

New Iran Sanctions Risk Long-term US Isolation

The U.S. is going for the jugular with new Iran sanctions intended to punish those who trade with Teheran. But the U.S. may have a fight on its hands in a possible post- WWII turning-point, writes Patrick Lawrence.

New Iran Sanctions Risks Long-term US Isolation

Europe, Asia May Rebel Against US Penalties

By Patrick Lawrence

Special to Consortium News



The next step in the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran comes this Sunday, Nov. 4, when the most severe sanctions will be imposed on the Islamic Republic. Crucially, they apply not only to Iran but to anyone who continues to do business with it.

It's not yet clear how disruptive this move will be. While the U.S. intention is to isolate Iran, it is the U.S. that could wind up being more isolated. It depends on the rest of the world's reaction, and especially Europe's.

The issue is so fraught that disputes over how to apply the new sanctions have even divided Trump administration officials.

The administration is going for the jugular this time. It wants to force Iranian exports of oil and petrochemical products down to as close to zero as possible. As the measures are now written, they also exclude Iran from the global interbank system known as SWIFT.

It is hard to say which of these sanctions is more severe. Iran's oil exports have already started falling. They peaked at 2.7 million barrels a day last May—just before Donald Trump pulled the U.S. out of the six-nation accord governing Iran's nuclear programs. By early September oil exports were averaging a million barrels a day less.

In August the U.S. barred Iran's purchases of U.S.-dollar denominated American

and foreign company aircraft and auto parts. Since then the Iranian rial has crashed to record lows and inflation has risen above 30 percent.

Revoking Iran's SWIFT privileges will effectively cut the nation out of the dollar-denominated global economy. But there are moves afoot, especially by China and Russia, to move away from a dollar-based economy.

The SWIFT issue has caused infighting in the administration between Treasury Secretary Mnuchin and John Bolton, Trump's national security adviser who is among the most vigorous Iran hawks in the White House. Mnuchin might win a temporary delay or exclusions for a few Iranian financial institutions, but probably not much more.

On Sunday, the second round of sanctions will kick in since Trump withdrew the U.S. from the 2015 Obama administration-backed, nuclear agreement, which lifted sanctions on Iran in exchange for stringent controls on its nuclear program. The International Atomic Energy Agency has repeatedly certified that the deal is working and the other signatories—Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia have not pulled out and have resumed trading with Iran. China and Russia have already said they will ignore American threats to sanction it for continuing economic relations with Iran. The key question is what will America's European allies do?

Europeans React

Europe has been unsettled since Trump withdrew in May from the nuclear accord. The European Union is developing a trading mechanism to get around U.S. sanctions. Known as a Special Purpose Vehicle, it would allow European companies to use a barter system similar to how Western Europe traded with the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

EU officials have also been lobbying to preserve Iran's access to global interbank operations by excluding the revocation of SWIFT privileges from Trump's list of sanctions. They count Mnuchin, who is eager to preserve U.S. influence in the global trading system, among their allies. Some European officials, including Jean-Claude Juncker, president of the European Commission, propose making the euro a global trading currency to compete with the dollar.

Except for Charles de Gaulle briefly pulling France out of NATO in 1967 and Germany and France voting on the UN Security Council against the U.S. invading Iraq in 2003, European nations have been subordinate to the U.S. since the end of the Second World War.

The big European oil companies, unwilling to risk the threat of U.S. sanctions, have already signaled they intend to ignore the EU's new trade mechanism. Total

SA, the French petroleum company and one of Europe's biggest, pulled out of its Iran operations several months ago.

Earlier this month a U.S. official confidently predicted there would be little demand among European corporations for the proposed barter mechanism.

Whether Europe succeeds in efforts to defy the U.S. on Iran is nearly beside the point from a long-term perspective. Trans-Atlantic damage has already been done. A rift that began to widen during the Obama administration seems about to get wider still.

Asia Reacts

Asian nations are also exhibiting resistance to the impending U.S. sanctions. It is unlikely they could absorb all the exports Iran will lose after Nov. 4, but they could make a significant difference. China, India, and South Korea are the first, second, and third-largest importers of Iranian crude; Japan is sixth. Asian nations may also try to work around the U.S. sanctions regime after Nov. 4.

India is considering purchases of Iranian crude via a barter system or denominating transactions in rupees. China, having already said it would ignore the U.S. threat, would like nothing better than to expand yuan-denominated oil trading, and this is not a hard call: It is in a protracted trade war with the U.S., and an oil-futures market launched in Shanghai last spring already claims roughly 14 percent of the global market for "front-month" futures—contracts covering shipments closest to delivery.

As with most of the Trump administration's foreign policies, we won't know how the new sanctions will work until they are introduced. There could be waivers for nations such as India; Japan is on record asking for one. The E.U.'s Special Purpose Vehicle could prove at least a modest success at best, but this remains uncertain. Nobody is sure who will win the administration's internal argument over SWIFT.

Long-term Consequences for the U.S.

The de-dollarization of the global economy is gradually gathering momentum. The orthodox wisdom in the markets has long been that competition with the dollar from other currencies will eventually prove a reality, but it will not be one to arrive in our lifetimes. But with European and Asian reactions to the imminent sanctions against Iran it could come sooner than previously thought.

The coalescing of emerging powers into a non-Western alliance —most significantly China, Russia, India, and Iran—starts to look like another medium-

term reality. This is driven by practical rather than ideological considerations, and the U.S. could not do more to encourage this if it tried. When Washington withdrew from the Iran accord, Moscow and Beijing immediately pledged to support Tehran by staying with its terms. If the U.S. meets significant resistance, especially from its allies, it could be a turning-point in post-World War II U.S. dominance.

Supposedly Intended for New Talks

All this is intended to force Iran back to the negotiating table for a rewrite of what Trump often calls “the worst deal ever.” Tehran has made it clear countless times it has no intention of reopening the pact, given that it has consistently adhered to its terms and that the other signatories to the deal are still abiding by it.

The U.S. may be drastically overplaying its hand and could pay the price with additional international isolation that has worsened since Trump took office.

Washington has been on a sanctions binge for years. Those about to take effect seem recklessly broad. This time, the U.S. risks lasting alienation even from those allies that have traditionally been its closest.

Patrick Lawrence, a correspondent abroad for many years, chiefly for the International Herald Tribune, is a columnist, essayist, author, and lecturer. His most recent book is Time No Longer: Americans After the American Century (Yale). Follow him [@thefloutist](#). His web site is [www.patricklawrence.us](#). Support his work via [www.patreon.com/thefloutist](#) .

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The Art of No Mideast Deal

Donald Trump once advertised an Israeli-Palestinian peace plan as his greatest achievement-in-the-making, but like many of the president’s negotiations, the Kushner-Greenblatt strategy is a one-sided bargain, writes Patrick Lawrence.

By Patrick Lawrence

Special to Consortium News



Whatever happened to President Trump's "Deal of the Century"—his promise to forge an agreement between Israelis and Palestinians bringing a 70-year conflict to a close?

We now have two answers.

One, whatever comes out of this undertaking will not be a deal. Since the Palestinians have refused to negotiate, it will be an imposed plan entirely to Israel's advantage.

Two, when the White House does announce its Mideast framework, it is unlikely to do much more than consolidate the status quo. "It'll be a cease-fire, not a peace plan, even if the United States and Israel could get Palestinians to go along," Richard Falk, an international lawyer and longtime authority on the Mideast question, said in a recent conversation.

Wait Until Next Year

Little was made of it, but Trump took a big step back from his deal of deals during the recent General Assembly general debate at the United Nations. We'll show the world our plan "over the next two to three to four months," he announced.

Clearly the administration is unsurprisingly kicking its proposals well into next year. By all indications, it has so far found little buy-in from any Arab nation, let alone the Palestinians.

Jared Kushner and Jason Greenblatt, who have led the administration effort for 20 months, have plenty on the table. While they have disclosed no details, Trump's son-in-law and adviser on Israel appear to have structured a grand plan that takes Palestinian self-determination out of the equation in return for economic aid and the promise of prosperity. In other words, surrender your principles, and we'll pay you for it.

I simply do not see this winning the endorsement it would need in either Gaza or the West Bank. And without that, international support will prove minimal at best. "No Palestinian who wants to keep any political influence can accept what we know so far," said Phyllis Bennis, a fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, who has written widely on the Mideast crisis.

The Kushner–Greenblatt strategy seems to draw heavily from Daniel Pipes in Middle East Forum, the conservative think tank Pipes founded in 1990. The MEF’s “Victory Caucus” initiative calls on Palestinians to admit their seven-decade political struggle is lost and accept a kind of Mideast Marshall Plan. “Palestinians will have to pass through the bitter crucible of defeat, with all its deprivation, destruction, and despair,” Pipes wrote in an MEF paper last year. In a congressional hearing, Pipes later described this as “an alternative to endless negotiations nobody believes in.”

The Kushner-Greenblatt Plan

Here are the main elements of the Kushner–Greenblatt plan, according to experts such as Falk and Bennis, many months of leaks, and press reports from the region.

In Gaza, investment will center on a free-trade zone along the border with the Sinai Peninsula. Egypt, Jordan or both are to take responsibility for Gaza as a protectorate. This will legally separate Gaza and West Bank Palestinians, guarantee Israel’s status as a Jewish state, and create jobs in the Sinai and Gaza, where unemployment and discontent run high.

Two problems here. Neither Cairo nor Amman show any interest in assuming political responsibility for Gaza. Qatar and the other Gulf emirates could invest in the free-trade project, I am told, but that depends on whether they find the rest of the Kushner–Greenblatt plan at least minimally acceptable.

On the West Bank, Kushner, Greenblatt and David Friedman, the U.S. ambassador in Jerusalem, propose legalizing the status quo while giving it the appearance of balance. Israeli settlement activity is to be accepted as legal, while investment and infrastructure (possibly including an international airport, Bennis tells me) will go into Palestinian-held land. The Palestinian Authority will be officially recognized and would locate its capital at Abu Dis, a small village east of Jerusalem now under Israeli control. Again, there is no indication these proposals have support among Palestinians or elsewhere in the region.

Neither would the Palestinian Authority government remain independent, if talks now underway succeed. On this point, Kushner and Greenblatt are fishing for what might plausibly work, Falk says. They are currently encouraging Jordan to accept the West Bank in a bipartite confederation. While Jordanian officials say this is out of the question, it is the one idea in which Mahmoud Abbas, the PA’s head, has expressed interest.

Another proposal is to include Israel in a tripartite deal. Israeli President

Reuven Rivlin recently described this as “a momentous opportunity,” according to a *Times of Israel* report. But what weight does this carry? Rivlin is a titular head of state, not the prime minister.

Classic Trump Strategy

I find the indifference to international law in the Kushner-Greenblatt plans not short of breathtaking. Kushner wants to redefine refugees, for example, so they are limited to those who left Israel’s borders as of 1948. This would deprive legal status to the vast majority of Palestinians, who number roughly 5 million. Crucially, they also would lose their 70-year claim to a “right of return.” But only the U.N. has the authority to alter the status of refugees or certify Israeli settlements as legal, and it is inconceivable that it would take either step.

The front end of the Kushner strategy has been clear since the administration recognized Jerusalem as Israel’s capital last December. The administration has since cut off \$200 million in aid for West Bank and Gaza programs, eliminated the \$65 million remaining in already reduced payments to UNWRA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency) for Palestine Refugees in the Near East), the U.N. agency supporting Palestinians in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, and is closing the Palestine Liberation Organization office in Washington.

This is classic Trump strategy: Achieve maximum advantage before disclosing what is on offer.

‘A Disaster Waiting to Happen’

International reaction to the Trump administration plan, whenever it is unveiled, is difficult to assess. Arab nations have long paid little more than lip service to the Palestinian cause. Many are now preoccupied with countering Iran’s regional role, and none wants to risk damaging relations with the U.S. and Israel. But they also are wary of provoking domestic opinion, especially with the Arab Spring uprisings just a few years behind them.

Europeans appear set to seize a diplomatic opening in the Mideast (once again at the cost of worsening trans-Atlantic ties). The EU just proposed a \$46 million increase in its UNRWA funding. While anti-immigrant politics in Germany and the Netherlands may weaken European unity on the Mideast question, the BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) campaign is certain to continue gathering momentum (as will Israel’s concerted campaign to counter it). Jeremy Corbyn, the British Labour Party’s leader, said in September that a Labour government “will recognize a Palestinian state as soon as we take office.” It is a symbolic gesture but not without significance.

As to Russia, President Putin has working relations with Benjamin Netanyahu and interests in Syria to think about, but Putin also is committed to opposing the U.S. plan. The logical call here: muted objections from Moscow once the plan is public.

Washington, not least, is deeply divided. Conservative politicians and think tanks line up with the Pipe's rightwing Middle East Forum. But both Bennis and Falk told **Consortium News** that they've learned a number of officials at the State Department and Pentagon oppose the administration on two grounds: They think the plan has little chance of working and they regret the loss of U.S. legitimacy in the region for the sake of an imposed plan fundamentally one-sided in Israel's favor.

Is there any wonder Trump is in no rush to reveal what he once advertised as his greatest achievement-in-the-making? "A disaster waiting to happen," Foreign Policy called it a few months ago. Wait for it.

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New Writers Welcomed to Consortium News

In the past few weeks **Consortium News** has added a group of accomplished writers as regular contributors, ensuring that **Consortium** remains a unique source of news, analysis and commentary that you will not find in mainstream media.

Pepe Escobar, the globe-trotting veteran Brazilian journalist, who can turn a phrase with the best of them while delivering incisive analysis of social movements and West vs. East geopolitics, recently joined **Consortium's** roster and

has already delivered.

His piece on the Brazilian presidential election is a must read.

Joining Pepe as a new **Consortium** writer is Max Blumenthal, one of the top journalists in alternative media. Max penned a brilliant obituary of Senator John McCain that gave you everything that was missing from *The New York Times*.

Patrick Lawrence, a long-time contributor to *The Nation*, *Salon* and other important alternative media, with a background in the mainstream as Asia Editor of *The International Herald Tribune*, has begun contributing his insightful analysis to **Consortium News**.

As'ad AbuKhalil, a.k.a "The Angry Arab," began contributing a few months ago with a special perspective on the Middle East as a Lebanese scholar of the region that overrides the usual Orientalist Western view.

Alexander Mercouris, a sharp observer of British politics has begun filing a regular Letter from Britain, in the vein of the legendary BBC U.S. correspondent Alistair Cooke's Letter from America.

John Kiriakou, a former CIA agent who blew the whistle on torture, has also begun contributing a regular column to **Consortium News**.

These important writers join our stable of regulars that include Ray Mc Govern, Gareth Porter, Daniel Lazare, Jonathan Marshall, Marjorie Cohn, Diana Johnstone and Annie Machon.

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The Battle for Our Minds

There are battlefields in Syria, Ukraine, Yemen, and elsewhere, but given the state of corporate media, perhaps the most consequential battle now being fought is for our minds, says Patrick Lawrence.

By Patrick Lawrence

Special to Consortium News



After reading *The New York Times* piece "[The Plot to Subvert an Election](#)" I put the paper down with a single question.

Why, after two years of allegations, indictments, and claims to proof of this, that, and the other did the newspaper of record—well, once the newspaper of record—see any need to publish such a piece? My answer is simple: The orthodox account of Russia-gate has not taken hold: It has failed in its effort to establish a consensus of certainty among Americans. My conclusion matches this observation: The orthodox narrative is never going to achieve this objective. There are too many holes in it.

"The information age is actually a media age," John Pilger, the noted British–Australian journalist, [remarked](#) during a symposium four years ago, when the Ukraine crisis was at its peak. "We have war by media; censorship by media; demonology by media; retribution by media; diversion by media—a surreal assembly line of obedient clichés and false assumptions." Pilger revisited the theme in a [piece](#) last week on Consortium News, arguing that once-tolerated, dissenting opinion has in recent years "regressed into a metaphoric underground."

There are battlefields in Syria, Ukraine, Yemen, and elsewhere, but perhaps the most consequential battle now being fought is for our minds.

Those who dispense with honest intellectual inquiry, healthy skepticism of *all* media, and an insistence that assertions require supporting evidence should not win this war. The *Times* piece by Scott Shane and Mark Mazzetti—two of the paper's top-tier reporters—is a case in point: If the Russia-gate narrative were so widely accepted as their report purports, there would have been no need to publish such a piece at this late date.

Many orthodox narratives are widely accepted however among a public that is not always paying attention. The public too often participates in the manufactured consent. Usually it takes years for the truth to be widely understood. Sometimes it comes when the U.S. admits it decades later, such as the role of the CIA in the coups in [Iran](#) and [Chile](#). Other times it comes through [admissions](#) by former U.S. officials, such as former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara about the Vietnam War.

Even Recent Narratives are Fraying

There are more recent examples of official narratives quickly fraying if not starting to fall apart, though Establishment media continues to push them.

For instance, there are serious doubts about who was responsible for alleged chemical weapons attacks in Syria. The most significant was in Eastern Ghouta in August 2013 followed by attacks in Khan Sheikhoun (April 2017) and Douma (April 2018).

The corporate media accounts of each of these attacks have been countered with persuasive evidence against the prevailing view that the government of Bashar al-Assad was to blame. It has been provided journalists ([Seymour Hersh](#)), a scientist ([Theodore Postol](#)), and on-the-ground correspondents and local [witnesses](#). These reports are subject to further verification. But by no means do official narratives stand without challenge.

There is also the case of Malaysian Flight MH-17, shot down over Ukrainian territory in June 2014. The official report, issued a year later, concluded that the plane was downed by Ukrainian rebels using a Russian-supplied missile. The report was faulty from the first: Investigators [never visited the site](#), some evidence was based on a [report](#) produced by Bellingcat, an open-source web site affiliated with the vigorously anti-Russian Atlantic Council, and Ukraine was given the right to approve the report before it was issued.

Last week the Russian military disclosed [evidence](#) that serial numbers found in the debris at the MH-17 crash site indicate the missile that downed the plane was produced at a Soviet military-production plant in 1986 owned by Ukraine. Let us see further verification of this evidence (although I seriously doubt any Western correspondent will seek any). The official report of 2015 noted the serial numbers, so we know they are authentic, but it did not use them to trace the missile's provenance.

There is also the seriously muddled case of the poisoning of the Skripals in Britain. Why hasn't the Western media dug into this story rather than accept at face value the pronouncements of the British government?

A month ago I [lamented](#) the damage Russia-gate has done to many of our most important institutions, the press not least among them. What is the corporate media thinking? That once President Trump is dumped, all will return to normal and professional standards will be restored? One can also argue the reverse: that adversarial journalism has returned to the White House beat largely out of personal animus towards Trump and that it will disappear again once a more "normal" president is in office.

As Pilger put it, "This is a seismic shift, with journalists policing the new 'groupthink,' as [Robert] Parry called it, dispensing myths and distractions,

pursuing its enemies.”

In other words, Establishment journalism has shifted far afield from its traditional ideals of non-partisan, objective reporting and is instead vying for your mind to enlist it in its agenda to promote American interests abroad or one party or the other at home.

We can't let them get away with it. Our minds are our own.

Patrick Lawrence, a correspondent abroad for many years, chiefly for the International Herald Tribune, is a columnist, essayist, author, and lecturer. His most recent book is *Time No Longer: Americans After the American Century* (Yale). Follow him @thefloutist. His web site is www.patricklawrence.us. Support his work via www.patreon.com/thefloutist.

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Why the U.S. Seeks to Hem in Russia, China and Iran

America's three principal adversaries signify the shape of the world to come: a post-Western world of coexistence. But neoliberal and neocon ideology is unable to to accept global pluralism and multipolarity, argues Patrick Lawrence.

By Patrick Lawrence

Special to Consortium News



The Trump administration has brought U.S. foreign policy to the brink of crisis, if it has not already tipped into one. There is little room to argue otherwise. In Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, and in Washington's ever-fraught relations with Russia, U.S. strategy, as reviewed in [my previous column](#), amounts to little more than spoiling the efforts of others to negotiate peaceful solutions to war and dangerous standoffs in the interests of an orderly world.

The bitter reality is that U.S. foreign policy has no definable objective other than blocking the initiatives of others because they stand in the way of the further expansion of U.S. global interests. This impoverished strategy reflects Washington's refusal to accept the passing of its relatively brief post-Cold War moment of unipolar power.

There is an error all too common in American public opinion. Personalizing Washington's regression into the role of spoiler by assigning all blame to one man, now Donald Trump, deprives one of deeper understanding. This mistake was made during the steady attack on civil liberties after the Sept. 11 tragedies and then during the 2003 invasion of Iraq: namely that it was all George W. Bush's fault. It was not so simple then and is not now. The crisis of U.S. foreign policy—a series of radical missteps—are systemic. Having little to do with personalities, they pass from one administration to the next with little variance other than at the margins.

Let us bring some history to this question of America as spoiler. What is the origin of this undignified and isolating approach to global affairs?

It began with that hubristic triumphalism so evident in the decade after the Cold War's end. What ensued had various names.

There was the "end of history" thesis. American liberalism was humanity's highest achievement, and nothing would supersede it.

There was also the "Washington consensus." The world was in agreement that free-market capitalism and unfettered financial markets would see the entire planet to prosperity. The consensus never extended far beyond the Potomac, but this sort of detail mattered little at the time.

The neoliberal economic crusade accompanied by neoconservative politics had its intellectual ballast, and off went its true-believing warriors around the world.

Failures ensued. Iraq post-2003 is among the more obvious. Nobody ever planted democracy or built free markets in Baghdad. Then came the "color revolutions," which resulted in the destabilization of large swathes of the former Soviet Union's borderlands. The 2008 financial crash followed.

I was in Hong Kong at the time and recall thinking, "This is not just Lehman Brothers. An economic model is headed into Chapter 11." One would have thought a fundamental rethink in Washington might have followed these events. There has never been one.

The orthodoxy today remains what it was when it formed in the 1990s: The neoliberal crusade must proceed. Our market-driven, "rules-based" order is still advanced as the only way out of our planet's impasses.

A Strategic and Military Turn

Midway through the first Obama administration, a crucial turn began. What had been an assertion of financial and economic power, albeit coercive in many

instances, particularly with the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, took on further strategic and military dimensions. The NATO bombing campaign in Libya, ostensibly a humanitarian mission, became a regime-change operation—despite Washington’s promises otherwise. Obama’s “pivot to Asia” turned out to be a neo-containment policy toward China. The “reset” with Russia, declared after Obama appointed Hillary Clinton secretary of state, flopped and turned into the virulent animosity we now live with daily. The U.S.-cultivated coup in Kiev in 2014 was a major declaration of drastic turn in policy towards Moscow. So was the decision, taken in 2012 at the latest, to back the radical jihadists who were turning civil unrest in Syria into a campaign to topple the Assad government in favor of another Islamist regime.

Spoilage as a poor excuse for a foreign policy had made its first appearances.

I count 2013 to 2015 as key years. At the start of this period, China began developing what it now calls its Belt and Road Initiative—its hugely ambitious plan to stitch together the Eurasian landmass, Shanghai to Lisbon. Moscow favored this undertaking, not least because of the key role Russia had to play and because it fit well with President Vladimir Putin’s Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), launched in 2014.

In 2015, the last of the three years I just noted, Russia intervened militarily and diplomatically in the Syria conflict, in part to protect its southwest from Islamist extremism and in part to pull the Middle East back from the near-anarchy then threatening it as well as Russia and the West.

Meanwhile, Washington had cast China as an adversary and committed itself—as it apparently remains—to regime change in Syria. Three months prior to the treaty that established the EAEU, the Americans helped turn another case of civil unrest into a regime change—this time backing not jihadists in Syria but the crypto-Nazi militias in Ukraine on which the government now in power still depends.

That is how we got the U.S.-as-spoiler foreign policy we now have.

If there is a president to blame—and again, I see little point in this line of argument—it would have to be Barack Obama. To a certain extent, Obama was a creature of those around him, as he acknowledged in his interview with Jeffrey Goldberg in *The Atlantic* toward the end of his second term. From that “Anonymous” opinion piece published in *The New York Times* on Sept. 5, we know Trump is too, to a greater extent than Obama may have feared in his worst moments.

The crucial question is why. Why do U.S. policy cliques find themselves bereft

of imaginative thinking in the face of an evolving world order? Why has there been not a single original policy initiative since the years I single out, with the exception of the now-abandoned 2015 accord governing Iran's nuclear programs? "Right now, our job is to create quagmires until we get what we want," an administration official told *The Washington Post's* David Ignatius in August.

Can you think of a blunter confession of intellectual bankruptcy? I can't.

Global 'Equals' Like Us?

There is a longstanding explanation for this paralysis. Seven decades of global hegemony, the Cold War notwithstanding, left the State Department with little to think about other than the simplicities of East-West tension. Those planning and executing American diplomacy lost all facility for imaginative thinking because there was no need of it. This holds true, in my view, but there is more to our specific moment than mere sclerosis within the policy cliques.

As I have argued numerous times elsewhere, parity between East and West is a 21st century imperative. From Woodrow Wilson to the post-World War II settlement, an equality among all nations was in theory what the U.S. considered essential to global order.

Now that this is upon us, however, Washington cannot accept it. It did not count on non-Western nations achieving a measure of prosperity and influence until they were "just like us," as the once famous phrase had it. And it has not turned out that way.

Think of Russia, China, and Iran, the three nations now designated America's principal adversaries. Each one is fated to become (if it is not already) a world or regional power and a key to stability—Russia and China on a global scale, Iran in the Middle East. But each stands resolutely—and this is not to say with hostile intent—outside the Western-led order. They have different histories, traditions, cultures, and political cultures. And they are determined to preserve them.

They signify the shape of the world to come—a post-Western world in which the Atlantic alliance must coexist with rising powers outside its orbit. Together, then, they signify precisely what the U.S. cannot countenance. And if there is one attribute of neoliberal and neoconservative ideology that stands out among all others, it is its complete inability to accept difference or deviation if it threatens its interests.

This is the logic of spoilage as a substitute for foreign policy. Among its many consequences are countless lost opportunities for global stability.

Patrick Lawrence, a correspondent abroad for many years, chiefly for the International Herald Tribune, is a columnist, essayist, author, and lecturer. His most recent book is *Time No Longer: Americans After the American Century* (Yale). Follow him @thefloutist. His web site is www.patricklawrence.us. Support his work via www.patreon.com/thefloutist.

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The Trump Administration's Spoiler Foreign Policy

U.S. strategy abroad is assuming a curious shape. Whether the president or his minders are running affairs, Patrick Lawrence sees the U.S. being reduced to playing a spoiler role in the Middle East and Northeast Asia.

By Patrick Lawrence

Special to Consortium News



It is not possible to speak of “Donald Trump’s foreign policy” for the simple reason one can never tell whether the president or his minders are running it. Contradictions, reversals, and turns-on-a-dime have abounded since Trump took office.

But this administration’s strategy abroad has assumed a discernible shape in recent weeks, whoever may be managing it in any given context. Never mind “not a pretty picture.” This is a shameful picture.

Consider these recent developments. Have you lost track of how many sets of sanctions Washington has imposed on Russia? I have. Last week, the [Treasury Department](#) added four Russian companies and two Russian citizens to its lengthy list of sanctioned entities—these for allegedly circumventing United States sanctions and (in two cases)

United Nations sanctions barring oil shipments to North Korea. More are on the way, to judge by deliberations on Capitol Hill. At this point, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the U.S. objective is to strangle the Russian economy.

The Trump administration has mounted a maximum-pressure campaign on Europe, and especially Germany, to follow the U.S.-U.K. lead in developing a more hostile posture toward Russia, even if it hurts European, and especially German, interests. Prior to Angela Merkel's summit with Vladimir Putin last weekend, Washington strongly urged the German chancellor to scuttle a Russia-to-Europe gas pipeline known as Nord Stream 2. Washington now threatens sanctions—as early as this autumn—against any European companies investing in the project.

The bizarre reversals are especially apparent on North Korea. Recall that the July summit was on-again and off-again. Last Friday, the White House canceled a trip to Pyongyang that Mike Pompeo had scheduled for this week. It would have been the secretary of state's third visit. Trump's complaint was that North Korea is "not making sufficient progress toward denuclearization." He then went on the blame China for easing pressure it had formerly applied to the North. But he also sent "warmest regards" to Kim Jong Un, the North Korean leader, and added, "I look forward to seeing him soon." This is a hard read. It may be a matter of Trump keeping the klieg lights focused on Trump, although the fundamental intent of Trump's minders remains scuttling any accord that brings peace to Northeast Asia.

Syrian Shuffle

In Syria too, Trump says one thing and another thing seems to happen. In much-publicized remarks in April, Trump said U.S. special forces would be pulled from the country. They are still there, and it's not clear whether the U.S. is winding down or ramping up.

Two weeks ago, the administration dropped plans to spend \$230 million on reparation projects to help stabilize Syria. These funds were to have gone to fixing water systems, clearing rubble and removing unexploded mines. Note, however: The U.S. intended to spend this money in areas still controlled by anti-Damascus militias. Pulling the funds

looks like an admission of defeat, but indications are it is not quite a surrender.

The Russian Defense Ministry warned all last week of another false-flag gas attack—this one in Idlib, where the last 70,000 anti-Damascus militias are holding out. This is not the first time the Russian military has detected such plans. It warned of the attack in Douma, the besieged Damascus suburb, weeks before it occurred in April. Over the weekend, John Bolton, Trump's national security adviser, countered that Washington has information that Damascus plans a chemical attack in Idlib.

Try me for treason. I believe the Russian intelligence, not Bolton. In the Douma case and now in Idlib, Moscow produced evidence implicating the White Helmets, the notoriously fraudulent "civic aid" group that is partly funded by the U.S. even as it maintains ties to jihadist militias. Bolton, as is the American habit these days, offered no evidence for his claim. We will have to see what transpires. Moscow predicts an attack in the next few days.

Remaining in the funds-cutting column, the administration announced last Friday that it would eliminate more than \$200 million in Palestinian aid to the West Bank and Gaza. These are small reductions in the administration's plans to cut the foreign-aid budget by up to \$3 billion.

'Round the World Muddle

Russia, Asia, the Middle East, Europe. The above list covers a great deal of the planet. What do we surmise from it? A brief review of events in each region will help us toward an answer.

To begin with, the argument that North Korea has taken no significant steps toward denuclearization collapses when subject to even the most superficial scrutiny. Pyongyang has pledged to stop all nuclear and missile tests and has conducted none since the Kim-Trump summit in May. It has destroyed its principal nuclear-testing facility and decommissioned a key missile-engine manufacturing plant. It has returned the remains of some U.S. soldiers left from the Korean War.

It has begun de-escalating tensions at the demilitarized zone separating North and South. And it is in extensive talks with South Korea, China and Russia on integrating the North into a Northeast Asian regional economic hub.

How this amounts to “insufficient progress” is simply beyond me.

Russia, by any detached measure, must be credited in recent months with some of the most outstanding statecraft of any major power in many years. Much of this, though not all, relates to Syria. In Douma last spring and more recently in the southwest, it negotiated agreements between jihadist militias and the Syrian Arab Army that allowed so-called “moderate rebels” safe-passage retreats. It then commenced relief efforts in both locations. Russia is now attempting the same thing in Idlib. Most startling, maybe, is the agreement Moscow arranged between Israel and Iran, whereby Iranian troops agreed not to participate in the S.A.A.’s southwest campaign, which put Syrian troops close to the border with the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.

The Putin-Merkel encounter last weekend appears to have been equally eventful. The two leaders agreed that the Nord Stream 2 project would proceed as a simple matter of mutual economic advantage—this despite Washington’s vigorous objections. We will now have to watch the fate of those European companies faced with sanctions for investing in the pipeline.

Putin also drew Merkel into multi-sided reconstruction efforts in Syria. Merkel’s motives are obvious. Rebuilding Syria will make it possible for at least some of the 1 million-plus Syrians now in Germany to return. In September, Germany and France are almost certain to attend a four-way summit on Syria reparations that also will include Russia and Turkey.

Washington’s Receding Power

It is time to draw conclusions. I have two.

One, most of the world, including the major powers other than the U.S. and Britain, are deeply committed to constructing a more orderly

world. This judgment rests on many years of observation, but the past several months turn a surmise into a certainty. From the first North-South summit at the Korean demilitarized zone (DMZ), maybe, or the rout of jihadists in Syria, I see an ardent desire to develop a true “post-Cold War order”—which the community of nations has yet to achieve if you look back over the past 29 years.

Two, the policy cliques in Washington appear to recognize that there is no stopping (what I read as) a compelling global aspiration, but there is plenty of opportunity to slow or spoil it. Why are 2,500 to 3,000 U.S. troops still stationed in Syria, some occupying Syrian oilfields (and apparently harboring jihadist militias)—this while the theme in Syria shifts from conflict to reconstruction? By what possible logic can the White House or State Department or Pentagon argue that North Korea has done little to engender substantive steps toward an enduring peace in Northeast Asia?

If spoiler is the new American role, it strongly suggests a rear-guard action—a significant turn in the gradual-but-evident decline of American influence. This shift predates Trump by many years, and in a forthcoming column, I will explore it.

In the cases noted here, the objectives appear to be to prevent a reordering of the Middle East without the U.S. as its hegemonic prime mover, to maintain maximum tension in Northeast Asia to protect the U.S. military presence in the western Pacific, and to block the consolidation of the Eurasian landmass such that it eventually binds Western Europe closer to its eastern flank than it has been in many, many centuries.

Say the word “responsibility” slowly. It denotes the ability to respond. In this context, current U.S. foreign policy is not a responsible policy. The U.S. does not, to put the point another way, have the ability to respond in a world that changes before our eyes. This is Washington’s most perilous vulnerability, in my view. It leaves us nursing a pointless nostalgia for a global environment that events supersede almost by the day.

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the International Herald Tribune, is a columnist, essayist, author, and lecturer. His most recent book is *Time No Longer: Americans After the American Century* (Yale). Follow him @thefloutist. His web site is www.patricklawrence.us. Support his work via www.patreon.com/thefloutist.

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This month Consortium News launched [Consortium News Radio](#). Today we begin a second radio show in collaboration with Pacifica Radio's Flashpoints, a biweekly interview program with Consortium News writers.

In collaboration with Dennis Bernstein, host of Pacifica Radio's syndicated show Flashpoints, Consortium News is today launching its second radio program, **Consortium News on Flashpoints**. Recorded and produced in the Berkeley, California studios of KPFA radio, Bernstein will interview three Consortium News writers about their recent articles published on this site. Each program will open with Consortium News Editor-in-Chief Joe Lauria discussing with Bernstein his picks of the three CN articles to be featured. The show will air twice a month on every other Friday. (We are about to launch a podcast of all our radio programming).

On the first show, Bernstein interviews Sam Hussein on his piece [The Limits of Elizabeth Warren](#); Patrick Lawrence about his article, ['Too Big to Fail': Russia-gate One Year After VIPS Showed a Leak, Not a Hack](#); and Joe Lauria, on his [retrospective](#) of Kofi Annan, who died last Saturday.

Now the first episode of **Consortium News on Flashpoints**.

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. You can get in touch with the author at dennisjbernstein@gmail.com.

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‘Too Big to Fail’: Russia-gate One Year After VIPS Showed a Leak, Not a Hack

One year later, the VIPS memo contending that the DNC emails were leaked and not hacked has yet to be successfully challenged. Meanwhile, the country sinks deeper into the morass of the new McCarthyism, comments Patrick Lawrence.

By Patrick Lawrence

Special to Consortium News



A year has passed since highly credentialed intelligence professionals produced the first hard evidence that allegations of mail theft and other crimes attributed to Russia rested on purposeful falsification and subterfuge. The initial reaction to these revelations—a firestorm of frantic denial—augured ill, and the time since has fulfilled one’s worst expectations. One year later we live within an institutionalized proscription of proven reality. Our discourse consists of a series of fence posts and taboos. By any detached measure, this lands us in deep, serious trouble. The sprawl of what we call “Russia-gate” now brings our republic and its institutions to a moment of great peril—the gravest since the McCarthy years and possibly since the Civil War. No, I do not consider this hyperbole.

Much has happened since Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity published its report on intrusions into the Democratic Party’s mail servers on Consortium News on July 24 last year. Parts of the intelligence apparatus—by no means all or even most of it—have issued official “assessments” of Russian culpability. Media have produced countless multi-part “investigations,” “special reports,” and what-have-yous that amount to an orgy of faulty syllogisms. Robert Mueller’s special investigation has issued two sets of indictments that, on scrutiny, prove as wanting in evidence as the notoriously flimsy intelligence “assessment” of January 6, 2017.

Indictments are not evidence and do not need to contain evidence. That is supposed to come out at trial, which is very unlikely to ever happen. Nevertheless, the corporate media has treated the indictments as convictions.

Numerous sets of sanctions against Russia, individual Russians, and Russian entities have been imposed on the basis of this great conjuring of assumption and presumption. The latest came last week, when the Trump administration announced measures in response to the alleged attempt to murder Sergei and Yulia Skripal, a former double agent and his daughter, in England last March. No evidence proving responsibility in the Skripal case has yet been produced. This amounts to our new standard. It prompted a reader with whom I am in regular contact to ask, "How far will we allow our government to escalate against others without proof of anything?"

This is a very good question.

There have been many attempts to discredit VIPS50 as the group's document is called. There has been much amateurish journalism, false reporting, misrepresentation, distortion, misquotation, and omission. We have been treated to much shoddy science, attempts at character assassination, a great deal of base name-calling, and much else. Russia is routinely advanced as the greatest threat to democracy Americans now face. Is there any denying that we live amid an induced hysteria now comparable to the "Red under every bed" period of the 1950s?

None of this has altered the basic case. VIPS and forensic scientists working with it have continued their investigations. New facts, some of which alter conclusions drawn last year, have come to light, and these are to be addressed. But the basic evidence that Russia-gate is a false narrative concocted by various constituents of national power stands, difficult as this is to discern. Scrape back all that is ethically unacceptable and unscrupulously conveyed into the public sphere and you find that nothing has changed: No one "hacked" the Democratic party's mail in the summer of 2016. It was leaked locally. From what one can make out, it was done to expose the party leadership's corrupt efforts to sink Bernie Sanders' insurgent campaign to win the Democratic nomination.

But in another, very profound way, more has changed since VIPS50 was published than one could have imagined a year ago. American discourse has descended to a dangerous level of irrationality. The most ordinary standards of evidentiary procedure are forgone. Many of our key institutions—the foreign policy apparatus, the media, key intelligence and law-enforcement agencies, the political leadership—are now extravagantly committed to a narrative none appears able to control. The risk of self-inflicted damage these institutions assume, should the truth of the Russia-gate events emerge—as one day it surely will—is

nearly incalculable. This is what inspires my McCarthy and Civil War references. Russia-gate, in a phrase, has become too big to fail.

This column is an attack on no one. However it may be read, it is not intended as another round of vituperative argument adding to the din and fog we already suffer daily. No shred of ideology informs it. I write a lament—this for all we have done to ourselves and our institutions this past year, and to the prospect of an orderly world, and for all that must somehow be done to repair the damage once enough of us indeed recognize what has been done.

New VIPS Findings

The forensic scientists working with VIPS continued their research and experiments after VIPS50 was published. So have key members of the VIPS group, notably William Binney, the National Security Agency's former technical director for global analysis and designer of programs the agency still uses to monitor internet traffic. Such work continues as we speak, indeed. This was always the intent: "Evidence to date" was the premise of VIPS50. Over the past year there have been confirmations of the original thesis and some surprises that alter secondary aspects of it. Let us look at the most significant of these findings.

At the time I reported on the findings of VIPS and associated forensic scientists, that the most fundamental evidence that the events of summer 2016 constituted a leak, not a hack, was the transfer rate—the speed at which data was copied. The speed proven then was an average of 22.7 megabytes per second. That speed matches what is standard when someone with physical access uses an external storage device to copy data from a computer or server and is much faster than a remote hack, reliant on communications topology available at the time, could achieve.

Binney experimented into the autumn. By mid-autumn he had tested several routes—from East Coast locations to cities in eastern Europe, from New Jersey to London. The fastest internet transfer speed achieved, during the New Jersey-to-Britain test, was 12.0 megabytes of data per second. Since this time it has emerged from G-2.0's metadata that the detected average speed—the 22.7 megabytes per second—included peak speeds that ran as high as 49.1 megabytes per second, impossible over the internet. "You'd need a dedicated, leased, 400-megabit line all the way to Russia to achieve that result," Binney said in a recent interview.

To my knowledge, no one with an understanding of the science involved, including various former skeptics, any longer questions the validity of the specific finding based on the observed transfer rate. That remains the bedrock evidence of the case VIPS and others advance without qualification. "No one—including the

FBI, the CIA, and the NSA—has come out against this finding,” Binney said Monday. “Anyone who says the speed we demonstrated can be achieved remotely, our position is ‘Let’s see it. We’ll help any way we can.’ There hasn’t been anyone yet.”

There is also the question of where and when leaks were executed. Research into this has turned out differently.

Evidence last year, based on analysis of the available metadata, showed that the copy operation date-stamped July 5, 2016, took place in the Eastern U.S. time zone. But Forensicator, one of the chief forensic investigators working on the mail-theft case anonymously, published evidence in May showing that while there was activity in the Eastern zone at the time of that copy, there was also a copy operation in the Pacific time zone, where clocks run three hours earlier than EST. In an earlier publication he had also reported activity in the Central time zone.



Plainly, more was awaiting discovery as to the when and where of the copy operations. The identity of Guccifer 2.0, who claimed to be a Romanian hacker but which the latest Mueller indictment claims is a construct of the GRU, Russian military intelligence, has never been proven. The question is what G-2.0 did with or to the data in question. It turns out that both more, and less, is known about G-2.0 than was thought to have been previously demonstrated. This work has been completed only recently. It was done by Binney in collaboration with Duncan Campbell, a British journalist who has followed the Russia-gate question closely.

Peak Speed Established

Binney visited Campbell in Brighton, England, early this past spring. They examined all the metadata associated with the files G-2.0 has made public. They

looked at the number of files, the size of each, and the time stamps at the end of each. It was at this time that Binney and Campbell established the peak transfer rate at 49.1 megabytes per second.

But they discovered something else of significance, too. At some point G-2.0 had merged two sets of data, one dated July 5, 2016, which had been known, and another dated the following September 1, which had not been known. In essence, Campbell reverse-engineered G-2.0's work: He took the sets of data G-2.0 presented as two and combined them back into one. "G-2.0 used an algorithm to make a downloaded file look like two files," Binney explained. "Those two shuffled back together like a deck of cards."

G-2.0 then took another step. Running another algorithm, he changed all the dates on all the files. With yet another algorithm, he changed the hours stamped on each file. These are called "range changes" among the professionals. The conclusion was then obvious: G-2.0 is a fabrication and a fabricator. Forensicator had already proven that the G-2.0 entity had inserted Russian "fingerprints" into the document known as the "Trump Opposition Report," which G-2.0 had published on June 15, 2016. It is clear that no firm conclusions can be drawn at this point as to when or where G-2.0 did what he did.

"Now you need to prove everything you might think about him," Binney told me. "We have no way of knowing anything about him or what he has done, apart from manipulating the files. We detected activity in the Eastern time zone. Now we have to ask again, 'Which time zone?' The West Coast copy operation [discovered by Forensicator] has to be proven. All the data has been manipulated. It's a fabrication."

This throws various things into question. The conclusions initially drawn on time and location in VIPS50 are now subject to these recent discoveries. "In retrospect, giving 'equal importance' status to data pertaining to the locale was mistaken," Ray McGovern, a prominent VIPS member, wrote in a recent note. "The key finding on transfer speed always dwarfed it in importance."

The indictments against 12 Russian intelligence officers announced in mid-July by Rod Rosenstein, the deputy attorney-general, also come into question. They rest in considerable part on evidence derived from G-2.0 and DCLeaks, another online persona. How credible are those indictments in view of what is now known about G-2.0?

Binney told me: "Once we proved G-2.0 is a fabrication and a manipulator, the timing and location questions couldn't be answered but really didn't matter. I don't right now see a way of absolutely proving either time or location. But this doesn't change anything. We know what we know: The intrusion into the

Democratic National Committee mail was a local download—wherever ‘local’ is.” That doesn’t change. As to Rosenstein, he’ll have a lot to prove.”

What Role does Evidence Play?

Rosenstein’s predicament—and there is no indication he understands it as one—brings us to an essential problem: What is the place of evidence in American public discourse? Of rational exchange?

The questions are germane far beyond the Russia-gate phenomenon, but it is there that answers are most urgent. What is implicit in the Rosenstein indictments has been evident everywhere in our public sphere for a year or more: Make a presumption supported by circumstantial evidence or none and build other presumptions upon it until a false narrative is constructed. The press has deployed this device for as long as I have been a practitioner: “Might” or “could” or “possibly” becomes “perhaps,” “probably” and “almost certainly,” and then moves on to unqualified fact in the course of, maybe, several weeks. Now this is how our most basic institutions—not least agencies of the Justice Department—routinely operate.

This is what I mean when I refer to ours as a republic in peril.

There is the argument that certain things have been uncovered over the past year, and these are enough to conclude that Russia plots to undermine our democracy. I refer to the small number of Facebook advertisements attributed to Russians, to strings of Twitter messages, to various phishing exercises that occur thousands of times a day the world over. To be clear, I am no more satisfied with the evidence of Russian involvement in these cases than I am with the evidence in any other aspect of the Russia-gate case. But for the sake of argument, let us say it is all true.

Does this line up with the Russophobic hysteria—not too strong a term—that envelops us? Does this explain the astonishing investments our public institutions, the press, and leading political parties have made in advancing this hysteria as they did a variant of in the 1950s?

As global politics go, some serious thought should be given to a reality we have created all by ourselves: It is now likely that America has built a new Cold War division with Russia that will prove permanent for the next 20 to 30 years. All this because of some Facebook ads and Twitter threads of unproven origin? Am I the only one who sees a weird and worrisome gap between what we are intent on believing—as against thinking or knowing—and the consequences of these beliefs?

There was an orthodoxy abroad many centuries ago called Fideism. In the simplest terms, it means the privileging of faith and belief over reason. It was the

enemy of individual conscience, among much else. Fideism has deep roots, but it was well around in the 16th century, when Montaigne and others had to navigate its many dangers. Closer to our time, William James landed a variant on American shores with an 1896 address called "The Will to Believe." Bertrand Russell countered this line of thinking a couple of decades later with "Free Thought and Official Propaganda," a lecture whose title I will let speak for itself. Twenty years ago, none other than Pope John Paul II warned of a resurgence of Fideism. It is still around, in short.

Do we suffer from it? A variant of it, I would say, if not precisely in name. There seems to be a givenness to it in the American character. I think we are staring into a 21st century rendition of it.

To doubt the hollowed-out myth of American innocence is a grave sin against the faith. It is now unpatriotic to question the Russia-gate narrative despite the absence of evidence to support it. Informal censorship of differing perspectives is perfectly routine. It is now considered treasonous to question the word of intelligence agencies and the officials who lead them despite long records of deceit. Do we forget that it was only 15 years ago that these same institutions and people deceived us into an invasion of Iraq the consequences of which still persist?

This was the question Craig Murray, the former British diplomat (who has vital information on the DNC mail theft but who has never been interviewed by American investigators) posed a few weeks ago. Eugene Robinson gave a good-enough reply in a *Washington Post* opinion piece shortly afterward: "God Bless the Deep State," the headline read.

How we got here deserves a work of social psychology, and I hope someone takes up the task. Understanding our path into our self-created crisis seems to me the first step to finding our way out of it.

Patrick Lawrence, a correspondent abroad for many years, chiefly for the International Herald Tribune, is a columnist, essayist, author, and lecturer. His most recent book is *Time No Longer: Americans After the American Century* (Yale). Follow him @thefloutist. His web site is www.patricklawrence.us. Support his work via www.patreon.com/thefloutist.

New Cracks in Russia-gate Foundation

The Russia-gate groupthink always rested on a fragile foundation of dubious analysis and biased guesswork, but now has been shaken by new forensic studies of the purported “hack,” as Patrick Lawrence reported at The Nation.

By Patrick Lawrence

It is now a year since the Democratic National Committee’s mail system was compromised – a year since events in the spring and early summer of 2016 were identified as remote hacks and, in short order, attributed to Russians acting in behalf of Donald Trump.

A great edifice has been erected during this time. President Trump, members of his family, and numerous people around him stand accused of various corruptions and extensive collusion with Russians. Half a dozen simultaneous investigations proceed into these matters. Last week news broke that Special Counsel Robert Mueller had convened a grand jury, which issued its first subpoenas on August 3. Allegations of treason are common; prominent political figures and many media cultivate a case for impeachment.

The President’s ability to conduct foreign policy, notably but not only with regard to Russia, is now crippled. Forced into a corner and having no choice, Trump just signed legislation imposing severe new sanctions on Russia and European companies working with it on pipeline projects vital to Russia’s energy sector. Striking this close to the core of another nation’s economy is customarily considered an act of war, we must not forget.

In retaliation, Moscow has announced that the United States must cut its embassy staff by roughly two-thirds. All sides agree that relations between the United States and Russia are now as fragile as they were during some of the Cold War’s worst moments. To suggest that military conflict between two nuclear powers inches ever closer can no longer be dismissed as hyperbole.

All this was set in motion when the DNC’s mail server was first violated in the spring of 2016 and by subsequent assertions that Russians were behind that “hack” and another such operation, also described as a Russian hack, on July 5. These are the foundation stones of the edifice just outlined.

The evolution of public discourse in the year since is worthy of scholarly study: Possibilities became allegations, and these became probabilities. Then the probabilities turned into certainties, and these evolved into what are now taken to be established truths. By my reckoning, it required a few days to a few

weeks to advance from each of these stages to the next. This was accomplished via the indefensibly corrupt manipulations of language repeated incessantly in our leading media.

Lost in a year that often appeared to veer into our peculiarly American kind of hysteria is the absence of any credible evidence of what happened last year and who was responsible for it. It is tiresome to note, but none has been made available. Instead, we are urged to accept the word of institutions and senior officials with long records of deception. These officials profess “high confidence” in their “assessment” as to what happened in the spring and summer of last year – this standing as their authoritative judgment.

Few have noticed since these evasive terms first appeared that an assessment is an opinion, nothing more, and to express high confidence is an upside-down way of admitting the absence of certain knowledge. This is how officials avoid putting their names on the assertions we are so strongly urged to accept – as the record shows many of them have done.

We come now to a moment of great gravity.

There has been a long effort to counter the official narrative we now call “Russiagate.” This effort has so far focused on the key events noted above, leaving numerous others still to be addressed. Until recently, researchers undertaking this work faced critical shortcomings, and these are to be explained. But they have achieved significant new momentum in the past several weeks, and what they have done now yields very consequential fruit.

Forensic investigators, intelligence analysts, system designers, program architects, and computer scientists of long experience and strongly credentialed are now producing evidence disproving the official version of key events last year. Their work is intricate and continues at a kinetic pace as we speak. But its certain results so far are two, simply stated, and freighted with implications:

- There was no hack of the Democratic National Committee’s system on July 5 last year – not by the Russians, not by anyone else. Hard science now demonstrates it was a leak – a download executed locally with a memory key or a similarly portable data-storage device. In short, it was an inside job by someone with access to the DNC’s system. This casts serious doubt on the initial “hack,” as alleged, that led to the very consequential publication of a large store of documents on WikiLeaks last summer.
- Forensic investigations of documents made public two weeks prior to the July 5 leak by the person or entity known as Guccifer 2.0 show that they were fraudulent: Before Guccifer posted them they were adulterated by

cutting and pasting them into a blank template that had Russian as its default language. Guccifer took responsibility on June 15 for an intrusion the DNC reported on June 14 and professed to be a WikiLeaks source – claims essential to the official narrative implicating Russia in what was soon cast as an extensive hacking operation. To put the point simply, forensic science now devastates this narrative.

New Analyses

This article is based on an examination of the documents these forensic experts and intelligence analysts have produced, notably the key papers written over the past several weeks, as well as detailed interviews with many of those conducting investigations and now drawing conclusions from them. Before proceeding into this material, several points bear noting.

One, there are many other allegations implicating Russians in the 2016 political process. The work I will now report upon does not purport to prove or disprove any of them. Who delivered documents to WikiLeaks? Who was responsible for the “phishing” operation penetrating John Podesta’s e-mail in March 2016?

We do not know the answers to such questions. It is entirely possible, indeed, that the answers we deserve and must demand could turn out to be multiple: One thing happened in one case, another thing in another. The new work done on the mid-June and July 5 events bears upon all else in only one respect. We are now on notice: Given that we now stand face to face with very considerable cases of duplicity, it is imperative that all official accounts of these many events be subject to rigorously skeptical questioning. Do we even know that John Podesta’s e-mail was in fact “phished”? What evidence of this has been produced? Such rock-bottom questions as these must now be posed in all other cases.

Two, houses built on sand and made of cards are bound to collapse, and there can be no surprise that the one resting atop the “hack theory,” as we can call the prevailing wisdom on the DNC events, appears to be in the process of doing so.

Neither is there anything far-fetched in a reversal of the truth of this magnitude. American history is replete with similar cases. The Spanish sank the *Maine* in Havana harbor in February 1898. Iran’s Mossadegh was a Communist. Guatemala’s Árbenz represented a Communist threat to the United States. Vietnam’s Ho Chi Minh was a Soviet puppet. The Sandinistas were Communists. The truth of the *Maine*, a war and a revolution in between, took a century to find the light of day, whereupon the official story disintegrated. We can do better now. It is an odd sensation to live through one of these episodes, especially one as big as Russiagate. But its place atop a long line of precedents can no longer be disputed.

Three, regardless of what one may think about the investigations and conclusions I will now outline – and, as noted, these investigations continue – there is a bottom line attaching to them. We can even call it a red line. Under no circumstance can it be acceptable that the relevant authorities – the National Security Agency, the Justice Department (via the Federal Bureau of Investigation), and the Central Intelligence Agency – leave these new findings without reply. Not credibly, in any case. Forensic investigators, prominent among them people with decades' experience at high levels in these very institutions, have put a body of evidence on a table previously left empty. Silence now, should it ensue, cannot be written down as an admission of duplicity, but it will come very close to one.

It requires no elaboration to apply the above point to the corporate media, which have been flaccidly satisfied with official explanations of the DNC matter from the start.

Qualified experts working independently of one another began to examine the DNC case immediately after the July 2016 events. Prominent among these is a group comprising former intelligence officers, almost all of whom previously occupied senior positions. Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS), founded in 2003, now has 30 members, including a few associates with backgrounds in national-security fields other than intelligence. The chief researchers active on the DNC case are four: William Binney, formerly the NSA's technical director for world geopolitical and military analysis and designer of many agency programs now in use; Kirk Wiebe, formerly a senior analyst at the NSA's SIGINT Automation Research Center; Edward Loomis, formerly technical director in the NSA's Office of Signal Processing; and Ray McGovern, an intelligence analyst for nearly three decades and formerly chief of the CIA's Soviet Foreign Policy Branch. Most of these men have decades of experience in matters concerning Russian intelligence and the related technologies. This article reflects numerous interviews with all of them conducted in person, via Skype, or by telephone.

The customary VIPS format is an open letter, typically addressed to the President. The group has written three such letters on the DNC incident, all of which were first published by Robert Parry at www.consortiumnews.com. [Here is](#) the latest, dated July 24; it blueprints the forensic work this article explores in detail. They have all argued that the hack theory is wrong and that a locally executed leak is the far more likely explanation.

In a letter to Barack Obama dated January 17, three days before he left office, the group explained that the NSA's known programs are fully capable of capturing all electronic transfers of data. "We strongly suggest that you ask NSA for any

evidence it may have indicating that the results of Russian hacking were given to WikiLeaks,” the letter said. “If NSA cannot produce such evidence – and quickly – this would probably mean it does not have any.”

The day after Parry published this letter, Obama gave his last press conference as President, at which he delivered one of the great gems among the official statements on the DNC e-mail question. “The conclusions of the intelligence community with respect to the Russian hacking,” the legacy-minded Obama said, “were not conclusive.” There is little to suggest the VIPS letter prompted this remark, but it is typical of the linguistic tap-dancing many officials connected to the case have indulged so as to avoid putting their names on the hack theory and all that derives from it.

Cyber-Evidence

Until recently there was a serious hindrance to the VIPS’s work, and I have just suggested it. The group lacked access to positive data. It had no lump of cyber-material to place on its lab table and analyze, because no official agency had provided any.

Donald Rumsfeld famously argued with regard to the WMD question in Iraq, “The absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.” In essence, Binney and others at VIPS say this logic turns upside down in the DNC case: Based on the knowledge of former officials such as Binney, the group knew that (1) if there was a hack and (2) if Russia was responsible for it, the NSA would have to have evidence of both. Binney and others surmised that the agency and associated institutions were hiding the absence of evidence behind the claim that they had to maintain secrecy to protect NSA programs.

“Everything that they say must remain classified is already well-known,” Binney said in an interview. “They’re playing the Wizard of Oz game.”

New findings indicate this is perfectly true, but until recently the VIPS experts could produce only “negative evidence,” as they put it: The absence of evidence supporting the hack theory demonstrates that it cannot be so. That is all VIPS had. They could allege and assert, but they could not conclude: They were stuck demanding evidence they did not have – if only to prove there was none.

Research into the DNC case took a fateful turn in early July, when forensic investigators who had been working independently began to share findings and form loose collaborations wherein each could build on the work of others. In this a small, new website called www.disobedientmedia.com proved an important catalyst. Two independent researchers selected it, Snowden-like, as the medium

through which to disclose their findings.

One of these is known as Forensicator and the other as Adam Carter. On July 9, Adam Carter sent Elizabeth Vos, a co-founder of Disobedient Media, a paper by the Forensicator that split the DNC case open like a coconut.

By this time Binney and the other technical-side people at VIPS had begun working with a man named Skip Folden. Folden was an IT executive at IBM for 33 years, serving 25 years as the IT program manager in the United States. He has also consulted for Pentagon officials, the FBI, and the Justice Department. Folden is effectively the VIPS group's liaison to Forensicator, Adam Carter, and other investigators, but neither Folden nor anyone else knows the identity of either Forensicator or Adam Carter. This bears brief explanation.

The Forensicator's July 9 document indicates he lives in the Pacific Time Zone, which puts him on the West Coast. His notes describing his investigative procedures support this. But little else is known of him. Adam Carter, in turn, is located in England, but the name is a coy pseudonym: It derives from a character in a BBC espionage series called *Spooks*. It is protocol in this community, Elizabeth Vos told me in a telephone conversation this week, to respect this degree of anonymity.

Kirk Wiebe, the former SIGINT analyst at the NSA, thinks Forensicator could be "someone very good with the FBI," but there is no certainty. Unanimously, however, all the analysts and forensics investigators interviewed for this column say Forensicator's advanced expertise, evident in the work he has done, is unassailable. They hold a similarly high opinion of Adam Carter's work.

Forensicator is working with the documents published by Guccifer 2.0, focusing for now on the July 5 intrusion into the DNC server. The contents of Guccifer's files are known – they were published last September – and are not Forensicator's concern. His work is with the metadata on those files. These data did not come to him via any clandestine means. Forensicator simply has access to them that others did not have. It is this access that prompts Kirk Wiebe and others to suggest that Forensicator may be someone with exceptional talent and training inside an agency such as the FBI.

"Forensicator unlocked and then analyzed what had been the locked files Guccifer supposedly took from the DNC server," Skip Folden explained in an interview. "To do this he would have to have 'access privilege,' meaning a key."

What has Forensicator proven since he turned his key? How? What has work done atop Forensicator's findings proven? How?

The Transfer Rate

Forensicator's first decisive findings, made public in the paper dated July 9, concerned the volume of the supposedly hacked material and what is called the transfer rate – the time a remote hack would require. The metadata established several facts in this regard with granular precision: On the evening of July 5, 2016, 1,976 megabytes of data were downloaded from the DNC's server. The operation took 87 seconds. This yields a transfer rate of 22.7 megabytes per second.

These statistics are matters of record and essential to disproving the hack theory. No Internet service provider, such as a hacker would have had to use in mid-2016, was capable of downloading data at this speed. Compounding this contradiction, Guccifer claimed to have run his hack from Romania, which, for numerous reasons technically called delivery overheads, would slow down the speed of a hack even further from maximum achievable speeds.

What is the maximum achievable speed? Forensicator recently ran a test download of a comparable data volume (and using a server speed not available in 2016) 40 miles from his computer via a server 20 miles away and came up with a speed of 11.8 megabytes per second – half what the DNC operation would need were it a hack. Other investigators have built on this finding. Folden and Edward Loomis say a survey published August 3, 2016, by www.speedtest.net/reports is highly reliable and use it as their thumbnail index. It indicated that the highest average ISP speeds of first-half 2016 were achieved by Xfinity and Cox Communications. These speeds averaged 15.6 megabytes per second and 14.7 megabytes per second, respectively. Peak speeds at higher rates were recorded intermittently but still did not reach the required 22.7 megabytes per second.

“A speed of 22.7 megabytes is simply unobtainable, especially if we are talking about a transoceanic data transfer,” Folden said. “Based on the data we now have, what we've been calling a hack is impossible.” Last week Forensicator reported on a speed test he conducted more recently. It tightens the case considerably. “Transfer rates of 23 MB/s (Mega Bytes per second) are not just highly unlikely, but effectively impossible to accomplish when communicating over the Internet at any significant distance,” he wrote. “Further, local copy speeds are measured, demonstrating that 23 MB/s is a typical transfer rate when using a USB-2 flash device (thumb drive).”

Time stamps in the metadata provide further evidence of what happened on July 5. The stamps recording the download indicate that it occurred in the Eastern Daylight Time Zone at approximately 6:45 pm. This confirms that the person entering the DNC system was working somewhere on the East Coast of the United States.

In theory the operation could have been conducted from Bangor or Miami or

anywhere in between – but not Russia, Romania, or anywhere else outside the EDT zone. Combined with Forensicator’s findings on the transfer rate, the time stamps constitute more evidence that the download was conducted locally, since delivery overheads – conversion of data into packets, addressing, sequencing times, error checks, and the like – degrade all data transfers conducted via the Internet, more or less according to the distance involved.

Russian ‘Fingerprints’

In addition, there is the adulteration of the documents Guccifer 2.0 posted on June 15, when he made his first appearance. This came to light when researchers penetrated what Folden calls Guccifer’s top layer of metadata and analyzed what was in the layers beneath. They found that the first five files Guccifer made public had each been run, via ordinary cut-and-paste, through a single template that effectively immersed them in what could plausibly be cast as Russian fingerprints. They were not: The Russian markings were artificially inserted prior to posting. “It’s clear,” another forensics investigator self-identified as HET, wrote in a report on this question, “that metadata was deliberately altered and documents were deliberately pasted into a Russianified [W]ord document with Russian language settings and style headings.”

To be noted in this connection: The list of the CIA’s cyber-tools WikiLeaks began to release in March and labeled Vault 7 includes one called Marble that is capable of obfuscating the origin of documents in false-flag operations and leaving markings that point to whatever the CIA wants to point to. (The tool can also “de-obfuscate” what it has obfuscated.) It is not known whether this tool was deployed in the Guccifer case, but it is there for such a use.

It is not yet clear whether documents now shown to have been leaked locally on July 5 were tainted to suggest Russian hacking in the same way the June 15 Guccifer release was. This is among several outstanding questions awaiting answers, and the forensic scientists active on the DNC case are now investigating it.

In a note Adam Carter sent to Folden and McGovern last week and copied to me, he reconfirmed the corruption of the June 15 documents, while indicating that his initial work on the July 5 documents – of which much more is to be done – had not yet turned up evidence of doctoring.

In the meantime, VIPS has assembled a chronology that imposes a persuasive logic on the complex succession of events just reviewed. It is this:

- On June 12 last year, Julian Assange announced that WikiLeaks had and would publish documents pertinent to Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign.

- On June 14, CrowdStrike, a cyber-security firm hired by the DNC, announced, without providing evidence, that it had found malware on DNC servers and had evidence that Russians were responsible for planting it.
- On June 15, Guccifer 2.0 first appeared, took responsibility for the “hack” reported on June 14 and claimed to be a WikiLeaks source. It then posted the adulterated documents just described.
- On July 5, Guccifer again claimed he had remotely hacked DNC servers, and the operation was instantly described as another intrusion attributable to Russia. Virtually no media questioned this account.

It does not require too much thought to read into this sequence. With his June 12 announcement, Assange effectively put the DNC on notice that it had a little time, probably not much, to act preemptively against the imminent publication of damaging documents. Did the DNC quickly conjure Guccifer from thin air to create a cyber-saboteur whose fingers point to Russia? There is no evidence of this one way or the other, but emphatically it is legitimate to pose the question in the context of the VIPS chronology. WikiLeaks began publishing on July 22. By that time, the case alleging Russian interference in the 2016 elections process was taking firm root. In short order Assange would be written down as a “Russian agent.”

By any balanced reckoning, the official case purporting to assign a systematic hacking effort to Russia, the events of mid-June and July 5 last year being the foundation of this case, is shabby to the point taxpayers should ask for their money back. The Intelligence Community Assessment, the supposedly definitive report featuring the “high confidence” dodge, was greeted as farcically flimsy when issued January 6.

Ray McGovern calls it a disgrace to the intelligence profession. It is spotlessly free of evidence, front to back, pertaining to any events in which Russia is implicated.

‘Hand-Picked’ Analysts

James Clapper, the former director of national intelligence, admitted in May that “hand-picked” analysts from three agencies (not the 17 previously reported) drafted the ICA.

There is a way to understand “hand-picked” that is less obvious than meets the eye: The report was sequestered from rigorous agency-wide reviews. This is the way these people have spoken to us for the past year.

Behind the ICA lie other indefensible realities. The FBI has never examined the DNC’s computer servers – an omission that is beyond preposterous. It has instead

relied on the reports produced by CrowdStrike, a firm that drips with conflicting interests well beyond the fact that it is in the DNC's employ. Dmitri Alperovitch, its co-founder and chief technology officer, is on the record as vigorously anti-Russian. He is a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, which suffers the same prejudice. Problems such as this are many.

"We continue to stand by our report," CrowdStrike said, upon seeing the VIPS blueprint of the investigation. CrowdStrike argues that by July 5 all malware had been removed from the DNC's computers. But the presence or absence of malware by that time is entirely immaterial, because the event of July 5 is proven to have been a leak and not a hack. Given that malware has nothing to do with leaks, CrowdStrike's logic appears to be circular.

In effect, the new forensic evidence considered here lands in a vacuum. We now enter a period when an official reply should be forthcoming. What the forensic people are now producing constitutes evidence, however one may view it, and it is the first scientifically derived evidence we have into any of the events in which Russia has been implicated. The investigators deserve a response, the betrayed professionals who formed VIPS as the WMD scandal unfolded in 2003 deserve it, and so do the rest of us. The cost of duplicity has rarely been so high.

I concluded each of the interviews conducted for this column by asking for a degree of confidence in the new findings. These are careful, exacting people as a matter of professional training and standards, and I got careful, exacting replies.

All those interviewed came in between 90 percent and 100 percent certain that the forensics prove out. I have already quoted Skip Folden's answer: impossible based on the data.

"The laws of physics don't lie," Ray McGovern volunteered at one point.

"It's QED, theorem demonstrated," William Binney said in response to my question. "There's no evidence out there to get me to change my mind." When I asked Edward Loomis, a 90 percent man, about the 10 percent he held out, he replied, "I've looked at the work and it shows there was no Russian hack. But I didn't do the work. That's the 10 percent. I'm a scientist."

Editor's note: In its chronology, VIPS mistakenly gave the wrong date for CrowdStrike's announcement of its claim to have found malware on DNC servers. It said June 15, when it should have said June 14. VIPS has acknowledged the error, and we have made the correction.

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most recent books are *Somebody Else's Century: East and West in a Post-Western World* and *Time No Longer: America After the American Century*. His website is patricklawrence.us. [This article was originally published at The Nation at <https://www.thenation.com/article/a-new-report-raises-big-questions-about-last-years-dnc-hack/>]
