

# In Case You Missed...

Some of our special stories in June dealt with the seemingly endless Russia-gate frenzy, President Trump's stumbling debut on the global stage and Oliver Stone's insightful interviews with Vladimir Putin.

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["Hillary Clinton's Deceptive Blame-Shifting"](#) by Robert Parry, Jun. 1, 2017

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["NYT Finally Retracts Russia-gate Canard"](#) by Robert Parry, Jun. 29, 2017

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# Netanyahu Pushes Trump Toward Wider Wars

**Exclusive:** Russia-gate is empowering Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu to strong-arm President Trump into escalating the Syrian war by abandoning a recent cease-fire and challenging Iran and Russia, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

A weakened, even desperate President Donald Trump must decide whether to stand up to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu or to repudiate the Syrian partial ceasefire, which Trump hammered out with Russian President Vladimir Putin on July 7.

Whether intentionally or not, this crossroads is where the months of Russia-gate hysteria have led the United States, making Trump even more vulnerable to Israeli and neoconservative pressure and making any cooperation with Russia more dangerous for him politically.

After meeting with French President Emmanuel Macron in Paris on Sunday, Netanyahu declared that Israel was totally opposed to the Trump-Putin cease-fire deal in southern Syria because it perpetuates Iranian presence in Syria in support of the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad.

Netanyahu's position increases pressure on Trump to escalate U.S. military involvement in Syria and possibly move toward war against Iran and even Russia. The American neocons, who generally move in sync with Netanyahu's wishes, already have as their list of current goals "regime changes" in Damascus, Tehran and Moscow – regardless of the dangers to the Middle East and indeed the world.

At the G-20 summit on July 7, Trump met for several hours with Putin coming away with an agreed-upon cease-fire for southwestern Syria, an accord that has proven more successful than previous efforts to reduce the violence that has torn the country apart since 2011.

But that limited peace could mean failure for the proxy war that Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and other regional players helped launch six years ago with the goal of removing Assad from power and shattering the so-called "Shiite crescent" from Tehran through Damascus to Beirut. Instead, that "crescent" appears more firmly in place, with Assad's military bolstered by Shiite militia forces from Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah.

In other words, the "regime change" gambit against Assad's government would have backfired, with Iranian and Hezbollah forces arrayed along Israel's border with Syria. And instead of accepting that reversal and seeking some modus vivendi

with Iran, Netanyahu and his Sunni-Arab allies (most notably the Saudi monarchy) have decided to go in the other direction (a wider war) and to bring President Trump along with them.

### **Neophyte Trump**

Trump – a relative neophyte in global intrigue – has been slow to comprehend how his outreach to Netanyahu and Saudi King Salman runs counter to his collaboration with Putin on efforts to defeat the Sunni jihadist groups, including Al Qaeda and Islamic State, which have served as the point of the spear in the war to overthrow Assad.

Al Qaeda and Islamic State have received direct and indirect support from Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Turkey, Israel and even the Obama administration, albeit sometimes unwittingly. To block Assad's overthrow – and the likely victory by these terror groups – Russia, Iran and Hezbollah came to Assad's defense, helping to turn the tide of the war since 2015.

In his nearly half year in office, Trump has maintained an open hostility toward Iran – sharing a position held by Washington's neocons as well as Netanyahu and Salman – but the U.S. President also has advocated cooperation with Russia to crush Islamic State and Al Qaeda inside Syria.

Collaboration with Russia – and indirectly with Iran and the Syrian military – makes sense for most U.S. interests, i.e., stabilizing Syria, reversing the refugee flow that has destabilized Europe, and denying Al Qaeda and Islamic State a base for launching terror strikes against Western targets.

But the same collaboration would be a bitter defeat for Netanyahu and Salman who have invested heavily in this and other “regime change” projects that require major U.S. investments in terms of diplomacy, money and military manpower.

So, in last weekend's trip to Paris, Netanyahu chose to raise the stakes on Trump at a time when Democrats and the U.S. mainstream media are pounding him daily with the Russia-gate scandal, even raising the possibility that his son, Donald Trump Jr., might be prosecuted and imprisoned for having a meeting in June 2016 with a Russian lawyer.

If Trump wants the Russia-gate pain to lessen, he will be tempted to give Netanyahu what he wants and count on the savvy Israeli leader to intervene with the influential neocons of Official Washington to pull back on the scandal-mongering.

The problem, however, would be that Netanyahu really wants the U.S. military to complete the “regime change” project in Syria – much as it did in Iraq and Libya

– meaning more American dead, more American treasure expended and a likely wider war, extending to Iran and possibly nuclear-armed Russia.

That might fulfill the neocon current menu of “regime change” schemes but it runs the risk of unleashing a nuclear conflagration on the world. In that way, liberals and even some progressives – who have embraced Russia-gate as a way to remove the hated Donald Trump from office – may end up contributing to the end of human civilization as well.

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

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## How Russia-gate Met the Magnitsky Myth

**Exclusive:** A documentary debunking the Magnitsky myth, which was an opening salvo in the New Cold War, was largely blocked from viewing in the West but has now become a factor in Russia-gate, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Near the center of the current furor over Donald Trump Jr.’s meeting with a Russian lawyer in June 2016 is a documentary that almost no one in the West has been allowed to see, a film that flips the script on the story of the late Sergei Magnitsky and his employer, hedge-fund operator William Browder.

The Russian lawyer, Natalie Veselnitskaya, who met with Trump Jr. and other advisers to Donald Trump Sr.’s campaign, represented a company that had run afoul of a U.S. investigation into money-laundering allegedly connected to the Magnitsky case and his death in a Russian prison in 2009. His death sparked a campaign spearheaded by Browder, who used his wealth and clout to lobby the U.S. Congress in 2012 to enact the Magnitsky Act to punish alleged human rights abusers in Russia. The law became what might be called the first shot in the New Cold War.

According to Browder’s narrative, companies ostensibly under his control had been hijacked by corrupt Russian officials in furtherance of a \$230 million tax-fraud scheme; he then dispatched his “lawyer” Magnitsky to investigate and – after supposedly uncovering evidence of the fraud – Magnitsky blew the whistle only to be arrested by the same corrupt officials who then had him locked up in

prison where he died of heart failure from physical abuse.

Despite Russian denials – and the “dog ate my homework” quality of Browder’s self-serving narrative – the dramatic tale became a cause celebre in the West. The story eventually attracted the attention of Russian filmmaker Andrei Nekrasov, a known critic of President Vladimir Putin. Nekrasov decided to produce a docu-drama that would present Browder’s narrative to a wider public. Nekrasov even said he hoped that he might recruit Browder as the narrator of the tale.

However, the project took an unexpected turn when Nekrasov’s research kept turning up contradictions to Browder’s storyline, which began to look more and more like a corporate cover story. Nekrasov discovered that a woman working in Browder’s company was the actual whistleblower and that Magnitsky – rather than a crusading lawyer – was an accountant who was implicated in the scheme.

So, the planned docudrama suddenly was transformed into a documentary with a dramatic reversal as Nekrasov struggles with what he knows will be a dangerous decision to confront Browder with what appear to be deceptions. In the film, you see Browder go from a friendly collaborator into an angry adversary who tries to bully Nekrasov into backing down.

### **Blocked Premiere**

Ultimately, Nekrasov completes his extraordinary film – entitled “The Magnitsky Act: Behind the Scenes” – and it was set for a premiere at the European Parliament in Brussels in April 2016. However, at the last moment – faced with Browder’s legal threats – the parliamentarians pulled the plug. Nekrasov encountered similar resistance in the United States, a situation that, in part, brought Natalie Veselnitskaya into this controversy.

As a lawyer defending Prevezon, a real-estate company registered in Cyprus, on a money-laundering charge, she was dealing with U.S. prosecutors in New York City and, in that role, became an advocate for lifting the U.S. sanctions, The Washington Post reported.

That was when she turned to promoter Rob Goldstone to set up a meeting at Trump Tower with Donald Trump Jr. To secure the sit-down on June 9, 2016, Goldstone dangled the prospect that Veselnitskaya had some derogatory financial information from the Russian government about Russians supporting the Democratic National Committee. Trump Jr. jumped at the possibility and brought senior Trump campaign advisers, Paul Manafort and Jared Kushner, along.

By all accounts, Veselnitskaya had little or nothing to offer about the DNC and turned the conversation instead to the Magnitsky Act and Putin’s retaliatory

measure to the sanctions, canceling a program in which American parents adopted Russian children. One source told me that Veselnitskaya also wanted to enhance her stature in Russia with the boast that she had taken a meeting at Trump Tower with Trump's son.

But another goal of Veselnitskaya's U.S. trip was to participate in an effort to give Americans a chance to see Nekrasov's blacklisted documentary. She traveled to Washington in the days after her Trump Tower meeting and attended a House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing, according to The Washington Post.

There were hopes to show the documentary to members of Congress but the offer was rebuffed. Instead a room was rented at the Newseum near Capitol Hill. Browder's lawyers, who had successfully intimidated the European Parliament, also tried to strong arm the Newseum, but its officials responded that they were only renting out a room and that they had allowed other controversial presentations in the past.

Their stand wasn't exactly a profile in courage. "We're not going to allow them not to show the film," said Scott Williams, the chief operating officer of the Newseum. "We often have people renting for events that other people would love not to have happen."

In an article about the controversy in June 2016, The New York Times added that "A screening at the Newseum is especially controversial because it could attract lawmakers or their aides." Heaven forbid!

### **One-Time Showing**

So, Nekrasov's documentary got a one-time showing with Veselnitskaya reportedly in attendance and with a follow-up discussion moderated by journalist Seymour Hersh. However, except for that audience, the public of the United States and Europe has been essentially shielded from the documentary's discoveries, all the better for the Magnitsky myth to retain its power as a seminal propaganda moment of the New Cold War.

After the Newseum presentation, a Washington Post editorial branded Nekrasov's documentary Russian "agit-prop" and sought to discredit Nekrasov without addressing his many documented examples of Browder's misrepresenting both big and small facts in the case. Instead, the Post accused Nekrasov of using "facts highly selectively" and insinuated that he was merely a pawn in the Kremlin's "campaign to discredit Mr. Browder and the Magnitsky Act."

The Post also misrepresented the structure of the film by noting that it mixed fictional scenes with real-life interviews and action, a point that was technically true but willfully misleading because the fictional scenes were from

Nekrasov's original idea for a docu-drama that he shows as part of explaining his evolution from a believer in Browder's self-exculpatory story to a skeptic. But the Post's deception is something that almost no American would realize because almost no one got to see the film.

The Post concluded smugly: "The film won't grab a wide audience, but it offers yet another example of the Kremlin's increasingly sophisticated efforts to spread its illiberal values and mind-set abroad. In the European Parliament and on French and German television networks, showings were put off recently after questions were raised about the accuracy of the film, including by Magnitsky's family.

"We don't worry that Mr. Nekrasov's film was screened here, in an open society. But it is important that such slick spin be fully exposed for its twisted story and sly deceptions."

The Post's gleeful editorial had the feel of something you might read in a totalitarian society where the public only hears about dissent when the Official Organs of the State denounce some almost unknown person for saying something that almost no one heard.

### **New Paradigm**

The Post's satisfaction that Nekrasov's documentary would not draw a large audience represents what is becoming a new paradigm in U.S. mainstream journalism, the idea that it is the media's duty to protect the American people from seeing divergent narratives on sensitive geopolitical issues.

Over the past year, we have seen a growing hysteria about "Russian propaganda" and "fake news" with The New York Times and other major news outlets eagerly awaiting algorithms that can be unleashed on the Internet to eradicate information that groups like Google's First Draft Coalition deem "false."

First Draft consists of the Times, the Post, other mainstream outlets, and establishment-approved online news sites, such as Bellingcat with links to the pro-NATO think tank, Atlantic Council. First Draft's job will be to serve as a kind of Ministry of Truth and thus shield the public from information that is deemed propaganda or untrue.

In the meantime, there is the ad hoc approach that was applied to Nekrasov's documentary. Having missed the Newseum showing, I was only able to view the film because I was given a special password to an online version.

From searches that I did on Wednesday, Nekrasov's film was not available on Amazon although a pro-Magnitsky documentary was. I did find a streaming service



that appeared to have the film available.

But the Post's editors were right in their expectation that "The film won't grab a wide audience." Instead, it has become a good example of how political and legal pressure can effectively black out what we used to call "the other side of the story." The film now, however, has unexpectedly become a factor in the larger drama of Russia-gate and the drive to remove Donald Trump Sr. from the White House.

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## Forgetting the 'Dirty Dossier' on Trump

**Exclusive:** The new Russia-gate furor is over Donald Trump Jr. meeting a Russian who claimed to have dirt on Hillary Clinton, but the Clinton team's Russian cash-for-trash search against Trump Sr. is all but forgotten, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Yes, I realize that the editors of The New York Times long ago cast aside any journalistic professionalism to become charter members of the #Resistance against Donald Trump. But the latest frenzy over a meeting between Donald Trump Jr. and a Russian lawyer who was dangling the possibility of information about the Democrats receiving money from Russians represents one of the more remarkable moments of the entire Russia-gate hysteria.

Essentially, Trump's oldest son is being accused of taking a meeting with a foreign national who claimed to have knowledge of potentially illegal activities by Trump's Democratic rivals, although the promised information apparently turned out to be a dud.

Yet, on Monday, the Times led its newspaper with a story about this meeting – and commentators on MSNBC and elsewhere are labeling Trump Jr. a criminal if not a traitor for hearing out this lawyer.

Yet, no one seems to remember that Hillary Clinton supporters paid large sums of money, reportedly about \$1 million, to have ex-British spy Christopher Steele

use his Russian connections to dig up dirt on Trump inside Russia, resulting in a salacious dossier that Clinton backers eagerly hawked to the news media.

Also, the two events – Trump Jr.’s meeting with the Russian lawyer and the Clinton camp’s commissioning of Steele’s Russia dossier – both occurred in June 2016, so you might have thought it would be a journalistic imperative to incorporate a reference or two to the dossier.

But the closest the Times came to that was noting: “Political campaigns collect opposition research from many quarters but rarely from sources linked to foreign governments.” That would have been an opportune point to slide in a paragraph about the Steele dossier, but nothing.

The Times doesn’t seem to have much historical memory either. There actually have been a number of cases in which American presidential campaigns have ventured overseas to seek out “opposition research” about rivals.

For instance, in 1992, President George H.W. Bush took a personal role in trying to obtain derogatory information about Bill Clinton’s 1970 student trip to Eastern Europe, including to Moscow.

That effort started out by having senior State Department officials rifle through the passport files of Clinton and his mother, looking for a purported letter in which some Republican operatives thought Clinton might have renounced his U.S. citizenship.

Bush and his team were called out on that caper, which became known as “Passport-gate.” During the Oct. 11, 1992 debate, Clinton even compared Bush’s tactics to Joe McCarthy’s during the 1950s Red Scare. But the Bush campaign didn’t let the issue entirely go.

### **Czech-ing on Bill**

In the days after the debate, phone records revealed a flurry of calls from Bush’s campaign headquarters to Czechoslovakia, another stop on Clinton’s student tour. There were also fax transmissions on Oct. 14 and 15, 1992, according to a later official investigation.

On Oct. 16, what appears to have been a return call was placed from the U.S. Embassy in Prague to the office of ad man Sig Rogich, who was handling anti-Clinton themes for the Bush campaign.

Following those exchanges, stories about Clinton’s Prague trip began popping up in Czech newspapers. On Oct. 24, 1992, three Czech newspapers ran similar stories about Clinton’s Czech hosts. The *Cesky Denik* story had an especially

nasty headline: "Bill Was With Communists."

The Czech articles soon blew back to the United States. Reuters distributed a summary, and *The Washington Times*, over three consecutive days, ran articles about Clinton's Czech trip. The Clinton campaign responded that Clinton had entered Czechoslovakia under normal procedures for a student and stayed with the family of an Oxford friend.

Despite those last-minute efforts to revive Clinton's loyalty issue, the Democrat held on to defeat Bush in a three-way race (with Ross Perot).

You also could go back to Republican contacts with South Vietnamese officials to sabotage President Lyndon Johnson's Vietnam peace talks in 1968 and similar meetings with Iranian emissaries to frustrate President Jimmy Carter's Iran hostage negotiations in 1980, including a curious meeting involving senior Ronald Reagan campaign aides at the L'Enfant Plaza Hotel in Washington, D.C.

But the Steele dossier is a more immediate and direct example of close Hillary Clinton supporters going outside the United States for dirt on Trump and collaborating with foreign nationals to dig it up – allegedly from Kremlin insiders. Although it is still not clear exactly who footed the bill for the Steele dossier and how much money was spread around to the Russian contacts, it is clear that Clinton supporters paid for the opposition research and then flacked the material to American journalists.

### **The Mystery Dossier**

As I wrote on March 29, "An irony of the escalating hysteria about the Trump camp's contacts with Russians is that one presidential campaign in 2016 did exploit political dirt that supposedly came from the Kremlin and other Russian sources. Friends of that political campaign paid for this anonymous hearsay material, shared it with American journalists and urged them to publish it to gain an electoral advantage. But this campaign was not Donald Trump's; it was Hillary Clinton's.

"And, awareness of this activity doesn't require you to spin conspiracy theories about what may or may not have been said during some seemingly innocuous conversation. In this case, you have open admissions about how these Russian/Kremlin claims were used.

"Indeed, you have the words of Rep. Adam Schiff, the ranking Democratic member of the House Intelligence Committee, in his opening statement at [a] public hearing on so-called 'Russia-gate.' Schiff's seamless 15-minute narrative of the Trump campaign's alleged collaboration with Russia followed the script prepared by former British intelligence officer Christopher Steele who was hired as an

opposition researcher last June [2016] to dig up derogatory information on Donald Trump.

“Steele, who had worked for Britain’s MI-6 in Russia, said he tapped into ex-colleagues and unnamed sources inside Russia, including leadership figures in the Kremlin, to piece together a series of sensational reports that became the basis of the current congressional and FBI investigations into Trump’s alleged ties to Moscow.

“Since he was not able to go to Russia himself, Steele based his reports mostly on multiple hearsay from anonymous Russians who claim to have heard some information from their government contacts before passing it on to Steele’s associates who then gave it to Steele who compiled this mix of rumors and alleged inside dope into ‘raw’ intelligence reports.

“Besides the anonymous sourcing and the sources’ financial incentives to dig up dirt, Steele’s reports had numerous other problems, including the inability of a variety of investigators to confirm key elements, such as the salacious claim that several years ago Russian intelligence operatives secretly videotaped Trump having prostitutes urinate on him while he lay in the same bed in Moscow’s Ritz-Carlton used by President Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama.

“That tantalizing tidbit was included in Steele’s opening report to his new clients, dated June 20, 2016. Apparently, it proved irresistible in whetting the appetite of Clinton’s mysterious benefactors who were financing Steele’s dirt digging and who have kept their identities (and the amounts paid) hidden. Also in that first report were the basic outlines of what has become the scandal that is now threatening the survival of Trump’s embattled presidency.”

### **The Trump Jr. Meeting**

So, compare that with what we know about the June 9, 2016 meeting at Trump Tower in New York City, which Donald J. Trump Jr. says he agreed to because someone was claiming knowledge about Russian payments helping Hillary Clinton.

Trump Jr. said Russian lawyer Natalie Veselnitskaya “stated that she had information that individuals connected to Russia were funding the Democratic National Committee and supporting Mrs. Clinton. Her statements were vague, ambiguous and made no sense. No details or supporting information was provided or even offered. It quickly became clear that she had no meaningful information.”

According to Trump Jr.’s account, Veselnitskaya then turned the conversation to President Vladimir Putin’s cancellation of an adoption program which had sent Russian children to American parents, a move he took in reaction to the so-

called Magnitsky Act, a 2012 punitive law passed by the U.S. Congress in retaliation for the 2009 death of Sergei Magnitsky in a Russian jail.

The death became a Western cause célèbre with Magnitsky, the accountant for hedge-fund executive William Browder, hailed as a martyr in the cause of whistleblowing against a profoundly corrupt Russian government. After Magnitsky's death from a heart attack, Browder claimed that his "lawyer" Magnitsky had been tortured and murdered to cover up official complicity in a \$230 million tax-fraud scheme involving companies ostensibly under Browder's control.

Because of Browder's wealth and political influence, he succeeded in getting the European Parliament and the U.S. Congress to buy into his narrative and move to punish the presumed villains in the tax fraud and in Magnitsky's death. The U.S.-enacted Magnitsky Act in 2012 was an opening salvo in what has become a new Cold War between Washington and Moscow.

### **Only One Side Heard**

The Magnitsky narrative has now become so engrained in Western geopolitical mythology that the storyline apparently can no longer be questioned or challenged. The New York Times reports Browder's narrative as flat fact, and The Washington Post took pleasure in denouncing a 2016 documentary that turned Browder's version of events on its head.

The documentary, entitled "The Magnitsky Act. Behind the Scenes," was essentially blocked for distribution in the West, with the European Parliament pulling the plug on its planned premiere in Brussels shortly before it was scheduled for showing.

When the documentary got a single showing at the Newseum in Washington, a Washington Post editorial branded the documentary Russian "agit-prop."

The Post sought to discredit the filmmaker, Andrei Nekrasov, without addressing his avalanche of documented examples of Browder's misrepresenting both big and small facts in the case. Instead, the Post accused Nekrasov of using "facts highly selectively" and insinuated that he was merely a pawn in the Kremlin's "campaign to discredit Mr. Browder and the Magnitsky Act."

The Post concluded smugly: "The film won't grab a wide audience, but it offers yet another example of the Kremlin's increasingly sophisticated efforts to spread its illiberal values and mind-set abroad. In the European Parliament and on French and German television networks, showings were put off recently after questions were raised about the accuracy of the film, including by Magnitsky's family.

“We don’t worry that Mr. Nekrasov’s film was screened here, in an open society. But it is important that such slick spin be fully exposed for its twisted story and sly deceptions.”

Given the fact that virtually no one in the West was allowed to see the film, the Post’s gleeful editorial had the feel of something you might read in a totalitarian society where the public only hears about dissent when the Official Organs of the State denounce some almost unknown person for saying something that almost no one heard.

What the Post didn’t want you to know was that Nekrasov started off his project with the goal of producing a docu-drama that accepted Browder’s self-serving narrative. However, during the research, Nekrasov uncovered evidence that revealed that Magnitsky was neither a “lawyer” nor a whistleblower; that the scam involving Browder’s companies had been exposed by a woman employee; and that Magnitsky, an accountant for Browder, was arrested as a conspirator in the fraud.

As the documentary unfolds, you see Nekrasov struggling with his dilemma as Browder grows increasingly abusive toward his erstwhile ally. Nekrasov painfully concludes that Browder had deceived him.

But, don’t worry, as a citizen in the Free World, you probably will never have to worry about viewing this documentary, since it has been effectively flushed down the memory hole. Official references to Magnitsky are back in the proper form, treating him as a Martyr for Truth and a victim of the Evil Russians.

Plus, if you rely on The New York Times, The Washington Post, MSNBC, CNN and the rest of the U.S. mainstream media for your news, you won’t have to think about the far more substantive case of the Steele Dossier in which Hillary Clinton’s allies spent gobs of money seeking out sources in Russia to serve up dirt on Donald Trump.

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## MSM, Still Living in Propaganda-ville

**Exclusive:** The stakes in U.S.-Russia relations could not be higher – possible nuclear conflagration and the end of civilization – but the U.S. mainstream

media is still slouching around in “propaganda-ville,” says Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

As much as the U.S. mainstream media wants people to believe that it is the Guardian of Truth, it is actually lost in a wilderness of propaganda and falsehoods, a dangerous land of delusion that is putting the future of humankind at risk as tension escalate with nuclear-armed Russia.

This media problem has grown over recent decades as lucrative careerism has replaced responsible professionalism. Pack journalism has always been a threat to quality reporting but now it has evolved into a self-sustaining media lifestyle in which the old motto, “there’s safety in numbers,” is borne out by the fact that being horrendously wrong, such as on Iraq’s WMD, leads to almost no accountability because so many important colleagues were wrong as well.

Similarly, there has been no accountability after many mainstream journalists and commentators falsely stated as flat-fact that “all 17 U.S. intelligence agencies” concurred that Russia did “meddle” in last November’s U.S. election.

For months, this claim has been the go-to put-down whenever anyone questions the groupthink of Russian venality perverting American democracy. Even the esteemed “Politifact” deemed the assertion “true.” But it was never true.

It was at best a needled distortion of a claim by President Obama’s Director of National Intelligence James Clapper when he issued [a statement](#) last Oct. 7 alleging Russian meddling. Because Clapper was the chief of the U.S. Intelligence Community, his opinion morphed into a claim that it represented the consensus of all 17 intelligence agencies, a dishonest twist that Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton began touting.

However, for people who understand how the U.S. Intelligence Community works, the claim of a 17-agencies consensus has a specific meaning, some form of a National Intelligence Estimate (or NIE) that seeks out judgments and dissents from the various agencies.

But there was no NIE regarding alleged Russian meddling and there apparently wasn’t even a formal assessment from a subset of the agencies at the time of Clapper’s statement. President Obama did not order a publishable assessment until December – after the election – and it was not completed until Jan. 6, when a report from Clapper’s office presented the opinions of analysts from the Central Intelligence Agency, Federal Bureau of Investigation and the National Security Agency – three agencies (or four if you count the DNI’s office), not 17.

## **Lacking Hard Evidence**

The report also contained no hard evidence of a Russian “hack” and amounted to a one-sided circumstantial case at best. However, by then, the U.S. mainstream media had embraced the “all-17-intelligence-agencies” refrain and anyone who disagreed, including President Trump, was treated as delusional. The argument went: “How can anyone question what all 17 intelligence agencies have confirmed as true?”

It wasn't until May 8 when then-former DNI Clapper belatedly set the record straight in sworn congressional testimony in which he explained that there were only three “contributing agencies” from which analysts were “hand-picked.”

The reference to “hand-picked” analysts pricked the ears of some former U.S. intelligence analysts who had suffered through earlier periods of “politicized” intelligence when malleable analysts were chosen to deliver what their political bosses wanted to hear.

On May 23, also in congressional testimony, former CIA Director John Brennan confirmed Clapper's description, saying only four of the 17 U.S. intelligence agencies took part in the assessment.

Brennan said the Jan. 6 report “followed the general model of how you want to do something like this with some notable exceptions. It only involved the FBI, NSA and CIA as well as the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. It wasn't a full inter-agency community assessment that was coordinated among the 17 agencies.”

After this testimony, some of the major news organizations, which had been waving around the “17-intelligence-agencies” meme, subtly changed their phrasing to either depict Russian “meddling” as an established fact no longer requiring attribution or referred to the “unanimous judgment” of the Intelligence Community without citing a specific number.

This “unanimous judgment” formulation was deceptive, too, because it suggested that all 17 agencies were in accord albeit without exactly saying that. For a regular reader of The New York Times or a frequent viewer of CNN, the distinction would almost assuredly not be detected.

For more than a month after the Clapper-Brennan testimonies, there was no formal correction.

## **A Belated Correction**

Finally, on June 25, the Times' hand was forced when White House correspondent



Maggie Haberman reverted to the old formulation, mocking Trump for “still refus[ing] to acknowledge a basic fact agreed upon by 17 American intelligence agencies that he now oversees: Russia orchestrated the attacks, and did it to help get him elected.”

When this falsehood was called to the Times’ attention, it had little choice but to append a correction to the article, noting that the intelligence “assessment was made by four intelligence agencies – the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the National Security Agency. The assessment was not approved by all 17 organizations in the American intelligence community.”

The Associated Press ran a similar “clarification” applied to some of its fallacious reporting repeating the “17-intelligence-agencies” meme.

So, you might have thought that the mainstream media was finally adjusting its reporting to conform to reality. But that would mean that one of the pillars of the Russia-gate “scandal” had crumbled, the certainty that Russia and Vladimir Putin did “meddle” in the election.

The story would have to go back to square one and the major news organizations would have to begin reporting on whether or not there ever was solid evidence to support what had become a “certainty” – and there appeared to be no stomach for such soul-searching. Since pretty much all the important media figures had made the same error, it would be much easier to simply move on as if nothing had changed.

That would mean that skepticism would still be unwelcome and curious leads would not be followed. For instance, there was a head-turning reference in an otherwise typical Washington Post take-out on June 25 accusing Russia of committing “the crime of the century.”

A reference, stuck deep inside the five-page opus, said, “Some of the most critical technical intelligence on Russia came from another country, officials said. Because of the source of the material, the NSA was reluctant to view it with high confidence.”

Though the Post did not identify the country, this reference suggests that more than one key element of the case for Russian culpability was based not on direct investigations by the U.S. intelligence agencies, but on the work of external organizations.

Earlier, the Democratic National Committee denied the FBI access to its supposedly hacked computers, forcing the investigators to rely on a DNC contractor called CrowdStrike, which has a checkered record of getting this sort

of analytics right and whose chief technology officer, Dmitri Alperovitch, is an anti-Putin Russian émigré with ties to the anti-Russian think tank, Atlantic Council.

### **Relying on Outsiders**

You might be wondering why something as important as this “crime of the century,” which has pushed the world closer to nuclear annihilation, is dependent on dubious entities outside the U.S. government with possible conflicts of interest.

If the U.S. government really took this issue seriously, which it should, why didn't the FBI seize the DNC's computers and insist that impartial government experts lead the investigation? And why – given the extraordinary expertise of the NSA in computer hacking – is “some of the most critical technical intelligence on Russia [coming] from another country,” one that doesn't inspire the NSA's confidence?

But such pesky questions are not likely to be asked or answered by a mainstream U.S. media that displays deep-seated bias toward both Putin and Trump.

Mostly, major news outlets continue to brush aside the clarifications and return to various formulations that continue to embrace the “17-intelligence-agencies” canard, albeit in slightly different forms, such as references to the collective Intelligence Community without the specific number. Anyone who questions this established conventional wisdom is still crazy and out of step.

For instance, James Holmes of Esquire was stunned on Thursday when Trump at a news conference in Poland reminded the traveling press corps about the inaccurate reporting regarding the 17 intelligence agencies and said he still wasn't entirely sure about Russia's guilt.

“In public, he's still casting doubt on the intelligence community's finding that Russia interfered in the 2016 election nearly nine months after the fact,” Holmes sputtered before describing Trump's comment as a “rant.”

So, if you thought that a chastened mainstream media might stop in the wake of the “17-intelligence-agencies” falsehood and rethink the whole Russia-gate business, you would have been sadly mistaken.

But the problem is not just the question of whether Russia hacked into Democratic emails and slipped them to WikiLeaks for publication (something that both Russia and WikiLeaks deny). Perhaps the larger danger is how the major U.S. news outlets have adopted a consistently propagandistic approach toward everything relating to Russia.

## Hating Putin

This pattern traces back to the earliest days of Vladimir Putin's presidency in 2000 when he began to rein in the U.S.-prescribed "shock therapy," which had sold off Russia's assets to well-connected insiders, making billions of dollars for the West-favored "oligarchs," even as the process threw millions of average Russian into poverty.

But the U.S. mainstream media's contempt for Putin reached new heights after he helped President Obama head off neoconservative (and liberal interventionist) demands for a full-scale U.S. military assault on Syria in August 2013 and helped bring Iran into a restrictive nuclear agreement when the neocons wanted to bomb-bomb-bomb Iran.

The neocons delivered their payback to Putin in early 2014 by supporting a violent coup in Ukraine, overthrowing elected President Viktor Yanukovich and installing a fiercely anti-Russian regime. The U.S. operation was spearheaded by neocon National Endowment for Democracy President Carl Gershman and neocon Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland, with enthusiastic support from neocon Sen. John McCain.

Nuland was heard in an intercepted pre-coup phone call with U.S. Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt discussing who should become the new leaders and pondering how to "glue" or "midwife this thing."

Despite the clear evidence of U.S. interference in Ukrainian politics, the U.S. government and the mainstream media embraced the coup and accused Putin of "aggression" when ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine, called the Donbas, resisted the coup regime.

When ethnic Russians and other citizens in Crimea voted overwhelmingly in a referendum to reject the coup regime and rejoin Russia – a move protected by some of the 20,000 Russian troops inside Crimea as part of a basing agreement – that became a Russian "invasion." But it was the most peculiar "invasion," since there were no images of tanks crashing across borders or amphibious landing craft on Crimean beaches, because no such "invasion" had occurred.

However, in virtually every instance, the U.S. mainstream media insisted on the most extreme anti-Russian propaganda line and accused people who questioned this Official Narrative of disseminating Russian "propaganda" – or being a "Moscow stooge" or acting as a "useful fool." There was no tolerance for skepticism about whatever the State Department or the Washington think tanks were saying.

## Trump Meets Putin

So, as Trump prepares for his first meeting with Putin at the G-20 summit in Hamburg, Germany, the U.S. mainstream media has been in a frenzy, linking up its groupthinks about the Ukraine “invasion” with its groupthinks about Russia “hacking” the election.

In a July 3 editorial, The Washington Post declared, “Mr. Trump simply cannot fail to admonish Mr. Putin for Russia’s attempts to meddle in the 2016 presidential election. He must make clear the United States will not tolerate it, period. Naturally, this is a difficult issue for Mr. Trump, who reaped the benefit of Russia’s intervention and now faces a special counsel’s investigation, but nonetheless, in his first session with Mr. Putin, the president must not hesitate to be blunt. ...

“On Ukraine, Mr. Trump must also display determination. Russia fomented an armed uprising and seized Crimea in violation of international norms, and it continues to instigate violence in the Donbas. Mr. Trump ought to make it unmistakably clear to Mr. Putin that the United States will not retreat from the sanctions imposed over Ukraine until the conditions of peace agreements are met.”

Along the same lines, even while suggesting the value of some collaboration with Russia toward ending the war in Syria, Post columnist David Ignatius wrote in a July 5 column, “Russian-American cooperation on Syria faces a huge obstacle right now. It would legitimize a Russian regime that invaded Ukraine and meddled in U.S. and European elections, in addition to its intervention in Syria.”

Note the smug certainty of Ignatius and the Post editors. There is no doubt that Russia “invaded” Ukraine; “seized” Crimea; “meddled” in U.S. and European elections. Yet all these groupthinks should be subjected to skepticism, not simply treated as undeniable truths.

But seeing only one side to a story is where the U.S. mainstream media is at this point in history. Yes, it is possible that Russia was responsible for the Democratic hacks and did funnel the material to WikiLeaks, but evidence has so far been lacking. And, instead of presenting both sides fairly, the major media acts as if only one side deserves any respect and dissenting views must be ridiculed and condemned.

In this perverted process, collectively approved versions of complex situations congeal into conventional wisdom, which simply cannot be significantly reconsidered regardless of future revelations.

As offensive as this rejection of true truth-seeking may be, it also represents an extraordinary danger when mixed with the existential risk of nuclear conflagration.

With the stakes this high, the demand for hard evidence – and the avoidance of soft-minded groupthink – should go without question. Journalists and commentators should hold themselves to professional precision, not slide into sloppy careerism, lost in “propaganda-ville.”

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

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## NYT Finally Retracts Russia-gate Canard

**Exclusive:** A founding Russia-gate myth is that all 17 U.S. intelligence agencies agreed that Russia hacked into and distributed Democratic emails, a falsehood that The New York Times has belatedly retracted, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry (Updated on July 1 with new NYT deception)

The New York Times has finally admitted that one of the favorite Russia-gate canards – that all 17 U.S. intelligence agencies concurred on the assessment of Russian hacking of Democratic emails – is false.

On Thursday, the Times appended [a correction to a June 25 article](#) that had repeated the false claim, which has been used by Democrats and the mainstream media for months to brush aside any doubts about the foundation of the Russia-gate scandal and portray President Trump as delusional for doubting what all 17 intelligence agencies supposedly knew to be true.

In the Times’ White House Memo of June 25, correspondent Maggie Haberman mocked Trump for “still refus[ing] to acknowledge a basic fact agreed upon by 17 American intelligence agencies that he now oversees: Russia orchestrated the attacks, and did it to help get him elected.”

However, on Thursday, the Times – while leaving most of Haberman’s ridicule of Trump in place – noted in a correction that the relevant intelligence “assessment was made by four intelligence agencies – the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the National Security Agency. The assessment was not approved by all 17 organizations in the American intelligence community.”

The Times’ grudging correction was vindication for some Russia-gate skeptics who

had questioned the claim of a full-scale intelligence assessment, which would usually take the form of a National Intelligence Estimate (or NIE), a product that seeks out the views of the entire Intelligence Community and includes dissents.

The reality of a more narrowly based Russia-gate assessment was admitted in May by President Obama's Director of National Intelligence James Clapper and Obama's CIA Director John Brennan in sworn congressional testimony.

Clapper testified before a Senate Judiciary subcommittee on May 8 that the Russia-hacking claim came from a "special intelligence community assessment" (or ICA) produced by selected analysts from the CIA, NSA and FBI, "a coordinated product from three agencies – CIA, NSA, and the FBI – not all 17 components of the intelligence community," the former DNI said.

Clapper further acknowledged that the analysts who produced the Jan. 6 assessment on alleged Russian hacking were "hand-picked" from the CIA, FBI and NSA.

Yet, as any intelligence expert will tell you, if you "hand-pick" the analysts, you are really hand-picking the conclusion. For instance, if the analysts were known to be hard-liners on Russia or supporters of Hillary Clinton, they could be expected to deliver the one-sided report that they did.

### **Politicized Intelligence**

In the history of U.S. intelligence, we have seen how this selective approach has worked, such as the phony determination of the Reagan administration pinning the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II and other acts of terror on the Soviet Union.

CIA Director William Casey and Deputy Director Robert Gates shepherded the desired findings through the process by putting the assessment under the control of pliable analysts and sidelining those who objected to this politicization of intelligence.

The point of enlisting the broader intelligence community – and incorporating dissents into a final report – is to guard against such "stove-piping" of intelligence that delivers the politically desired result but ultimately distorts reality.

Another painful example of politicized intelligence was President George W. Bush's 2002 National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq's WMD that removed State Department and other dissents from the declassified version that was given to the public.

Since Clapper's and Brennan's testimony in May, the Times and other mainstream news outlets have avoided a direct contradiction of their earlier acceptance of the 17-intelligence-agencies canard by simply referring to a judgment by "the intelligence community."

That finessing of their earlier errors has allowed Hillary Clinton and other senior Democrats to continue referencing this fictional consensus without challenge, at least in the mainstream media.

For instance, on May 31 at a technology conference in California, Clinton referred to the Jan. 6 report, asserting that "Seventeen agencies, all in agreement, which I know from my experience as a Senator and Secretary of State, is hard to get. They concluded with high confidence that the Russians ran an extensive information war campaign against my campaign, to influence voters in the election."

The failure of the major news organizations to clarify this point about the 17 agencies may have contributed to Haberman's mistake on June 25 as she simply repeated the groupthink that nearly all the Important People in Washington just knew to be true.

Even after the correction, the Times quickly returned to its pattern of deceiving its readers regarding the U.S. intelligence assessment. On June 30, a Times article reported: "Mr. Trump has repeatedly cast doubt on the unanimous conclusion of United States intelligence agencies that Russia sought to interfere in the 2016 race."

The phrasing "unanimous conclusion" again suggests that all 17 intelligence agencies are in accord, albeit without specifically saying so, a journalistic sleight of hand that raises further doubts about the objectivity and honesty of the Times on this issue.

The Times' belated correction – and its new deceptive formulation – underscore the growing sense that the U.S. mainstream media has joined in a political vendetta against Trump and has cast aside professional standards to the point of repeating false claims designed to denigrate him.

That, in turn, plays into Trump's Twitter complaints that he and his administration are the targets of a "witch hunt" led by the "fake news" media, a grievance that appears to be energizing his supporters and could discredit whatever ongoing investigations eventually conclude.

**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](http://barnesandnoble.com)).

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## Parry Awarded Gellhorn Journalism Prize

Consortiumnews editor and longtime investigative reporter Robert Parry received the 2017 Martha Gellhorn Prize for Journalism at an event in London on Tuesday, presented by journalist John Pilger.

John Pilger made the following remarks in presenting the 15<sup>th</sup> Martha Gellhorn Prize to Robert Parry at a dinner in London on June 27.

There are too many awards for journalism. Too many simply celebrate the status quo. The idea that journalists ought to *challenge* the status quo – what Orwell called Newspeak and Robert Parry calls “groupthink” – is becoming increasingly rare.

More than a generation ago, a space opened up for a journalism that dissented from the groupthink and flourished briefly and often tenuously in the press and broadcasting. Today, that space has almost closed in the so-called mainstream media. The best journalists have become – often against their will – dissidents.

The Martha Gellhorn Prize for Journalism recognizes these honorable exceptions. It is very different from other prizes. Let me quote in full why we give this award:

“The Gellhorn Prize is in honor of one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s greatest reporters. It is awarded to a journalist whose work has penetrated the established version of events and told an unpalatable truth – a truth validated by powerful facts that expose what Martha Gellhorn called ‘official drivel.’ She meant establishment propaganda.”

Martha was renowned as a war reporter. Her dispatches from Spain in the 1930s and D-Day in 1944 are classics. But she was more than that. As both a reporter and a committed humanitarian, she was a pioneer: one of the first in Vietnam to report what she called “a new kind of war *against civilians*”: a precursor to the wars of today.

She was the reason I was sent to Vietnam as a reporter. My editor had spread across his desk her articles that had run in the *Guardian* and the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. A headline read, “Targeting the people.” For that series, she was placed on a blacklist by the U.S. military and never allowed to return to South



Vietnam.

She and I became good friends. Indeed, all my fellow judges of the Martha Gellhorn Prize – Sandy and Shirlee Matthews, James Fox, Jeremy Harding – have that in common. We keep her memory.

She was indefatigable. She would call very early in the morning and open up the conversation with one of her favourite expressions – “I smell a rat.”

When, in 1990, President George Bush Senior invaded Panama on the pretext of nabbing his old CIA buddy General Noriega, the embedded media made almost no mention of civilian suffering. My phone rang. “I smell a rat,” said a familiar voice.

Within 24 hours Martha was on a plane to Panama. She was then in her 80s. She went straight to the barrios of Panama City, and walked from door to door, interviewing ordinary people. That was the way she worked – in apartheid South Africa, in the favelas of Brazil, in the villages of Vietnam.

She estimated that the American bombing and invasion of Panama had killed at least 6,000 people.

She flew to Washington and stood up at a press conference at the Pentagon and asked a general: “Why did you kill so many people then lie about it?”

Imagine that question being asked today. And *that* is what we are honoring this evening. Truth-telling, and the courage to find out, to ask the forbidden question.

Robert Parry is a very distinguished honorable exception.

I first heard of Bob Parry in the 1980s when he broke the Iran-Contra scandal as an Associated Press reporter. This was a story as important as Watergate. Some would say it was more important.

The administration of Ronald Reagan had secretly and illegally sold weapons to Iran in order to secretly and illegally bankroll a bloodthirsty group known as the Contras, which was then trying to crush Nicaragua’s Sandinista government – on behalf of the CIA. You could barely make it up.

Bob Parry’s career has been devoted to finding out, lifting rocks – and supporting others who do the same. In the 1990s, he supported Gary Webb, who revealed that the Reagan administration had allowed the Contras to traffic cocaine in the U.S. For this, Webb was crucified by the so-called mainstream media, and took his own life. Lifting the big rocks can be as dangerous as a warzone.

In 1995, Parry founded his own news service, the Consortium for Independent Journalism. But, really, there was just him. Today, his website Consortiumnews.com reflects the authority and dissidence that marks Parry's career.

What he does is make sense of the news – why Saudi Arabia should be held accountable; why the invasion of Libya was a folly and a crime; why the *New York Times* is an apologist for great power; why Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump have much in common; why Russia is not our enemy; why history is critical to understanding.

For his journalism, Robert Parry is the winner of the 2017 Martha Gellhorn Prize. He joins the likes of Robert Fisk, Iona Craig, Patrick Cockburn, Mohammed Omer, Dahr Jamail, Marie Colvin, Julian Assange, Gareth Porter and other honorable exceptions.

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## Russia-gate Is No Watergate or Iran-Contra

**Special Report:** Many comparisons have been made between Russia-gate and the earlier scandals of Watergate and Iran-Contra, but the similarities are at best superficial, explains Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Russia-gate, the sprawling investigation into whether Russia meddled in last year's U.S. election, is often compared to the two big political scandals of the latter half of the Twentieth Century, Watergate and Iran-Contra. Sometimes you even hear that Russia-gate is "bigger than Watergate."

Yet what is perhaps most remarkable about those two Twentieth Century scandals is how little Official Washington really understands them – and how these earlier scandals significantly contrast, rather than compare, with what is unfolding now.

Although the historical record is still incomplete on Watergate and Iran-Contra, the available evidence indicates that both scandals originated in schemes by Republicans to draw foreign leaders into plots to undermine sitting Democratic presidents and thus pave the way for the elections of Richard Nixon in 1968 and Ronald Reagan in 1980.

As for Russia-gate, even if you accept that the Russian government hacked into Democratic emails and publicized them via WikiLeaks, there is still no evidence that Donald Trump or his campaign colluded with the Kremlin to do so. By contrast, in the origins of Watergate and Iran-Contra, it appears the Nixon and Reagan campaigns, respectively, were the instigators of schemes to enlist foreign governments in blocking a Vietnam peace deal in 1968 and negotiations to free 52 American hostages in Iran in 1980.

Though Watergate is associated directly with the 1972 campaign – when Nixon’s team of burglars was caught inside the Democratic National Committee offices in the Watergate building – Nixon’s formation of that team, known as the Plumbers, was driven by his fear that he could be exposed for sabotaging President Lyndon Johnson’s Vietnam peace talks in 1968 in order to secure the White House that year.

After Nixon’s narrow victory over Vice President Hubert Humphrey in the 1968 election, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover informed Nixon that Johnson had a secret file, complete with wiretapped phone calls, detailing the Nixon campaign’s backchannel messages to South Vietnamese officials convincing them to boycott Johnson’s Paris peace talks. Later, Nixon learned that this incriminating file had disappeared from the White House.

So, in 1971, after the leaking of the Pentagon Papers, which recounted the lies that had been used to justify the Vietnam War through 1967, Nixon fretted that the missing file about his peace-talk gambit in 1968 might surface, too, and would destroy him politically. Thus, he organized the Plumbers to find the file, even contemplating fire-bombing the Brookings Institution to enable a search of its safe where some aides thought the missing file might be found.

In other words, Watergate wasn’t simply a break-in at the Democratic National Committee on June 17, 1972, in pursuit of useful political intelligence and Nixon’s ensuing cover-up; the scandal had its origins in a far worse scandal, the derailing of peace talks that could have ended the Vietnam War years earlier and saved the lives of tens of thousands of U.S. soldiers and possibly more than 1 million Vietnamese.

### **Iran-Contra Parallels**

Similarly, the Iran-Contra scandal exploded in 1986 with revelations that President Reagan had authorized secret arms sales to Iran with some of the profits going to fund the Nicaraguan Contra rebels, but the evidence now indicates that the connections between Reagan’s team and Iran’s revolutionary regime traced back to 1980 when emissaries from Reagan’s campaign worked to stymie President Jimmy Carter’s negotiations to free 52 American hostages then

held in Iran.

According to multiple witnesses, including former Assistant Secretary of State for Middle Eastern Affairs Nicholas Veliotis, the pre-election contacts led to the opening of a weapons pipeline to Iran (via Israel), after Reagan was sworn in on Jan. 20, 1981, which was the precise moment when Iran finally released the American hostages after 444 days.

Some key players in the 1980 Reagan-Iran contacts reappeared four years later at the start of direct (again secret) U.S. arms shipments to Iran in 1985, which also involved Israeli middlemen. These key players included Iranian CIA operative Cyrus Hashemi, former CIA clandestine services chief Theodore Shackley, Reagan's campaign chief and then-CIA Director William Casey, and former CIA Director and then-Vice President George H.W. Bush.

In other words, the Iran-Contra weapons shipments of 1985-86 appear to have been an outgrowth of the earlier shipments dating back to 1980 and continuing under Israeli auspices until the supply line was taken over more directly by the Reagan administration in 1985-86.

Thus, both the Watergate scandal in 1972 and the Iran-Contra Affair in 1986 could be viewed as "sequels" to the earlier machinations driven by Republican hunger to seize the enormous powers of the U.S. presidency. However, for decades, Official Washington has been hostile to these underlying explanations of how Watergate and Iran-Contra began.

For instance, The New York Times, the so-called "newspaper of record," treated the accumulation of evidence regarding Nixon's 1968 peace-talk gambit as nothing more than a "rumor" until earlier this year when a scholar, John A. Farrell, uncovered cryptic notes taken by Nixon's aide H.R. Haldeman, which added another piece to the mosaic and left the Times little choice but to pronounce the historical reality finally real.

### **Grasping the Watergate Narrative**

Still, the Times and other major news outlets have failed to factor this belated admission into the larger Watergate narrative. If you understand that Nixon did sabotage President Johnson's Vietnam War peace talks and that Nixon was aware that Johnson's file on what LBJ called Nixon's "treason" had disappeared from the White House, the early "Watergate tapes" from 1971 suddenly make sense.

Nixon ordered White House chief of staff H.R. "Bob" Haldeman and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger to locate the missing file but their search came up empty. Yet, some Nixon aides thought the file might be hidden at the Brookings Institution, a liberal think tank in Washington. So, in his desperate

pursuit of the file, Nixon called for a break-in at Brookings, possibly even fire-bombing the building as a cover for his team of burglars to slip in amid the confusion and rifle the safe.

The old explanation that Nixon simply wanted to find some file related to Johnson's 1968 pre-election Vietnam bombing halt never made sense given the extreme steps that Nixon was prepared to take.

The relevant portions of Nixon's White House tapes include an entry on June 17, 1971, coincidentally one year to the day before the Watergate burglars were caught. Nixon summoned Haldeman and Kissinger to the Oval Office and pleaded with them again to locate the file.

"Do we have it?" Nixon asked Haldeman. "I've asked for it. You said you didn't have it."

Haldeman: "We can't find it."

Kissinger: "We have nothing here, Mr. President."

Nixon: "Well, damn-it, I asked for that because I need it."

Kissinger: "But Bob and I have been trying to put the damn thing together."

Haldeman: "We have a basic history in constructing our own, but there is a file on it."

Nixon: "Where?"

Haldeman: "[Presidential aide Tom Charles] Huston swears to God that there's a file on it and it's at Brookings."

Nixon: "Bob? Bob? Now do you remember Huston's plan [for White House-sponsored break-ins as part of domestic counter-intelligence operations]? Implement it."

Kissinger: "Now Brookings has no right to have classified documents."

Nixon: "I want it implemented. Goddamn-it, get in and get those files. Blow the safe and get it."

Haldeman: "They may very well have cleaned them by now, but this thing, you need to "

Kissinger: "I wouldn't be surprised if Brookings had the files."

Haldeman: "My point is Johnson knows that those files are around. He doesn't know for sure that we don't have them around."

But Johnson did know that the file was no longer at the White House because he had ordered his national security adviser, Walt Rostow, to remove it in the final days of Johnson's presidency.

### **Forming the Burglars**

On June 30, 1971, Nixon again berated Haldeman about the need to break into Brookings and "take it [the file] out." Nixon suggested using former CIA officer E. Howard Hunt to conduct the Brookings break-in.

"You talk to Hunt," Nixon told Haldeman. "I want the break-in. Hell, they do that. You're to break into the place, rifle the files, and bring them in. Just go in and take it. Go in around 8:00 or 9:00 o'clock."

Haldeman: "Make an inspection of the safe."

Nixon: "That's right. You go in to inspect the safe. I mean, *clean it up.*"

For reasons that remain unclear, it appears that the Brookings break-in never took place (nor did the fire-bombing), but Nixon's desperation to locate Johnson's peace-talk file was an important link in the chain of events that led to the creation of Nixon's burglary unit under Hunt's supervision. Hunt later oversaw the two Watergate break-ins in May and June of 1972.

While it's possible that Nixon was still searching for the file about his Vietnam-peace sabotage when the ill-fated Watergate break-ins occurred a year later, it's generally believed that the burglary was more broadly focused, seeking any information that might have an impact on Nixon's re-election, either defensively or offensively.

However, if you think back on 1971 when the Vietnam War was tearing the country apart and massive antiwar demonstrations were descending on Washington, Nixon's desperation to locate the missing file suddenly doesn't seem quite so crazy. There would have been hell to pay if the public learned that Nixon had kept the war going to gain a political advantage in 1968.

Through 1972 – and the early days of the Watergate scandal – former President Johnson had stayed silent about Nixon's sabotage of the Paris peace talks. But the ex-President became livid when – after Nixon's reelection in 1972 – Nixon's men sought to pressure Johnson into helping them shut down the Watergate investigation, in part, by noting that Johnson, too, had deployed wiretaps against Nixon's 1968 campaign to obtain evidence about the peace-talk sabotage.

While it's not clear whether Johnson would have finally spoken out, that threat to Nixon ended two days after Nixon's second inaugural when on Jan. 22, 1973,

Johnson died of a heart attack. However, unbeknownst to Nixon, Johnson had left the missing file, called "The X-Envelope," in the care of Rostow, who – after Johnson's death – gave the file to the LBJ presidential library in Austin, Texas, with instructions that it be kept under wraps for at least 50 years. (Rostow's instructions were overturned in the 1990s, and I found the now largely declassified file at the library in 2012.)

So, with the "The X-Envelope" squirreled away for more than two decades at the LBJ library and with the big newspapers treating the early sketchy reports of Nixon's peace-talk sabotage as only "rumors," Watergate remained a scandal limited to the 1972 campaign.

Still, Nixon's cover-up of his campaign's role in the Watergate break-in produced enough clear-cut evidence of obstruction of justice and other offenses that Nixon was forced to resign on Aug. 9, 1974.

### **A Failed Investigation**

The 1979-81 hostage confrontation with Iran was not nearly as devastating a crisis as the Vietnam War but America's humiliation during the 444-day-long ordeal became a focus of the 1980 election, too, with the first anniversary of Iran's seizure of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran coincidentally falling on Election Day 1980.

President Carter's failure to gain freedom for the 52 embassy personnel turned what had been a close race into a landslide for Ronald Reagan, with Republicans also gaining control of the U.S. Senate and ousting some of the most influential Democratic senators.

In 1984, Reagan won reelection in another landslide, but two years later ran afoul of the Iran-Contra scandal. Reagan's secret arms sales to Iran and diversion of profits to the Contras "broke" in November 1986 but focused only on Reagan's 1985-1986 arms sales and the diversion. Still, the scandal's crimes included violations of the Arms Export Control Act and the so-called Boland Act's prohibitions on arming the Contras as well as perjury and obstruction of justice. So there was the prospect of Reagan's impeachment.

But – from the start of Iran-Contra – there was a strong pushback from Republicans who didn't want to see another GOP president driven from office. There was also resistance to the scandal from many mainstream media executives who personally liked Reagan and feared a public backlash if the press played an aggressive role similar to Watergate.

And, moderate Democrats, such as Rep. Lee Hamilton of Indiana who co-chaired the congressional investigation, sought to tamp down the Iran-Contra fires and set

up firebreaks to prevent the investigation from spreading to related crimes such as the Reagan administration's protection of Contra cocaine traffickers.

"Ask about the cocaine," pleaded one protester who was dragged from the Iran-Contra hearing room, as the congressional investigators averted their eyes from such unseemly matters, focusing instead on stilted lectures about the Congress's constitutional prerogatives.

It was not until 1990-91 that it became clear that secret U.S.-approved arms shipments to Iran did not start in 1985 as the Iran-Contra narrative claimed but traced back to 1981 with Reagan's approval of arms sales to Iran through Israel.

Reagan's politically risky move of secretly arming Iran immediately after his inauguration and the hostage release was nearly exposed when one of the Israeli flights strayed into Soviet airspace on July 18, 1981, and crashed or was shot down.

In a PBS interview nearly a decade later, Nicholas Veliotis, Reagan's assistant secretary of state for the Middle East, said he looked into the incident by talking to top administration officials.

"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," Veliotis said.

In checking out the Israeli flight, Veliotis came to believe that the Reagan camp's dealings with Iran dated back to before the 1980 election. "It 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," Veliotis said. "And I understand some contacts were made at that time."

However, in 1981, Veliotis said, the State Department issued misleading press guidance to cover the administration's tracks and the Washington media failed to follow up. Thus, the U.S.-Israeli arms pipeline to Iran stayed secret from the American people until November 1986 when – despite Reagan's long-running insistence that he would never trade arms with a terrorist state like Iran – the operation was exposed.

When I re-interviewed Veliotis in 2012, he said he couldn't recall who the "people on high" were who had described the informal clearance of the Israeli shipments of U.S.-manufactured weapons, but he indicated that "the new players" were the young neoconservatives who were working on the Reagan campaign, many of whom later joined the administration as senior political appointees.



Documents that I discovered at the Reagan presidential library revealed that Reagan's neocons at the State Department, particularly Robert McFarlane and Paul Wolfowitz, initiated a policy review in 1981 to allow Israel to undertake secret military shipments to Iran.

McFarlane and Wolfowitz also maneuvered to put McFarlane in charge of U.S. relations toward Iran and to establish a clandestine U.S. back-channel to the Israeli government outside the knowledge of even senior U.S. government officials.

### **Another Failed Investigation**

In 1991, faced with the accumulating evidence of a prequel to the Iran-Contra scandal, Congress grudgingly agreed to take a look at these so-called "October Surprise" allegations. But Republicans, then led by President George H.W. Bush and his White House team, mounted an aggressive cover-up to "spike" the story.

And, with the congressional inquiry largely in the hands again of Rep. Hamilton, the Democrats timidly folded their tent despite a growing body of evidence that the Reagan team was indeed guilty.

Much of that evidence flowed into the House Task Force in December 1992 when President George H.W. Bush had already been defeated for reelection and the Democrats were looking forward to their renewed control of Washington. So, instead of giving a careful review to the new evidence, the House Task Force ignored, disparaged or buried it.

The late-arriving material included sworn testimony on Dec. 18, 1992, from David Andelman, the biographer of French intelligence chief Alexandre deMarenches, describing how deMarenches had confided that he had helped arrange the Republican-Iranian contacts. Andelman, an ex-New York Times and CBS News correspondent, said that while he was working on deMarenches's autobiography, the arch-conservative spymaster admitted arranging meetings between Republicans and Iranians about the hostage issue in the summer and fall of 1980, with one meeting held in Paris in October.

Andelman said deMarenches ordered that the secret meetings be kept out of his memoirs because the story could otherwise damage the reputations of his friends, William Casey and George H.W. Bush. Andelman's testimony corroborated longstanding claims from a variety of international intelligence operatives about a Paris meeting involving Casey and Bush. But the Task Force report brushed this testimony aside, paradoxically terming it "credible" but then claiming it was "insufficiently probative."

The Task Force's report argued that Andelman could not "rule out the possibility

that deMarenches had told him he was aware of and involved in the Casey meetings because he, deMarenches, could not risk telling his biographer he had no knowledge of these allegations.”

In the last weeks of the investigation, the House investigators also received a letter from former Iranian President Bani-Sadr detailing his behind-the-scenes struggle with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his son Ahmad over their secret dealings with the Reagan campaign. But the House investigators dismissed Bani-Sadr’s first-hand account as hearsay and thus also lacking “probative value.”

I later unearthed some of the evidence in unpublished Task Force files. However, in the meantime, Official Washington had dismissed the “October Surprise” and other Iran-Contra-connected scandals, like Contra drug trafficking, as conspiracy theories.

### **The Russian Report**

Ironically, another piece of late-arriving evidence was a January 1993 report from a national security committee of the Russian parliament about the Kremlin’s intelligence data confirming that key Republicans, including George H.W. Bush and William Casey, had met with Iranian officials in Europe regarding the hostages during the 1980 campaign.

Hamilton had requested the Russian assistance before the U.S. election in 1992, but the report was not sent until there were only two weeks left in George H.W. Bush’s presidency.

Lawrence Barcella, who served as the Task Force chief counsel, later told me that so much incriminating evidence arrived late that he asked Hamilton to extend the inquiry for three months but that Hamilton said no (although Hamilton told me that he had no recollection of denying Barcella’s request).

The other fatal flaw of the House investigation was that it left much of the actual investigating up to President George H.W. Bush’s White House counsel’s office and the State Department, although Bush was one of the chief suspects and, in 1991-92, was running for re-election, a campaign that would have been derailed if the 1980 October Surprise allegations were confirmed.

The naivete of this decision was underscored years later when I located a memo at Bush’s presidential library stating that the State Department had informed the White House counsel’s office that Casey had traveled to Madrid in 1980, corroborating a key October Surprise allegation.

The 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 October Surprise inquiry was taking shape, according to Beach's "memorandum for record" dated Nov. 4, 1991.

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.

Two days later, on Nov. 6, 1991, Beach's boss, White House counsel C. Boyden Gray, arranged 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.

In 2013, when I interviewed Hamilton about the Beach memo, he lamented that the Madrid information had not been shared with his investigation, saying "you have to rely on people" in authority to comply with information requests.

"We found no evidence to confirm Casey's trip to Madrid," Hamilton told me. "We couldn't show that. The [George H.W. Bush] White House did not notify us that he did make the trip. 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.

### **Not Moving the Needle**

However, the Madrid trip revelation and other post-investigation disclosures failed to move the needle on Official Washington's disdain for the October Surprise story.

The later disclosures included a 1993 interview in Tel Aviv in which former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir said he had read the 1991 book, *October Surprise*, by Carter's former National Security Council aide Gary Sick, which made the case for believing that the Republicans had intervened in the 1980 hostage negotiations to disrupt Carter's reelection.

With the topic raised, one interviewer asked, "What do you think? Was there an October Surprise?"

"Of course, it was," Shamir responded without hesitation. "It was."

And, there were other corroborating statements as well. In 1996, for instance, while former President Carter was meeting with Palestine Liberation Organization leader Arafat in Gaza City, Arafat tried to confess his role in the Republican

maneuvering to block Carter's Iran-hostage negotiations.

"There is something I want to tell you," Arafat said, addressing Carter in the presence of historian Douglas Brinkley. "You should know that in 1980 the Republicans approached me with an arms deal [for the PLO] if I could arrange to keep the hostages in Iran until after the [U.S. presidential] election," Arafat said, according to Brinkley's article in the fall 1996 issue of *Diplomatic Quarterly*.

In 2013, after the movie "Argo" appeared regarding an early facet of the Iran-hostage crisis, former Iranian President Bani-Sadr elaborated on his account of Republican overtures to Iran in 1980 and how that secret initiative prevented release of the hostages.

In a *Christian Science Monitor* commentary, Bani-Sadr wrote, "Ayatollah Khomeini and Ronald Reagan had organized a clandestine negotiation which prevented the attempts by myself and then-U.S. President Jimmy Carter to free the hostages before the 1980 U.S. presidential election took place. The fact that they were not released tipped the results of the election in favor of Reagan."

Then, Bani-Sadr added a new detail, that "two of my advisors, Hussein Navab Safavi and Sadr-al-Hefazi, were executed by Khomeini's regime because they had become aware of this secret relationship between Khomeini, his son Ahmad, ... and the Reagan administration." [For more details on the October Surprise case, see Robert Parry's *Trick or Treason and America's Stolen Narrative*.]

### **Compare and Contrast**

So how do Watergate and Iran-Contra compare and contrast with Russia-gate? One key difference is that in Watergate in 1972-73 and Iran-Contra in 1985-86, you had clear-cut crimes (even if you don't want to believe the two "prequels" from 1968 and 1980, respectively).

In Watergate, five burglars were caught inside the DNC offices on June 17, 1972, as they sought to plant more bugs on Democratic phones. (An earlier break-in in May had installed two bugs, but one didn't work.) Nixon then proceeded to mount a cover-up of his 1972 campaign's role in funding the break-in and other abuses of power.

In Iran-Contra, Reagan secretly authorized weapons sales to Iran, which was then designated a terrorist state, without informing Congress, a violation of the Arms Export Control Act. He also kept Congress in the dark about his belated signing of a related intelligence "finding." And the creation of slush funds to finance the Nicaraguan Contras represented an evasion of the U.S. Constitution.

There was also the attendant Iran-Contra cover-up mounted both by the Reagan White House and later the George H.W. Bush White House, which culminated in Bush's Christmas Eve 1992 pardons of six Iran-Contra defendants as special prosecutor Lawrence Walsh was zeroing in on possible indictment of Bush for withholding evidence.

By contrast, Russia-gate has been a "scandal" in search of a specific crime. President Barack Obama's intelligence chieftains have alleged – without presenting any clear evidence – that the Russian government hacked into the emails of the Democratic National Committee and of Hillary Clinton's campaign chairman John Podesta and released those emails via WikiLeaks and other Internet sites. (The Russians and WikiLeaks have both denied the accusations.)

The DNC emails revealed that senior Democrats did not maintain their required independence regarding the primaries by seeking to hurt Sen. Bernie Sanders and help Clinton. The Podesta emails pulled back the curtain on Clinton's paid speeches to Wall Street banks and on pay-to-play features of the Clinton Foundation.

Hacking into personal computers is a crime, but the U.S. government has yet to bring any formal charges against specific individuals supposedly responsible for the hacking of the Democratic emails. There also has been no evidence that Donald Trump's campaign colluded with Russians in the hacking.

Lacking any precise evidence of this cyber-crime or of a conspiracy between Russia and the Trump campaign, Obama's Justice Department holdovers and now special prosecutor Robert Mueller have sought to build "process crimes," around false statements to investigators and possible obstruction of justice.

### **Railroading Flynn**

In the case of retired Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, Trump's first national security adviser, acting Attorney General Sally Yates used the archaic Logan Act of 1799 to create a predicate for the FBI to interrogate Flynn about a Dec. 29, 2016 conversation with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak, i.e., after Trump's election but before the Inauguration.

The Logan Act, which has never resulted in a prosecution in 218 years, was enacted during the period of the Alien and Sedition Acts to bar private citizens from negotiating on their own with foreign governments. It was never intended to apply to a national security adviser of an elected President, albeit before he was sworn in.

But it became the predicate for the FBI interrogation – and the FBI agents were armed with a transcript of the intercepted Kislyak-Flynn phone call so they

could catch Flynn on any gaps in his recollection, which might have been made even hazier because he was on vacation in the Dominican Republic when Kislyak called.

Yates also concocted a bizarre argument that the discrepancies between Flynn's account of the call and the transcript left him open to Russian blackmail although how that would work – since the Russians surely assumed that Kislyak's calls would be monitored by U.S. intelligence and thus offered them no leverage with Flynn – was never explained.

Still, Flynn's failure to recount the phone call precisely and the controversy stirred up around it became the basis for an obstruction of justice investigation of Flynn and led to President Trump's firing Flynn on Feb. 13.

Trump may have thought that tossing Flynn overboard to the circling sharks would calm down the sharks but the blood in the water only excited them more. According to then-FBI Director James Comey, Trump talked to him one-on-one the next day, Feb. 14, and said, “I hope you can see your way clear to letting this go, to letting Flynn go. He is a good guy. I hope you can let this go.”

Trump's “hope” and the fact that he later fired Comey have reportedly led special prosecutor Mueller to look at a possible obstruction of justice case against Trump. In other words, Trump could be accused of obstructing what appears to have been a trumped-up case against Flynn.

Of course, there remains the possibility that evidence might surface of Trump or his campaign colluding with the Russians, but such evidence has so far not been presented. Or Mueller's investigation might turn over some rock and reveal some unrelated crime, possibly financial wrongdoing by Trump or an associate.

(Something similar happened in the Republican investigation of the Sept. 11, 2012 Benghazi attack, a largely fruitless inquiry except that it revealed that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton sent and received official emails over a private server, which Comey decried during last year's campaign as “extremely careless” but not criminal.)

### **Curb the Enthusiasm**

Another contrast between the earlier scandals (Watergate and Iran-Contra) and Russia-gate is the degree of enthusiasm and excitement that the U.S. mainstream media and congressional Democrats have shown today as opposed to 1972 and 1986.

Though The Washington Post's Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein aggressively pursued the Watergate scandal, there was much less interest elsewhere in major news outlets until Nixon's criminality became obvious in 1973. Many national

Democrats, including DNC Chairman Bob Strauss, were extremely hesitant to pursue the scandal if not outright against it.

Similarly, although Brian Barger and I at The Associated Press were pursuing aspects of Iran-Contra since early 1985, the big newspapers and networks consistently gave the Reagan administration the benefit of the doubt – at least before the scandal finally burst into view in fall 1986 (when a Contra-supply plane crashed inside Nicaragua and a Lebanese newspaper revealed U.S. arms shipments to Iran).

For several months, there was a flurry of attention to the complex Iran-Contra scandal, but the big media still ignored evidence of a White House cover-up and soon lost interest in the difficult work of unraveling the convoluted networks for arms smuggling, money laundering and cocaine trafficking.

Congressional Democrats also shied away from a constitutional confrontation with the popular Reagan and his well-connected Vice President George H.W. Bush.

After moving from AP to Newsweek in early 1987, I learned that the senior executives at Newsweek, then part of The Washington Post Company, didn't want "another Watergate"; they felt another such scandal was not "good for the country" and wanted Iran-Contra to go away as soon as possible. I was even told not to read the congressional Iran-Contra report when it was published in October 1987 (although I ignored that order and kept trying to keep my own investigation going in defiance of the wishes of the Newsweek brass until those repeated clashes led to my departure in June 1990).

So, perhaps the biggest similarity between Russia-gate and Watergate is that Richard Nixon and Donald Trump were both highly unpopular with the Washington establishment and thus had few influential defenders, while an important contrast with Iran-Contra was that Reagan and Bush were very well liked, especially among news executives such as Washington Post publisher Katharine Graham who, by all accounts, did not care for the uncouth Nixon. Today, the senior executives of The New York Times, The Washington Post and other major news outlets have made no secret of their disdain for the buffoonish Trump and their hostility toward Russian President Vladimir Putin.

In other words, what is driving Russia-gate – for both the mainstream news media and the Democrats – appears to be a political agenda, i.e., the desire to remove Trump from office while also ratcheting up a New Cold War with Russia, a priority for Washington's neoconservatives and their liberal-interventionist sidekicks.

If this political drama were playing out in some other country, we would be

talking about a “soft coup” in which the “oligarchy” or some other “deep state” force was using semi-constitutional means to engineer a disfavored leader’s removal.

Of course, since the ongoing campaign to remove Trump is happening in the United States, it must be presented as a principled pursuit of truth and a righteous application of the rule of law. But the comparisons to Watergate and Iran-Contra are a stretch.

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

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Some of our special stories in May addressed the ongoing Russia-gate imbroglio, Europe’s populist challenge to the elites, and America’s long history with foreign lobbying.

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**[“NYT Cheers the Rise of Censorship Algorithms”](#)** by Robert Parry, May 2, 2017

**[“Government Smearing of Israel’s Critics”](#)** by Lawrence Davidson, May 3, 2017

**[“Hillary Clinton Blame-Shifts Her Defeat”](#)** by Robert Parry, May 3, 2017

**[“Oliver Stone Honored with Press Freedom Award”](#)** by Robert Parry, May 4, 2017

**[“The McCarthyism of Russia-gate”](#)** by Robert Parry, May 7, 2017

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## Policing ‘Truth’ to Restore ‘Trust’

**Exclusive:** The U.S. mainstream media insists it just wants “truth” algorithms to purge “fake news” from the Internet, but the real goal seems to be restoring public “trust” by limiting what the people get to see, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

There’s been a lot of self-righteous talk about “truth” recently, especially from the people at The New York Times, The Washington Post and the rest of the mainstream news media. They understandably criticize President Trump for his casual relationship with reality and happily dream about how nice it would be if [they could develop algorithms to purge the Internet](#) of what they call “fake news.”

But these “truth-loving” pundits, the likes of star Times columnist Thomas L. Friedman, never seem to reflect on their own responsibility for disseminating

devastating “fake news,” such as the falsehoods about Iraq’s WMD, lies that led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and thousands of American soldiers and spread horrific chaos across the Mideast and into Europe.

Nor does that Iraq experience ever cause Friedman and his fellow pundits to question other Official Narratives, including those relating to the proxy war in Syria or the civil war in Ukraine or the New Cold War with Russia. Meanwhile those of us who ask for substantiating facts or observe that some official claims don’t make sense are subjected to insults as fill-in-the-blank “apologists” or “stooges.”

It seems that any deviation from Officialdom’s pronouncements makes you an enemy of “truth” because “truth” is what the Establishment says is “truth.” And, if you don’t believe me, I refer you to Friedman’s [Wednesday’s column](#).

Friedman leads off the article by quoting himself telling a questioner at a Montreal conference: “I fear we’re seeing the end of ‘truth’.”

But Friedman doesn’t take himself to task by noting how he helped disseminate the Iraq WMD lies and how he flacked for that illegal and disastrous war for years.

If he had ‘fessed up, maybe Friedman could then have explained why he didn’t resign in disgrace and engage in some lifelong penance, preferably including a vow of silence, rather than continuing to spout lots of other nonsense while also continuing to collect a handsome salary and to rack up lucrative speaking fees.

Instead, after wringing his hands over why Americans no longer trust their leaders, Friedman cites another voice of authority, a friend and mentor, Dov Seidman, who complains that “What we’re experiencing is an assault on the very foundations of our society and democracy – the twin pillars of truth and trust.

...

“What makes us Americans is that we signed up to have a relationship with ideals that are greater than us and with truths that we agreed were so self-evident they would be the foundation of our shared journey toward a more perfect union – and of respectful disagreement along the way. We also agreed that the source of legitimate authority to govern would come from ‘We the people’.”

Friedman then goes on to share Seidman’s lament that when “we” no longer share basic truths “then there is no legitimate authority and no unifying basis for our continued association.”

## **The Villains**

Friedman identifies the villains in this scenario as “social networks and cyberhacking,” which help “extremists to spread vitriol and fake news at a speed and breadth we have never seen before.” So, it seems those “truth” algorithms can’t arrive soon enough.

However, if you keep reading Friedman’s column, you learn that the real problem is not that “cyberhacking” is generating “fake news,” but rather that it has let Americans see too many ugly truths about their leadership, as happened when WikiLeaks published emails showing how the Democratic National Committee unethically tilted the playing field against Sen. Bernie Sanders; how Hillary Clinton pandered to Goldman Sachs in return for lucrative speaking fees; and how the Clinton Foundation engaged in pay-to-play with rich foreigners.

Friedman’s column acknowledges as much, again citing Seidman: “Social networks and hacking also ‘have enabled us to see, in full color, into the innermost workings of every institution and into the attitudes of those who run them,’ noted Seidman, ‘and that has eroded trust in virtually every institution, and the authority of many leaders, because people don’t like what they see.’”

In other words, the answer to restoring “trust” and to respecting “truth” is to hide ugly realities from the unwashed public. If the people are shielded from the facts, the Establishment will regain its control over “truth” and thus win back the people’s “trust.”

If all this seems upside-down to you – if you think that the real answer is for America’s leaders to behave more responsibly, to let the public in on the real “truth,” and thus to make the people’s “trust” mean something – you must be a “Kremlin stooge.” After all, the current groupthink is that the diabolical Russians slipped WikiLeaks those Democratic emails in a nefarious plot to undermine Americans’ faith in their democracy.

However, if you’re still having trouble with Friedman’s logic, you also must not understand how America’s new media paradigm works. The job of the media is not to provide as much meaningful information as possible to the people so they can exercise their free judgment; it is to package certain information in a way to guide the people to a preferred conclusion.

### **Pleasant Myths**

You see the last thing that Friedman really wants is for the American people to understand their own reality – the good, the bad and the ugly. Instead, we are to have our pretty little heads filled with pleasant myths that make us feel special as we are herded either to the shearing shed or to the slaughterhouse.

For instance, reflect on the history that we hear from Friedman’s friend Seidman

about how we “signed up” for those high-minded proclamations in the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution. The truth is that most of us didn’t “sign up” for anything; we were just born here; and – by the way – the Founders were hypocrites who said and wrote things that they didn’t believe at all.

When slaveholding Thomas Jefferson wrote “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness,” he didn’t believe a word of it. He considered his black slaves inferior beings and thought they deserved none of those “unalienable rights.” He devoted much of his adult life to defending and expanding the institution of slavery, which – by increasing demand for his human chattel – also increased his personal wealth.

When Gouverneur Morris penned the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution, citing “We the People” as the nation’s true sovereigns, he really meant white men of money and means, not poorer white men, nor women, and surely not slaves. His reference to “the People” was another propagandistic affectation.

There may be some irony in the fact that history imparts genuine value to the words of Jefferson and Morris even if they were simply empty propaganda when written. Jefferson’s assertion that “all men are created equal” possessing “unalienable rights” has inspired people around the world – and a literal interpretation of Morris’s florid rhetoric did, in a way, make “We the People” the technical sovereigns of America, as much as today’s ruling elites don’t really believe that either.

Much of what we see from the likes of Friedman is designed to reassert elite control by putting us back in an information-starved dependent state, reliant on the Establishment to parcel out a few morsels of information as it sees fit, the “truth” that the powers-that-be deign to give us. All the better for us to “trust” them.

But the messy behind-the-scenes reality that WikiLeaks and other publishers of “cyberhacked” and leaked material have made available to us – as well as the hypocritical and ambiguous history of the United States – is part of America’s “truth” and thus a reality that should belong to all the people.

Instead, Friedman and other Important People prefer a future in which unpleasant and unpopular truths can be marginalized or erased, all the better to guarantee our “trust” in our leaders.

The Times and the Post, in particular, have consistently conflated any deviation from their preferred groupthinks with “fake news” and “propaganda.” That is why

it is particularly troubling when they and other self-proclaimed arbiters of truth, including the pro-NATO propaganda site Bellingcat, sit on Google's First Draft Coalition and salivate over the prospects of unleashing high-tech algorithms to hunt down and eliminate information that runs counter to what they call the "truth."

The real truth about truth is that it is almost always complex and often hidden by powerful interests. It requires skepticism, hard work and even courage to reveal it.

Sure, there are occasions when creeps and crazy people purposely make up stuff or ignore reality in pursuit of some nutty conspiracy theory – and that deserves hearty condemnation – but there are many other times when the conventional wisdom is wrong and the people demanding inconvenient facts and asking probing questions turn out to be right.

So, if Friedman and his friends really want to restore trust and truth, they might begin by acknowledging their own flaws and by admitting the times when their groupthink turned out to be wrong. They also might start respecting the value that dissent has in the difficult pursuit of truth.

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

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