find the last reply credible, since it did not seem to justify an airline flight from Washington to Pittsburgh and back. Shapiro adjusted his answer by saying that there was some discussion of an investigator whom he knew from America who was going to visit Israel. He also added the figure of \$32,000 as to how much Israel owed NUMEC. As Mattson notes, again, this explanation does not seem to justify an air flight and an hour-long meeting with a clandestine Mossad officer.

Closing the Inquiry

The man who ultimately decided to close this initial inquiry was Glenn Seaborg, head of the AEC. Not only did he not see any civil or criminal charges as being viable, but when President Richard Nixon's Attorney General John Mitchell recommended revoking Shapiro's security clearances, Seaborg balked at that also.

Mattson clearly sees Seaborg as being a villain in the piece. Late in the book, he explicitly accuses him of running a cover-up. (see p. 297) And, there is evidence to back up this charge. It was later discovered, during the second

inquiry, that Seaborg had a close personal friendship with Shapiro. (ibid p. 268)

Earle Hightower, assistant director of safeguards at AEC, explicitly stated that the whole case regarding NUMEC was rigged because it was known that Seaborg would not take action. Little more than three years after Seaborg left the AEC, it was dissolved in 1975 and was replaced by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, in part, because critics accused the AEC of an insufficiently aggressive regulatory program.

The second, much longer, and more vigorous inquiry into NUMEC and Shapiro came about at the creation of the NRC when Jim Conran was tasked with reviewing the record of how safeguards had worked previously for the AEC so they could be strengthened in the future. In that review process, he came across the case of Shapiro and NUMEC.

When Conran asked to see more files on both, he was denied access, causing him to go up the NRC ladder to Chairman William Anders, who was briefed by, among others, Carl Duckett of the CIA. Since Anders was about to leave for a diplomatic post, he took his concerns to James Connor at President Gerald Ford's White House.

In March 1976, the CIA's Duckett addressed an informal gathering of pilots and astronauts, saying there was little doubt Israel had about 20 nuclear warheads. Although this was supposed to be off the record, the information leaked. In April 1976, *Time* reported that this claim was accurate, except the newsmagazine put the size of the arsenal at 13 bombs and added that the warheads could be delivered by Phantom jets or Jericho missiles.

Duckett wrote a memo to CIA Director George Bush in which he said he suspected that the Israeli program was jumpstarted by a diversion of enriched uranium from the NUMEC plant. (p. 165) He attached various appendices to the memo to show the results of previous inquiries into NUMEC and explain why his belief was justified.

One of the appendices consisted of a paper by John Hadden in which he expressed the suspicion that NUMEC was actually a shell company the Israeli government had set up for the express purpose of diverting materials, technology and information that Israel needed to speed up and facilitate its longstanding quest for atomic weapons. (ibid, p. 166)

A New Investigation

Attorney General Edward Levi was then sent a summary of the FBI's previous investigation of NUMEC. Levi alerted Ford that he thought NUMEC was culpable for

several crimes and, with Ford's permission, he wished to begin a criminal inquiry. Since Ford's close adviser James Connor was also disturbed by these findings, the President approved the investigation.

What followed was a tedious bureaucratic battle between the CIA and FBI. The FBI felt it did not have direct proof that a diversion had taken place, while the CIA had the proof – the chemical tests at Dimona – but was reluctant to reveal the intelligence to the FBI. Also, the CIA did not want to furnish the FBI with technical experts to help educate the investigating agents so they could effectively cross-examine important witnesses. Thus, the FBI's inquiry dragged on through three presidents: Ford, Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan.

But even with these obstructions, the FBI did eventually find witnesses to a diversion from the Apollo plant. It turned out that the FBI did not do enough interviews of plant employees in its initial inquiry because there were at least four of them willing to talk. Those witnesses form the climax of Mattson's book.

In 1980, one witness said that when he read newspaper accounts about the losses of enriched uranium at Apollo, he had to chuckle to himself. When asked why, he replied that in 1965 or 1966, he was walking near the loading dock at Apollo and saw people loading containers – the dimensions that were used for HEU packets – into equipment boxes. He noticed that the shipping papers for the boxes revealed that the packages were destined for Israel. This witness then suggested some other workers at the plant who had seen similar activity. (Ibid, p. 272)

Suspicion Shipment

One of these witnesses saw a flatbed truck backed up into the loading dock area with Shapiro pacing around the area while the driver was loading "stove pipes" into a cabinet on the truck. This struck the witness as odd because the plant had regularly assigned workers for loading duties during the day but this shipment was being prepared in the evening. He explained that "stove pipes" were cylindrical containers that the plant used to pack enriched uranium inside. Each stove pipe usually contained three or four packets of HEU.

When he glanced at the clipboard resting on a package, he saw the destination was Israel. The clipboard then was yanked away and an armed guard escorted him off the dock. He also said it was unusual to see Shapiro in this area of the plant, and further, that Shapiro was very seldom there at night. (ibid, p. 275)

There were two other witnesses who told the FBI about similar events. The FBI also interviewed an NRC inspector named James Devlin, who told the agents that, contrary to what Shapiro had said, the security at the Apollo plant was below par and that NUMEC did not employ a professional security force. The company had

one regular armed guard and Devlin happened to know who he was, since he was also a deputy for the township. The only other guards were unarmed and non-uniformed. (ibid, pgs. 272-73)

By this time, the FBI did not want to continue the investigation, believing that nothing would come of it, although the Justice Department urged the investigators on. But the FBI was correct since, as Mattson notes more than once in his book, the last president who really wanted to stop Israel from becoming a nuclear power was John F. Kennedy. (See pgs. 38-40, p. 256)

Richard Helms's conversation with a disinterested President Johnson underscores how that attitude changed after Kennedy's death. As Mattson further notes, opposition to Israel's nuclear-weapons program was more or less negated by President Richard Nixon's meeting with Prime Minister Golda Meir in 1969 when he agreed that the U.S. would not make any public statements revealing Israel's nuclear arsenal nor demand that it sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty, as long as Israel did no testing and made no public threats.

Even that policy was probably violated in 1979 with the Vela Incident: a suspected Israeli nuclear test done in the Indian Ocean.

Author Roger Mattson was part of the inquiry about the illegal transfer of atomic secrets to Israel, working in the NRC's safeguards department when Conran first voiced his fears about a diversion at NUMEC. Thus, Mattson became part of an internal review of the Shapiro case, seeing firsthand how certain intelligence agencies were, by accident or design, obstructing the investigation.

Mattson concludes his important book by stating that this policy of casting a deliberate blind eye towards a nuclear heist by Israel places the U.S. in a compromised position when trying to enforce a policy of non-proliferation on other nations because of the obvious double standards.

To point out one paradox, the U.S. government executed Julius and Ethel Rosenberg for purportedly supplying nuclear secrets to the Soviet Union with less evidence. Plus, the tinder box of the Middle East is probably the last place where America should have allowed atomic weapons to proliferate, but it did.

Because of that, the U.S. has little or no moral authority on the issue today.

James DiEugenio is a researcher and writer on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and other mysteries of that era. His most recent book is *Reclaiming Parkland*.
