

Russia-gate's Evidentiary Void

Exclusive: A cyber-warfare expert sees no technical evidence linking Russia to the Democratic email releases, but The New York Times presses ahead with a new hope that Ukraine can fill the void, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The New York Times' unrelenting anti-Russia bias would be almost comical if the possible outcome were not a nuclear conflagration and maybe the end of life on planet Earth.

A classic example of the Times' one-sided coverage was a front-page [article](#) on Thursday expressing the wistful hope that a Ukrainian hacker whose malware was linked to the release of Democratic National Committee (DNC) emails in 2016 could somehow "blow the whistle on Russian hacking."

Though full of airy suspicions and often reading like a conspiracy theory, the article by Andrew E. Kramer and Andrew Higgins contained one important admission (buried deep inside the "jump" on page A8 in my print edition), a startling revelation especially for those Americans who have accepted the Russia-did-it groupthink as an established fact.

The article quoted Jeffrey Carr, the author of a book on cyber-warfare, referring to a different reality: that the Russia-gate "certainties" blaming the DNC "hack" on Russia's GRU military intelligence service or Russia's FSB security agency lack a solid evidentiary foundation.

"There is not now and never has been a single piece of technical evidence produced that connects the malware used in the DNC attack to the GRU, FSB or any agency of the Russian government," Carr said.

Yet, before that remarkable admission had a chance to sink into the brains of Times' readers whose thinking has been fattened up on a steady diet of treating the "Russian hack" as flat fact, Times' editors quickly added that "United States intelligence agencies, however, have been unequivocal in pointing a finger at Russia."

The Times' rebuke toward any doubts about Russia-gate was inserted after Carr's remark although the Times had already declared several times on page 1 that there was really no doubt about Russia's guilt.

"American intelligence agencies have determined Russian hackers were behind the electronic break-in of the Democratic national Committee," the Times reported,

followed by the assertion that the hacker's "malware apparently did" get used by Moscow and then another reminder that "Washington is convinced [that the hacking operation] was orchestrated by Moscow."

By repeating the same point on the inside page, the Times editors seemed to be saying that any deviant views on this subject must be slapped down promptly and decisively.

A Flimsy Assessment

But that gets us back to the problem with the Jan. 6 "Intelligence Community Assessment," which – contrary to repeated Times' claims – was not the "consensus" view of all 17 U.S. intelligence agencies, but rather the work of a small group of "hand-picked" analysts from three agencies: the Central Intelligence Agency, Federal Bureau of Investigation and National Security Agency. And, they operated under the watchful eye of President Obama's political appointees, CIA Director John Brennan and Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, who was the one who called them "hand-picked."

Those analysts presented no real evidence to support their assessment, which they acknowledged was not a determination of fact, but rather what amounted to their best guess based on what they perceived to be Russian motives and capabilities.

The Jan. 6 assessment admitted as much, saying its "judgments are not intended to imply that we have proof that shows something to be a fact. Assessments are based on collected information, which is often incomplete or fragmentary, as well as logic, argumentation, and precedents."

Much of the unclassified version of the report lambasted Russia's international TV network RT for such offenses as hosting a 2012 presidential debate for third-party candidates excluded from the Republican-Democratic debate, covering the Occupy Wall Street protests, and reporting on dangers from "fracking." The assessment described those editorial decisions as assaults on American democracy.

But rather than acknowledge the thinness of the Jan. 6 report, the Times – like other mainstream news outlets – treated it as gospel and pretended that it represented a "consensus" of all 17 intelligence agencies even though it clearly never did. (Belatedly, the Times slipped in a correction to that falsehood in one article although continuing to use similar language in subsequent stories so an unsuspecting Times reader would not be aware of how shaky the Russia-gate foundation is.)

Russian President Vladimir Putin and WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange have

denied repeatedly that the Russian government was the source of the two batches of Democratic emails released via WikiLeaks in 2016, a point that the Times also frequently fails to acknowledge. (This is not to say that Putin and Assange are telling the truth, but it is a journalistic principle to include relevant denials from parties facing accusations.)

Conspiracy Mongering

The rest of Thursday's Times article veered from the incomprehensible to the bizarre, as the Times reported that the hacker, known only as "Profexer," is cooperating with F.B.I. agents inside Ukraine.

Yet, the reliance on Ukraine to provide evidence against Russia defies any objective investigative standards. The Ukrainian government is fiercely anti-Russian and views itself as engaged in an "information war" with Putin and his government.

Ukraine's SBU security service also has been implicated in possible torture, according to United Nations investigators who were denied access to Ukrainian government detention facilities housing ethnic Russian Ukrainians who resisted the violent coup in February 2014, which was spearheaded by neo-Nazis and other extreme nationalists and overthrew elected President Viktor Yanukovich.

The SBU also has been the driving force behind the supposedly "Dutch-led" investigation into the July 17, 2014 shooting down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17. That inquiry has ignored evidence that a rogue Ukrainian force may have been responsible – not even addressing a Dutch/NATO intelligence report stating that all anti-aircraft missile batteries in eastern Ukraine on that day were under the control of the Ukrainian military – and instead tried to pin the atrocity on Russia, albeit with no suspects yet charged.

In Thursday's article, the Times unintentionally reveals how fuzzy the case against "Fancy Bear" and "Cozy Bear" – the two alleged Russian government hacking operations – is.

The Times reports: "Rather than training, arming and deploying hackers to carry out a specific mission like just another military unit, Fancy Bear and its twin Cozy Bear have operated more as centers for organization and financing; much of the hard work like coding is outsourced to private and often crime-tainted vendors."

Further, under the dramatic subhead – "A Bear's Lair" – the Times reported that no such lair may exist: "Tracking the bear to its lair ... has so far proved impossible, not least because many experts believe that no such single place exists."

Lacking Witnesses

The Times' article also noted the "absence of reliable witnesses" to resolve the mystery – so to the rescue came the "reliable" regime in Kiev, or as the Times wrote: "emerging from Ukraine is a sharper picture of what the United States believes is a Russian government hacking group."

The Times then cited various cases of exposed Ukrainian government emails, again blaming the Russians albeit without any real evidence.

The Times suggested some connection between the alleged Russian hackers and a mistaken report on Russia's Channel 1 about a Ukrainian election, which the Times claimed "inadvertently implicated the government authorities in Moscow."

The Times' "proof" in this case was that some hacker dummied a phony Internet page to look like an official Ukrainian election graphic showing a victory by ultra-right candidate, Dmytro Yarosh, when in fact Yarosh polled less than 1 percent. The hacker supposedly sent this "spoof" graphic to Channel 1, which used it.

But such an embarrassing error, which would have no effect on the actual election results, suggests an effort to discredit Channel 1 rather than evidence of a cooperative relationship between the mysterious hacker and the Russian station. The Times, however, made this example a cornerstone in its case against the Russians.

Meanwhile, the Times offered its readers almost no cautionary advice that – in the case of Russia-gate – Ukraine would have every motive to send U.S. investigators in directions harmful to Russia, much as happened with the MH-17 investigation.

So, we can expect that whatever "evidence" Ukraine "uncovers" will be accepted as gospel truth by the Times and much of the U.S. government – and anyone who dares ask inconvenient questions about its reliability will be deemed a "Kremlin stooge" spreading "Russian propaganda."

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](#)).

Hillary Clinton Promised Wars, Too

Exclusive: President Trump has shattered the hope of many peace-oriented Americans that he would pull back from U.S. foreign interventions, but Hillary Clinton might have pursued even more wars, notes James W. Carden.

By James W. Carden

The alliance between neoconservatives and the Democratic foreign policy establishment, which is largely made up of former Obama administration officials and former Clinton campaign surrogates, has been much noted of late, particularly since the formation of the German Marshall Fund's "Alliance for Democracy Project" which brings together high-profile members of both groups in an effort to fight what is loosely (and often inaccurately) defined as Russian "disinformation."

Those who applaud the new alignment are quick to point out that Donald J. Trump who, by virtue of his volatile temperament and his alarming ignorance and inexperience, is a menace to his country and the planet. And at this stage in Mr. Trump's presidency, that would seem unarguable.

And yet, Clinton partisans charge that those who withheld their support from Clinton not only bear responsibility for Trump, but also had no right to do so since it was, according to them, obvious that Clinton would have been, among other things, a more responsible steward of U.S. foreign policy than Trump.

And so, given the extreme bitterness that Hillary Clinton's loss has engendered among a number of prominent members of the liberal commentariat, it might be worth looking at what her campaign promised with regard to foreign policy to see if the above criticism holds water.

The argument here isn't that Trump isn't awful (which is something I've never argued); it's that he's proven to be every bit as bad as some of us reasonably expected Clinton would have been; and if one takes the time to consult the Clinton campaign's own briefing papers and fact sheets, one will find that on issue after issue, Clinton invariably took hawkish positions that reflected the fact that Clinton was (and remains) a saber-rattler *par excellence* – very much on par with the current occupant of the White House.

When North Korea conducted a nuclear test in September 2016, she released a statement, if not quite promising "fire and fury," that did declare: "North Korea's decision to conduct another nuclear test is outrageous and unacceptable. ... This constitutes a direct threat to the United States, and we cannot and will

never accept this.”

No Regrets on ‘Regime Change’

Beyond that, Clinton remained a firm believer in regime-change strategies. On Syria, the Clinton campaign “proposed instituting a coalition no-fly zone in the air coupled with safe zones on the ground to protect Syrian civilians and create leverage for a diplomatic resolution that includes Assad’s departure.” She supported the “deployment of special operating forces to Syria” and “strongly urged President Obama to arm moderate rebels in support of the eventual removal of the brutal Assad regime.”

Clinton also favored escalation in other hot spots. On Iran, the Clinton campaign outlined “a plan to counter Iran’s other malicious behavior” which included pledges to “deepen America’s unshakeable commitment to Israel’s security”; “expand our military presence in the region”; “increase security cooperation in areas like intelligence sharing, military backing and missile defense with our Gulf allies, to ensure they can defend themselves against Iranian aggression”; and “build a coalition to counter Iran’s proxies.”

When we also factor in Clinton’s support for the NATO’s illegal airstrikes on Kosovo (1999), her vote to authorize the second Iraq War (2003), her enthusiastic support for sending more troops to fight and die in Afghanistan (2009), and her disastrous embrace of regime change in Libya (2011) and Syria (2012), how can anyone be sure that her administration’s foreign policy would have been much of an improvement over what we now have?

Indeed, those who threw their support behind Clinton’s vision of American world leadership, like those associated with the “Alliance for Democracy,” really, with the notable exception of Trump’s abandonment of the Paris Climate Accord, have little to complain about.

Trump has done much as Clinton would have done by, among other things: slapping sanctions on Russia, Iran and North Korea; pledging unlimited support to Israel; reassuring “our allies” in the Persian Gulf and eastern Europe; condemning Russia’s actions in eastern Ukraine; expanding military operations in eastern Syria; and lobbing none-to-veiled threats at the left-wing government in Venezuela.

So while it’s easy and almost certainly emotionally satisfying to the legions of Clinton supporters to tell themselves (and their readers) that *of course* Hillary would have been a better steward of U.S. foreign policy than Trump, that assertion remains both unprovable and, given her record, highly questionable.

James W. Carden served as an adviser on Russia policy at the US State

Department. Currently a contributing writer at The Nation magazine, his work has appeared in the Los Angeles Times, Quartz, The American Conservative and The National Interest.

How Obama, Trump Had Their Wings Clipped

Presidents Obama and Trump contrast sharply on foreign policy, but share a common denominator: they faced resistance to smoothing relations with a key power, Obama on Iran; Trump on Russia, Andrew Spannaus noted at Aspenia.

By Andrew Spannaus

President Donald Trump was backed into a corner in late July, forced to sign a bill imposing new sanctions on Russia, despite opposing it on substance and form. Trump issued a signing statement, claiming that the new law impinges on “the President’s constitutional authority to recognize foreign governments” (referring to the case of Crimea and Ukraine), limits the President’s actions on sanctions, and violates “the President’s exclusive constitutional authority to determine the time, scope, and objectives of international negotiations”, among other things.

The overwhelming vote on the sanctions bill in both the House and the Senate (419-3 and 98-2, respectively) was a clear indicator of how much of official Washington sees the White House’s attempts to improve relations with Russia: as a dangerous goal that needs to be stopped as soon as possible, lest the apparently bumbling, self-absorbed and ineffective President actually succeed in implementing a major change in U.S. foreign policy, one with repercussions on numerous areas of global geopolitics.

Influential Republicans in the Senate such as John McCain and Lindsey Graham have never hidden their disdain for Trump’s anti-neocon positions, and now they find themselves with the almost unanimous support of their colleagues on the Democratic side of the aisle as well.

The constant churn of Russiagate scandals, although they have yet to turn up a smoking gun, has created an environment in which politicians and major press outlets have decided that Russia is Trump’s weak point, on which a strong defeat can neuter his effectiveness and potentially even lead to his impeachment.

The White House’s isolation on a point of foreign policy that would represent a major strategic shift recalls another situation not too many years ago, that of

Iran, when then-President Barack Obama found himself in a difficult battle with the overwhelming majority of Congress apparently opposed to his plan to shift gears in the Middle East. Obama ultimately won that battle, succeeding in reaching a historic deal regarding Iran's nuclear program, after adopting a strategy of secret negotiations, clear goals, and an explicit definition of the choices to be made.

Trump differs considerably from Obama on Iran, instead following the traditional Israeli-Saudi line to date, but the clash with Congress and the power of neoconservative foreign policy is an area where the two Presidents definitely have something in common; in this case, Trump could draw on aspects of Obama's strategy, although the circumstances are undoubtedly different, and the stakes possibly even higher today.

Obama's Iran Initiative

President Obama's first attempt at reaching an agreement with Iran, in 2009, failed miserably due to a series of circumstances, some under the White House's responsibility, and others not. The events of the Green Revolution, the substantial opposition within his own Administration – Hillary Clinton spoke openly of negotiations merely as an excuse to then slap more sanctions on Iran – and a lack of a solid strategy all doomed the first round of negotiations, making some believe Obama never really intended to go all the way.

At the start of his second term though, Obama began to lay the groundwork for a major shift in foreign policy. One of the key aspects was the renewed push for an agreement with Iran. Secret negotiations began in Oman in the spring of 2013, leading to the initial Joint Plan of Action adopted in November of that year. Over the subsequent two years negotiations continued with the other members of the P5+1 (the permanent five members of the U.N. Security Council plus Germany, as well as the European Union), until the accord was finalized in July 2015.

In order for the United States to fulfill its commitments, it was sufficient for the President to begin waiving sanctions, but the anti-Iran forces within the United States were determined to block the deal, and thus pushed for a Congressional vote to prevent the President from moving forward. The attempt failed, as the Senate voted 58-42 to close debate on the resolution, just shy of the 60-vote threshold needed for final passage.

Despite the widespread commentary about how the Democrats predictably handed their President a victory, success was far from assured in this case. As a matter of fact, by any historical standard, the failure of a vote against Iran, presented to members as a way to express support for Israel, was a startling achievement.

Just consider the vote totals for similar bills in years past, or even on the same issue. In May 2015, as negotiations were ongoing, the Senate voted on the “Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act”, which required the President to submit the agreement to Congressional review, setting up the vote which Obama eventually won. That bill passed 98-1 in the Senate, and 400-25 in the House of Representatives.

These are common numbers for legislation that is considered pro-Israel and has the backing of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), whose widespread influence on U.S. politicians has been well chronicled in recent years. AIPAC did everything it could to win the vote against the Iran deal, but failed spectacularly, in a defeat that not only tarnished the group’s invincible image, but also contributed to the rise of other pro-Israel groups on the U.S. political scene whose policies are not necessarily aligned with the right-wing governments led by Benjamin Netanyahu – who still happens to be in power.

Challenging the Establishment

In addition to working behind the scenes to assure Senators’ votes, Obama also made his case for the Iran deal publicly. His most effective intervention came in August 2015 when speaking at American University in Washington, D.C. He put the choice in stark terms, rather than attempting to woo lawmakers with a soft approach: a vote against the Iran deal was a vote for war in the future. And he drew a clear parallel with the decision to invade Iraq in 2002, that in hindsight many Congressmen have been forced to admit was wrong, and avoidable.

Defining the Iran deal as a vote for or against conflict was obviously not what Obama’s opponents expected. Consider the response from Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell at the time: “This goes way over the line of civil discourse... The President needs to retract his bizarre and preposterous comments.”

Laying out the consequences so directly went against the normal rules of politics, but it was precisely what Obama needed to ensure that the stakes would be clear to everyone before the fact, not afterwards if the pro-war faction had won the day once again.

At the time the initial understanding was reached with Iran, in the fall of 2013, Obama was beginning his attempt at a wholesale change in U.S. foreign policy. Not only did he work with Russia and China on the nuclear deal, but he decided not to bomb the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad, accepting Russian President Vladimir Putin’s offer of a deal to remove chemical weapons from Syria.

Still today this decision is seen in the U.S. establishment as a disastrous

capitulation after having drawn the infamous “red line” regarding chemical weapons attacks. Yet Obama, who pulled back after hearing doubts about the intelligence and recognizing that Congress was unlikely to support action, later defined that as one of the most important moments of his presidency, when he broke with the “Washington playbook” of automatic military response.

The attempt to move away from the policies of “regime change,” drawing down support for extremist groups linked to Al Qaeda and ISIS while seeking different alliances, would ultimately be too little, and too late.

In 2014 cooperation with Russia was derailed due to the crisis in Ukraine – a situation where the Washington playbook remains intact – and by the time Obama and Putin were able to begin working together in Syria again, through the activism of John Kerry and Sergei Lavrov, time had essentially run out.

In 2016, the U.S. foreign policy establishment wasn’t willing to follow Obama towards cooperation with Russia, as most anticipated the more hawkish Hillary Clinton would win in November.

Obama moved quickly to embrace the new Cold War posture permeating Washington in the final months of his presidency, but his original goal of rebalancing the U.S. presence in the Middle East and cooperating with Vladimir Putin’s Russia in the fight against terrorism provides a direct link to the challenges facing the Trump Administration today.

The current President has openly declared his intentions with respect to Russia, which Obama rarely did. Despite numerous setbacks – some of his own making, of course – Trump has continued to seek better relations with Putin; yet the overwhelming pressure from both inside and outside of the Administration has heavily scaled back expectations of how far he can go, and thwarted cooperation on numerous fronts.

If Donald Trump wants to truly reach his goal of better relations with Russia, he could look to the successful aspects of Obama’s victory on the Iran deal. Not only is it essential to work behind the scenes, through back channels that avoid sabotage from within his own Administration, but the President could potentially go back on the offensive if he were to define the issue publicly on his own terms.

It won’t be easy to convince the American people, and a considerable part of the institutions, given the current environment; however, a clear and honest accounting of our relations with Russia, including the unthinkable dangers of conflict, could go a long way towards inaugurating a more rational discussion of Trump’s desired foreign policy shift.

Andrew Spannaus is a freelance journalist and strategic analyst based in Milan, Italy. He is the founder of Transatlantico.info, that provides news, analysis and consulting to Italian institutions and businesses. He has published the books “Perché vince Trump” (Why Trump is Winning – June 2016) and “La rivolta degli elettori” (The Revolt of the Voters – July 2017). [This article first appeared at <http://www.aspeninstitute.it/aspenia-online/article/congress-vs-president-what-trump-can-learn-obama>]

Russia-gate’s Fatally Flawed Logic

Exclusive: By pushing the Russia-gate “scandal” and neutering President Trump’s ability to conduct diplomacy, Democrats and Congress have encouraged his war-making side on North Korea, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

There was always a logical flaw in pushing Russia-gate as an excuse for Hillary Clinton’s defeat – besides the fact that it was based on a dubious “assessment” by a small team of “hand-picked” U.S. intelligence analysts. The flaw was that it poked the thin-skinned Donald Trump over one of his few inclinations toward diplomacy.

We’re now seeing the results play out in a very dangerous way in Trump’s bluster about North Korea, which was included in an aggressive economic sanctions bill – along with Russia and Iran – that Congress passed nearly unanimously, without a single Democratic no vote.

Democrats and Official Washington’s dominant neocons celebrated the bill as a vote of no-confidence in Trump’s presidency but it only constrained him in possible peacemaking, not war-making.

The legislation, which Trump signed under protest, escalated tensions with those three countries while limiting Trump’s power over lifting sanctions. After signing the bill into law, Trump denounced the bill as “seriously flawed – particularly because it encroaches on the executive branch’s authority to negotiate.”

As his “signing statements” made clear, Trump felt belittled by the congressional action. His response has been to ratchet up bellicose rhetoric about North Korea, bluster appearing to be his natural default position when

under pressure.

Remember, in April, as the Russia-gate hysteria mounted, Trump changed the subject, briefly, by rushing to judgment on an alleged chemical-weapons incident in Khan Sheikhoun, Syria, and firing off 59 Tomahawk missiles at a Syrian military base.

He immediately won acclaim from Official Washington, although Hillary Clinton and other hawks argued that he should have gone further with a much larger U.S. invasion of Syria, i.e., establishing a “no-fly zone” even if that risked nuclear war with Russia.

What Trump learned from that experience is that even when he is going off half-cocked, he is rewarded for taking the military option. (More careful analysis of the Khan Sheikhoun evidence later raised serious doubts that the Syrian military was responsible.)

Schoolyard Taunts

So, we now have President Trump in a bizarre exchange of schoolyard taunts with the leadership of North Korea, with Trump’s “fire and fury like the world has never seen” rhetoric possibly plunging the United States into a confrontation that could have devastating consequences for the Korean peninsula, Japan and indeed the whole world.

Given the fact that the world has already seen the U.S. nuclear destruction of two Japanese cities at the end of World War II, Trump’s loose phrasing seems to suggest that the United States is prepared to use nuclear weapons against North Korea (although he may be referring to “just” carpet-bombing with conventional ordnance).

If nuclear weapons are brought into play, it is hard to fathom what the long-term consequences might be. It’s unlikely that Trump – not known for his deep thinking – has even contemplated that future.

However, even a “limited” war with conventional weapons and confined to the Korean peninsula could kill hundreds of thousands of people and severely shake the world’s economy. If North Korea manages to deliver retaliatory damage on Japan, a human catastrophe and a financial panic could follow.

Many thoughtful people are now expressing alarm at Trump’s erratic behavior, but many of those same people cheered the promotion of Russia-gate as a way to corner Trump politically. They didn’t seem to care that the “scandal” was built on a foundation of flimsy or phony evidence and that a key argument – that “all 17 U.S. intelligence agencies” concurred in the Russian-hacking conclusion – was

false.

Once that fake “consensus” claim disappeared – after President Obama’s intelligence chiefs acknowledged that the Jan. 6 “assessment” was the work of “hand-picked” analysts from only three agencies – there should have been a stepping back from the Russia-gate groupthink. There should have been demands for a reassessment of the underlying assumptions.

However, by then, too many Important People, including editors and executives at major news organizations, had accepted Russia’s guilt as flat fact, meaning that their reputations were at risk. To protect their estimable careers, all doubts about Russia’s guilt had to be crushed and the conventional wisdom enforced.

That self-serving defensiveness became the backdrop to the Russia-Iran-North Korean sanctions bill. Not only could no rethinking be allowed on Russia-gate but Trump’s resistance to the groupthink had to be broken by neutering him along with his presidential powers to conduct diplomacy.

Still eager to please the Democratic #Resistance which sees Russia-gate as the pathway to Trump’s impeachment, Democrats – from neocons like Sen. Ben Cardin to anti-interventionists such as Rep. Tulsi Gabbard – joined in the stampede for the sanctions bill.

In their rush, the Democrats even endangered Obama’s signature diplomatic accomplishment, the international agreement blocking an Iranian nuclear weapon. Obama had promised Iran sanctions relief, not more sanctions. Now, the prospects for the accord’s collapse are increased and the neocon dream to bomb-bomb-bomb Iran revived.

And, by tossing North Korea into the mix, the Democrats left Trump few options other than to unleash his warmongering side and plunge the world toward a potential cataclysm.

So, this is what the Russia-gate opportunism has wrought. The logical flaw in Russia-gate may turn out to be a fatal one.

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

New Cracks in Russia-gate Foundation

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

By Patrick Lawrence

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We come now to a moment of great gravity.

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

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

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

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

New Analyses

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Cyber-Evidence

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

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

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

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

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

through which to disclose their findings.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Transfer Rate

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Russian ‘Fingerprints’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Hand-Picked’ Analysts

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Patrick Lawrence is a longtime columnist, essayist, critic, and lecturer, whose

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

How Congress 'Learns' About Russia

Hedge-fund operator William Browder helped plunder Russia's riches – and renounced his U.S. citizenship – but is still treated as a great truth-teller by a credulous Congress, notes ex-CIA officer Philip Giraldi at The American Conservative.

By Philip Giraldi

A congressman once admitted to me that he and his colleagues know a lot of things, generally speaking, but their knowledge only “extends about one inch deep.” In other words, the briefings provided by staffers and in committees is intended to touch only on what is important to know to look well informed in front of the C-SPAN cameras without any unnecessary depth that would only create confusion.

And the information provided must generally conform to what the congressmen already believe to be true and want to hear so no one will be embarrassed.

That such ignorance would be particularly notable in the realm of foreign policy should surprise no one because congressmen as a group are no longer very well educated. Few speak foreign languages and no one any longer studies the history or culture of any country but the United States, and sometimes not even that.

Some Congressmen nevertheless boast about all the countries they have visited to “fact find.” They fail to recognize how they travel in a bubble, whisked to foreign lands via military aircraft on the virtually worthless congressional delegations known as CODELS. On these trips, spouses go shopping while American legislators are briefed by the ambassador's staff and the CIA station, both of which, for budget reasons, are more interested in demonstrating what a wonderful job they are doing rather than explaining the complexity of the local situation.

And that is followed by the obligatory visit to listen to the local head of state lie about how everything is going just fine in his country. Given the reality of garbage in, garbage out, it is no wonder that buffoons like Senators

John McCain and Lindsey Graham are lauded as foreign-policy experts in the Republican Party. It's called setting the bar really low.

For a Congress intent on appearing to be doing something while doing nothing, one of the worst time wasters is the committee hearing, where the senators and congressmen call in "experts" to explain to them why a certain policy is either worthwhile or useless. Of course, it usually doesn't exactly play out that way, as the committee generally wants to hear testimony that supports its preconceptions about whatever is being discussed, so it only invites those to the party who will say what it wants to hear.

One-sided Hearings

To cite only one of many examples of Congress's unwillingness to listen to any opinion that might challenge the establishment view, a February 16 hearing by the House Foreign Affairs Committee entitled "Iran on Notice" featured four "experts," all of whom were hostile to Iran and advocates of "solutions" ranging from actively encouraging regime change to using military force. No one knowledgeable enough to explain Iran's behavior and/or offer non-confrontational approaches was invited or asked to participate.

I have been closely following some recent hearings that relate to Russia, most particularly the Senate Judiciary session that was supposed to look into the issue of registry under the Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938 for Russian agents. The hearing, which started on July 26, and was extended to the following day, was entitled "Oversight of the Foreign Agents Registration Act and Attempts to Influence U.S. Elections: Lessons Learned from Current and Prior Administrations."

The first day's session included statements by three Justice Department and FBI officials regarding how the FARA legislation is enforced and how presumed violations of it are investigated. There were some specific comments and questions from individual senators regarding Russian and Saudi government attempts to influence opinion in the United States, but little in the way of drama.

The second day was for additional "expert testimony." It consisted of billionaire hedge-fund director William Browder, who read a prepared statement and then responded to questions. (Video of the statement and the following discussion are available here, with Browder beginning at minute 24.) Browder, who clearly has his own agenda to debunk a film made last year attacking him and a narrative about a former employee Sergei Magnitsky that he has been promoting, was embraced by the senators, who should have known better.

Veteran award-winning journalist Robert Parry describes what took place: “...last week, Senate Judiciary Committee members sat in rapt attention as hedge-fund operator William Browder wowed them with a reprise of his Magnitsky tale and suggested that people who have challenged the narrative and those who dared air the documentary one time at Washington’s *Newseum* last year should be prosecuted for violating the Foreign Agent Registration Act (FARA).”

Browder’s Tall Tales

Not even one senator challenged William Browder’s sometimes extraordinary claims about Russia’s government in general and its President Vladimir Putin in particular, including that Putin is the richest man in the world due to all the money that he has stolen.

As Browder appears to be seeking to use FARA to punish those who have criticized him or even watched a movie about him based on the assumption that they must be Russian agents, he might well be regarded as not exactly a disinterested source providing objective information about Russia and its government.

American-born British citizen Browder has been the principal promoter of a narrative about Russian government malfeasance relating to his former employee Sergei Magnitsky, who, Browder claims, was a courageous whistleblower who was falsely arrested after exposing corruption and eventually died in a Moscow prison after being tortured.

Browder’s energetic promotion of the Magnitsky story has poisoned relations with Moscow and led to the passage of the Magnitsky Act by Congress in 2012. Russia rightly has seen the legislation, which includes sanctions on some officials, as unwarranted interference in the operation of its judicial system.

Browder astutely portrays himself as a human-rights campaigner dedicated to promoting the legacy of Magnitsky, but his own biography is inevitably much more complicated than that. The grandson of Earl Browder, the former general secretary of the American Communist Party, William Browder studied economics at the University of Chicago, and obtained an MBA from Stanford.

From the beginning, Browder concentrated on Eastern Europe, which was beginning to open up to the west. In 1989 he took a position at highly respected Boston Consulting Group dealing with reviving failing Polish socialist enterprises. He then worked as an Eastern Europe analyst for Robert Maxwell, the unsavory British press magnate and Mossad spy, before joining the Russia team at Wall Street’s Salomon Brothers in 1992.

He left Salomon in 1996 and partnered with Edmond Safra, the controversial Lebanese-Brazilian-Jewish banker who died under mysterious circumstances in a

fire in 1999, to set up Hermitage Capital Management Fund. Hermitage is registered in tax havens Guernsey and the Cayman Islands.

It is a hedge fund that was focused on “investing” in Russia, taking advantage initially of the loans-for-shares scheme under Boris Yeltsin, and then continuing to profit greatly during the early years of Vladimir Putin’s ascendancy. By 2005 Hermitage was the largest foreign investor in Russia.

Browder had renounced his U.S. citizenship in 1997 and became a British citizen apparently to avoid American taxes, which are levied on worldwide income.

In his book, *Red Notice: A True Story of High Finance, Murder and One Man’s Fight for Justice*, he depicts himself as an honest and honorable Western businessman attempting to function in a corrupt Russian business world. That may or may not be true, but the loans-for-shares scheme that made him his initial fortune has been correctly characterized as the epitome of corruption, an arrangement whereby foreign “investors” worked with local oligarchs to strip the former Soviet economy of its assets paying pennies on each dollar of value. Along the way, Browder was reportedly involved in making false representations on official documents and bribery.

As a consequence of what came to be known as the Magnitsky scandal, Browder was eventually charged by the Russian authorities for fraud and tax evasion. He was banned from reentering Russia in 2005, even before Magnitsky died, and began to withdraw his assets from the country. Three companies controlled by Hermitage were eventually seized by the authorities, though it is not clear if any of their assets remained in Russia. Browder himself was convicted of tax evasion in absentia in 2013 and sentenced to nine years in prison.

Browder has assiduously, and mostly successfully, made his case that he and Magnitsky have been the victims of Russian corruption both during and since that time, though there have been credible skeptics, including Israel Shamir, who have dissected the sordid side to his rise to power and wealth.

Wielding Influence

Browder has reportedly used political contributions and threats of lawsuits filed by his battery of lawyers to popularize and sell his tale to leading American politicians like Senators John McCain and Ben Cardin, ex-Senator Joe Lieberman, as well as to a number of European parliamentarians and media outlets.

But there is, inevitably, another side to the story, something quite different, which documentary filmmaker Andrei Nekrasov, an outspoken critic of Russian President Vladimir Putin, presented to the viewer in his film *The Magnitsky Act:*

Behind the Scenes.

The film has only been shown publicly once, at the *Newseum* in Washington on June 13, 2016 – a viewing that I attended, and that proceeded in spite of threats from Browder and attempted disruption by his supporters. Browder has characteristically used lawsuits and threats of still more legal action to intimidate numerous television stations in Europe and prevent additional showings.

Nekrasov discovered what he believed to be holes in the narrative about Magnitsky that had been carefully constructed and nurtured by Browder. He provides documents and also an interview with Magnitsky's mother maintaining that there is no clear evidence that he was beaten or tortured and that he died instead due to the failure to provide him with medicine while in prison or treatment shortly after he had a heart attack.

A subsequent investigation ordered by then Russian President Dimitri Medvedev in 2011 confirmed that Magnitsky had not received medical treatment, contributing to this death, but could not demonstrate that he had been beaten even though there was suspicion that that might have been the case.

Nekrasov also claimed that much of the case against the Russian authorities is derived from English language translations of relevant documents provided by Browder himself. The actual documents sometimes say something quite different, including that Magnitsky is consistently referred to as an accountant, which he was, not as a lawyer, which he wasn't. Browder calls him a lawyer because it better fits into his preferred narrative.

No Whistleblower

Magnitsky the accountant appears in the document of his deposition which was apparently part of a criminal investigation of possible tax fraud, meaning that he was no whistleblower and was instead a suspected criminal.

Other discrepancies are cited by Nekrasov, who concludes that there was indeed a huge fraud related to Russian taxes but that it was not carried out by corrupt officials. Instead, it was deliberately ordered and engineered by Browder with Magnitsky, the accountant, personally developing and implementing the scheme used to carry out the deception.

To be sure, Browder and his international legal team have presented documents in the case that contradict much of what Nekrasov has presented in his film. It might be that Browder and Magnitsky have been the victims of a corrupt and venal state, but it just might be the other way around.

Having a highly politicized Congress and a vengeful Browder lining up against a conveniently unpopular Russian government just might suggest that one is hearing a narrative that peddles lies as much as it tells the truth.

The Senate just might consider looking more deeply into Browder's business activities while in Russia before jumping to conclusions and bringing him in as an "expert" on anything. He should not be given a free pass because he is saying things about Russia and Putin that fit neatly into a Washington establishment profile and make Senators smile and nod their heads.

As soon as folks named McCain, Cardin and Lieberman jump on a cause, it should be time to step back a bit and reflect on what the consequences of proposed action might be.

One might also ask why anyone who has a great deal to gain by having a certain narrative accepted should be completely and unquestionably trusted, the venerable *Cui bono?* standard. And then there is a certain evasiveness on the part of Browder, who notably makes outrageous claims about the Russians but does not do so under oath, where he might be subject to legal consequences for perjury.

The film shows him huffing and puffing to explain himself at times and he has avoided being served with subpoenas on allegations connected to the Magnitsky fraud that are making their way through American courts. In one case, he can be seen on YouTube running away from a server, somewhat unusual behavior if he has nothing to hide.

So, if you wonder why the United States Congress makes such bad decisions, it just might be due to the kind of information that it gets when it travels the world and holds hearings. Inviting a man who has renounced his U.S. citizenship to avoid paying taxes, who likely engaged in questionable business practices, and who very definitely has his own agenda, which includes vilifying the Kremlin, is hardly the way to go if one truly wants to understand Russia, particularly as no one participated in the hearing to rebut his claims.

And if fining American citizens or forcing them to register as enemy agents because they may have supported or gone to see a movie is reflective of that gentleman's mindset, there is even more good reason to reject the snake oil that he might be selling.

Philip Giraldi, a former CIA officer, is executive director of the Council for the National Interest. [This article previously appeared at The American Conservative at <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/the-new-know-nothings-in-congress>

A New Twist in Seth Rich Murder Case

Exclusive: The U.S. mainstream media dismisses any link between the murder of DNC official Seth Rich and leaked DNC emails as a “conspiracy theory” – while blaming Russia instead – but a new possibility has arisen, writes Joe Lauria.

By Joe Lauria

With U.S.-Russia tensions as dangerously high as they’ve been since the worst days of the Cold War, there is potential new evidence that Russia was not behind a hack of the Democratic National Committee, although Congress and the U.S. mainstream media accept the unproven allegation of Russia’s guilt as indisputable fact.

The possible new evidence comes in the form of a leaked audiotape of veteran investigative journalist Seymour Hersh in which Hersh is heard to say that not Russia, but a DNC insider, was the source of the Democratic emails published by WikiLeaks just before the start of the Democratic National Convention in late July 2016.

Hersh said on the tape that the source of the leak was former DNC employee Seth Rich, who was murdered on a darkened street in a rough neighborhood of Northwest Washington D.C. two weeks before the Convention, on July 10, 2016. But Hersh threw cold water on a theory that the murder was an assassination in retaliation for the leak. Instead, Hersh concurs with the D.C. police who say the murder was a botched robbery.

Mainstream news outlets have mocked any linkage between Rich’s murder and the disclosure of the DNC emails as a “conspiracy theory,” but Hersh’s comments suggest another possibility – that the murder and the leak were unrelated while Rich may still have been the leaker.

In dismissing the possibility that Rich was the leaker, mainstream media outlets often ignore one of the key reason why some people believe that he was: Shortly after his murder, WikiLeaks, which has denied receiving the emails from the Russian government, posted a Tweet offering a \$20,000 reward for information leading to the solution of the mystery of who killed Rich.

Julian Assange, WikiLeaks founder and publisher, brought up Rich's murder out of context in an interview with Dutch TV last August. "Whistle-blowers go to significant efforts to get us material and often very significant risks," Assange said. "As a 27-year-old, works for the DNC, was shot in the back, murdered just a few weeks ago for unknown reasons as he was walking down the street in Washington."

Pressed by the interviewer to say whether Rich was the source of the DNC emails, Assange said WikiLeaks never reveals its sources. Yet, it appeared to be an indirect way of naming Rich, while formally maintaining WikiLeaks's policy. An alternative view would be to believe that Assange is cynically using Rich's death to divert the trail from the real source.

But Assange is likely one of the few people who actually knows who the source is, so his professed interest in Rich's murder presents a clue regarding the source of the leak that any responsible news organization would at least acknowledge although that has not been the case in many recent mainstream articles about the supposed Seth Rich "conspiracy theory."

Hersh's Unwitting Tapes

Hersh's taped comments add another element to the mystery, given his long record of shedding light into the dark corners of the U.S. government's crimes, lies and cover-ups. He exposed the My Lai massacre during the Vietnam War; revealed illegal CIA spying in the 1970s spurring wide-ranging Congressional investigations and reform; and uncovered U.S. torture in Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.

In the audiotape – which Hersh told me was made without his permission – he quoted an unnamed government source who told him that Rich offered the DNC emails to WikiLeaks in exchange for money.

"What I know comes off an FBI report. Don't ask me how. You can figure it out, I've been around a long time," Hersh says on the tape. "I have somebody on the inside who will go and read a file for me. This person is unbelievably accurate and careful, he's a very high-level guy and he'll do a favor. You're just going to have to trust me."

The FBI cyber unit got involved after the D.C. police were unable to access protected files on Rich's computer, Hersh said. So the FBI "found what he'd done. He had submitted a series of documents, of emails. Some juicy emails from the DNC," to Wikileaks, Hersh said.

"He offered a sample, an extensive sample, you know I'm sure dozens of emails and said 'I want money.' Then later Wikileaks did get the password, he had a

Dropbox, a protected Dropbox,” Hersh said.

“Wikileaks got access, and before he was killed ... he also, and this is also in the FBI report, he also let people know, with whom he was dealing. ... I don’t know how he dealt with the Wikileaks and the mechanism but ... the word was passed according to the NSA report, ‘I’ve also shared this box with a couple of friends so if anything happens to me it’s not going to solve your problem.’” Hersh said he didn’t know what this “problem” was.

Either Hersh misspoke when he mentioned an “NSA report,” instead meaning the FBI report, or the National Security Agency may have provided a record of Rich’s communication to the FBI. Both the FBI and the D.C. police have denied that the FBI got involved in the case.

The Tape Is Leaked

The Hersh audiotape was posted on a website called Big League Politics, which displays links to Project Veritas, a right-wing group run by James O’Keefe, though there is no evidence that Veritas was involved in the Hersh tape. Veritas does undercover audio and video recordings of unsuspecting subjects and has been accused of doctoring its video and audiotapes. But a recent O’Keefe undercover video of a CNN medical producer saying the network’s coverage of the Russia-gate story was “bullshit” was confirmed by CNN, which took no action against the producer.

People who believe that Hersh’s apparent revelation could reduce Russia-U.S. tensions are clamoring for him to confirm what he said. Popular blogger Caitlin Johnstone wrote: “If Hersh has any information at all indicating that the WikiLeaks releases last year came not from Russian hackers but from a leaker on the inside, he is morally obligated to volunteer all the information that he has. Even the slightest possibility that his information could help halt America’s collision course with Russia by killing public support for new cold war escalations makes his remaining silent absolutely inexcusable.”

Only Hersh’s voice is heard on the taped interview, which was conducted by Ed Butowsky, a wealthy Republican donor and Trump supporter. Until now, Hersh’s only public comment about the tape was to National Public Radio. “I hear gossip,” Hersh said. “[Butowsky] took two and two and made 45 out of it.”

I contacted Hersh on Friday via email. He confirmed to me that it was his voice on the tape by angrily condemning those who he said secretly recorded him, without identifying them. He did not respond when I asked him whether he thought the tape may have been altered. Hersh refused to comment further.

On June 2, in an exchange of emails between Hersh and Butowsky, Hersh denied any

knowledge of the FBI report. That was two months before Hersh discovered that he had been secretly recorded when the tape was made public on Aug. 1 by Big League Politics. A screenshot of the Hersh-Butowsky email exchange was published by Big League Politics last week.

"I am curious why you haven't approached the house committee telling them what you were read by your FBI friend related to Seth Rich that you in turn read to me," Butowsky wrote.

Hersh replied: "ed -you have a lousy memory...i was not read anything by my fbi friend..i have no firsthand information and i really wish you would stop telling others information that you think i have...please stop relaying information that you do not have right...and that i have no reason to believe is accurate..."

Without informing him that he had been recorded, Butowsky replies: "I know it isn't first hand knowledge but you clearly said, my memory is perfect, that you had a friend at the FBI who read / told you what was in the file on Seth Rich and I wonder why you aren't helping your country and sharing that information on who it was?"

Further suggesting that Rich may have been the source of the DNC emails, WikiLeaks posted a link to the audiotape on Twitter.

Hersh has given no indication he's planning to write a piece based on his source who he said has seen the FBI report. Hersh has found it difficult to be published in recent years in the United States. He has been writing for the *London Review of Books* until that publication earlier this year rejected a piece challenging the purported U.S. evidence blaming a chemical weapons attack in Syria, which led to Trump's bombing of a Syrian air field. Hersh's story was published instead in a major German weekly, *Die Welt*.

MSM Contempt

Corporate media's uniform reaction has been to treat the idea of Seth Rich being WikiLeaks's source as a "conspiracy theory" – while mostly ignoring Assange's hints and now the Hersh tape. Major U.S. media outlets cover Russia-gate as if Russian interference in last November's U.S. election is proven, rather than based on a shaky "assessment" by "hand-picked" analysts from three – not all 17 – U.S. intelligence agencies.

If Russia-gate special prosecutor Robert Mueller is serious about getting to the bottom of who WikiLeaks's source is there are several avenues he could pursue. He could check Rich's bank accounts to see if there was a transfer of money from a representative of WikiLeaks. He could try to find Rich's friends who may have been given his DropBox password. He could seek to interview Hersh.

"Someone ought to ask Mueller, if he had an ounce of integrity (which he doesn't), why he's not showing these FBI and/or NSA reports to his Grand Jury which could blow the lid off of 'Russiagate' that Mueller was appointed to investigate," former FBI official and whistleblower Coleen Rowley told me in an email. "It's sad the FBI could be keeping this secret. But I think the [Rich] family could sue to get the FBI Report that Hersh mentioned or now that FOX is sued, its attorneys could try to subpoena the FBI documents in discovery." She added that the FBI would likely fight such a subpoena, however.

The lawsuit that Rowley mentioned was filed by Rod Wheeler, a D.C. private detective, against Butowsky and Fox News. Wheeler was hired by Butowsky on behalf of the Rich family to find the killer. In a Fox News item on May 16, Wheeler was quoted referring to a Fox source in the federal government who said that Rich was WikiLeaks's source.

Fox News retracted the story a week later citing unspecified breaches of its editorial policies. At the time Fox had suffered ad boycotts when its chairman, Roger Ailes, and then its top presenter, Bill O'Reilly, faced sexual harassment allegations. Both later resigned. Sean Hannity, another top presenter, continued to pursue the Rich story until he was threatened with an ad boycott, at which point Fox retracted the story.

Wheeler's suit now alleges that he was misquoted and that the purpose of the Fox story was to distract attention from Russia's connection with the DNC emails. Big League Politics has posted audio of Wheeler saying that Aaron Rich, the victim's brother, blocked him from pursuing leads on Seth Rich's computer.

It is not clear if Hersh's source is the same as Fox's (or if Fox was using Hersh in a second-hand way). Butowsky has a connection with Fox as an on-air commentator. The date of the Hersh audio recording has not been made known although it presumably predated his email exchange with Butowsky on June 2.

If an FBI report exists indicating that Rich was the source of the DNC emails and the report is made public, it could reduce tensions with Russia that Congress ratcheted up further last week by escalating sanctions – a form of economic warfare – against Russia as punishment for its alleged role in exposing the DNC emails and others belonging to Hillary Clinton's campaign chairman John Podesta.

The DNC emails revealed DNC officials improperly interfering in the Democratic primaries to undercut Clinton's chief rival, Sen. Bernie Sanders. The Podesta emails included the contents of Clinton's speeches to Wall Street and other

special interests as well as pay-to-play features of the Clinton Foundation.

On Jan. 6 – before leaving office – President Obama’s intelligence chiefs oversaw “hand-picked” analysts from the CIA, FBI and NSA creating an “assessment” blaming Russia for the hacked emails albeit without presenting any hard evidence. Russian officials have denied supplying the emails to WikiLeaks and WikiLeaks has denied receiving them from Russia.

Craig Murray, a former British ambassador to Uzbekistan and an associate of Assange, has said categorically that the WikiLeaks source was a leak from an insider, not a hack. In an email message last week to former CIA analyst Ray McGovern, which McGovern shared with me, Murray wrote: “To my certain knowledge neither the DNC nor Podesta leaks to Wikileaks involved Russia. I met with someone while in Washington who, to the best of my knowledge, was an actual leaker.”

Nevertheless, the unproven allegations of Russian interference in the election have raised tensions between the two nuclear powers to levels not seen since the darkest days of the Cold War and possibly worse. Stephen Cohen, a leading U.S. expert on Russia, said the current showdown may be even more hazardous than the Cuban missile crisis.

“I think this is the most dangerous moment in American-Russian relations, at least since the Cuban missile crisis. And arguably, it’s more dangerous, because it’s more complex,” he told Democracy Now! in April. “Therefore, we ... have in Washington these – and, in my judgment, fact-less – accusations that Trump has somehow been compromised by the Kremlin.”

In the missile crisis “there was no doubt what the Soviets had done, putting missile silos in Cuba,” Cohen said. “No evidence has been presented today of anything. Imagine if Kennedy had been accused of being a secret Soviet Kremlin agent. He would have been crippled. And the only way he could have proved he wasn’t was to have launched a war against the Soviet Union. And at that time, the option was nuclear war.”

As it still is today.

Joe Lauria is a veteran foreign-affairs journalist. He has written for the Boston Globe, the Sunday Times of London and the Wall Street Journal among other newspapers. He is the author of How I Lost By Hillary Clinton published by OR Books in June 2017. He can be reached at joelauria@gmail.com and followed on Twitter at @unjoe.

The NYT's Grim Depiction of Russian Life

As a top propaganda outlet pushing the New Cold War, The New York Times paints life in Russia in the darkest hues, but this one-sided depiction misses the reality of the increasingly vibrant country that Gilbert Doctorow sees.

By Gilbert Doctorow

Our five-week stay at our home in the Russian countryside was approaching its conclusion when I got an email from a friend in France asking me to comment on an article in *The New York Times* entitled "Russia's Villages, and Their Way of Life, Are 'Melting Away'."

The article surely met the expectations of its editors by painting a grim picture of decline and fall of the Russian countryside in line with what the author sees as very unfavorable demographic trends in the Russian Federation as a whole. The fact that his own statistics do not justify the generalization (a net population loss of a few thousand deaths over live births in 2016 for a population of 146 million) does not get in the way of the paint-by-color canvas. Nor does the author explain why what he has observed in a village off the beaten track in Northwest Russia, in precisely the still poor region of Pskov, gives an accurate account of country life across the vast territory of Russia, the world's largest nation-state.

As the author notes, the main source of income from the land of the town he visited was – in the past – linen. That cultivation turned unprofitable and was discontinued. Consequently, the able-bodied part of the population has been looking for employment and making their lives elsewhere (a process internal migration common all over the world, including the United States).

The author fails to mention that linen production is not a major agricultural indicator in Russia today, whereas many other crops are booming. Linen goes into the lovely traditional handicraft tablecloths and napkins sold to tourists at riverboat landings, and that is the extent of demand.

I could respond to the overriding portrait of countryside decay in the *Times* article by drawing on my observations a year ago from the deck of one of those riverboats navigating the canals and rivers connecting St. Petersburg and Moscow. From that deck and from the experience of walking around the little picturesque towns where we made stops, I understand that growing domestic Russian tourism has pumped financial resources into historic centers, like Uglich. They are coming alive, with infrastructure improvements and reviving

trade.

But tourist sites are not going to be representative of the country at large, either. So I will instead use two sources of information that I am confident have greater relevance to the issue at hand. The first, and surely the most politically significant, comes from a couple of family friends who for nearly 50 years have spent summers at a parcel of land deep in the hinterland, 280 kilometers southeast of St. Petersburg, close to regional industrial center of Pikalyovo, (Leningradskaya Oblast) with its train station along the line linking the northern capital to Vologda.

My Own Eyes

The second source is my own experience in and around our property in Orolino, a hamlet numbering 300 inhabitants in the Gatchina district, also Leningradskaya Oblast, but 80 kilometers due south of St. Petersburg.

The homesteads around Pikalyovo were always hard to get to, with very poor local roads. There was no commercial infrastructure, so the bold and determined vacationers coming here had to bring most provisions for their stay with them. They were rewarded for their efforts by the produce grown in their gardens and by foraging for berries and highly desirable boletes and other wild mushrooms in the surrounding forests.

When the Soviet Union collapsed and the Russian economy followed suit in the 1990s, the Pikalyovo region suffered the kind of economic misery and population loss that the *Times* describes today in the Pskov region. Our friends saw that normal folks left, and the concentration of drunkards and thieves rose proportionately. The theft of anything of value in common space became acute when scrap metal scavengers pulled up kilometers of electrical cables for their copper content, leaving swathes of the district temporarily without electricity.

Pikalyovo came to the attention of national news during the 2008-2009 financial crisis when its three main industrial enterprises shut down, causing widespread misery. The best known of these enterprises, a clay processing plant owned by the oligarch Oleg Derispaska's conglomerate Basic Element, caused a major scandal when state television carried reports on how the factory had not paid its employees for months while the boss was seeking and obtaining government assistance with repayment and rescheduling of his foreign loans. In the spring of 2009, there were protest demonstrations in Pikalyovo that resulted in both Dmitry Medvedev and Vladimir Putin personally entering the dispute to pressure Deripaska to do the right thing.

The economic woes of the regional economic hub did nothing to improve the living

conditions in nearby hamlets like the one where our friends have their parcel. Our friends started cutting back on their visits and missed a year or two altogether. All of this would seem to confirm the storyline of the *Times* reporter, but the latest word from Volodya and Tamara overturns the storyline completely.

A Revival

A few weeks ago, our friends decided to go back to the property to prepare it for sale. They had had enough, they thought. However, once there, they discovered things were definitely looking up. A newly completed 35 kilometer highway makes their settlement much more accessible.

But, more importantly, the neighbors have changed – for the better. A retired colonel moved in a couple of years ago and started raising pigs, cows and chickens, offering meat, eggs and dairy products for sale, thereby ending our friends' need for brought-in provisions. His example attracted others. New and dynamic settlers are putting into practice the “return to the land” trend that is an undeniable feature of current Russian social life. Our friends have decided not to sell, and to spend more time on their property.

In legal terms, the parcel of land my wife owns in the hamlet of Orfino (population 300) is categorized as a “subsistence farm.” The nature of the farming to be done there even features in the plan attached to the cadastral registry: the 700 square meters where the house was built facing the “Central Street” can be used for fruit trees and vegetable garden; the back field of another 700 square meters is allocated for potatoes, cabbage and similar crops.

In the vernacular, however, together with the two-story planed log house we built here five years ago, the property is considered a “dacha,” a summer residence. Nearly one in two urban Russian households has a dacha.

Young people think of dachas as weekend getaway locations to hold a barbecue for friends and family. If they have a feeling for Russian traditions, it is where they take their Saturday *banya*, or sauna in dedicated outhouses heated by wood burning stoves and then socialize over a beer. Older folks and pensioners find this frivolous. In their view, the dacha is not so much a place to idle time away as it is a place of honest toil, working the land and communing with nature. And even some of the younger generation buys into the concept of growing their own organic foods on their land, thus getting along without industrially farmed supermarket produce, whether domestic or imported.

One hundred years ago, Orfino was populated mostly by wealthy merchants whose businesses were in the extended district. They lived here year-round in

substantial houses, some of which have survived to this day. To the back of the houses, what were essentially barns were built on, and there they kept some small livestock. No one in Orolino today keeps chickens, pigs, goats, not to mention cows. But they do till the land with great enthusiasm and look after their fruit trees and red berry shrubs.

The notion of subsistence farming suggests border-line poverty. But Orolino was never poor, and its residents are not indigent today. Oldsters whose pensions are inadequate are supported by their children or nephews/nieces' families living in the local towns, in the district capital of Gatchina 50 kilometers away, or even in St. Petersburg. In return, these relatives visit in the summer to spend some days of vacation and take advantage of the large lake on the edge of the hamlet, which is lovely for swimming or boating when the weather is cooperative.

Good Use of Land

The notion of subsistence farming also suggests tough practicality. But making good use of the land does not exclude aesthetic pleasures, and every parcel of land in the hamlet is decorated by flower beds showing great ingenuity and effort.

Similarly, in the last year the Orolino farmers have all gone the way of their brethren across Russia and invested in greenhouses made of pre-formed polycarbonate walls, most commonly resembling hoops in profile. Here they put in tomatoes, cucumbers and other highly prized vegetables for their dining table which do not do well in the short growing season of the North, and in the very adverse climatic conditions which were exemplary this year in terms of cool temperatures and incessant rains. Given the expense of these greenhouses, the investment is not so much economically justified as it is a point of pride in self-sufficiency and green-thumb skills.

Electricity is the only utility that spells dependency for Orolino residents. Otherwise, each household has its own well, its own septic tank system, its own gas cylinder for the cooking stove and its own supply of birch logs for a wood-burning stove that is the mainstay of heating.

Many households have cars. The most recent arrivals, being by far the most prosperous, often have four-wheel-drive utility vehicles. This is a valuable benefit given the deplorable condition of many local roads. But then there is a significant minority who depend on the local bus system to get around. It is cheap, runs to schedule and gets you from point A to point B without fuss. The hamlet has a couple of grocery stores, so that staples are always available within easy walking distance.

An Economic Hub

For luxuries, there is the town of Siversk 10 kilometers away. Numbering perhaps 10,000 people, it is the local economic hub, with several factories, including a manufacturer of good quality upholstered furniture.

Siversk has a train station with hourly connections to Gatchina and St. Petersburg. It also has several supermarkets run by major national retail chains, so that you will find exactly the same product assortment as in St. Petersburg or Moscow. And there are a number of high quality specialty food stores and at least one bakery which is indistinguishable from what you might find in Vienna or Frankfurt

In the not so distant past, even urban Russians had not much interest in salads or in fish. Chicken legs or sausages or pork cutlets for the barbecue were what folks shopped for as main courses. Now even our Siversk stores offer pre-packaged mixed lettuce salads or rucola coming from greenhouse complexes in Greater St. Petersburg.

And the leading fish store offers not only salmon steaks from Scandinavian producers, but several varieties of delicacy fish from Europe's largest fresh water lake, situated 50 kilometers to the east of St. Petersburg. Still more impressive is the assortment of fish coming down each day from Murmansk: excellent flounder and superb *gorbusha*, a wild salmon usually considered to be a Pacific Ocean variety but also available in the waters north and west of Siberia. For those with deeper pockets, the fish vendor in little Siversk occasionally offers a fresh sterlet, the magnificent 1 kilogram-size representative of the sturgeon family that is farmed on the Volga in Astrakhan, far to the South.

I offer these observations from shopping to make the following point about the Russian country life as I see it: a lively economy with a population growing ever more sophisticated and aspiring to the good life.

The Lower Strata

When I shared these thoughts with my friend in France, he shot back: what about the lower strata of society? How are they faring?

My ready response draws on my five-year acquaintance with our "average Joe" neighbor in Orino, Sergei. When we settled here five years ago, he drilled our artesian well, installed the electric pump and all sanitary plumbing in our house. Now he winterizes the house each year and keeps an eye on the property when we are away, for compensation to be sure, but more out of friendship, because he has other, more lucrative sources of income as a subcontractor or day

worker on local construction projects. There is a lot of work of this kind now that Orlino's fallow fields are slowly being converted into housing estates.

Sergei is a master of several building trades. He also drives a tractor. He is mechanically gifted.

Sergei is about 55, the father of a grown son and daughter, the grandfather of two. When we first met, he was living in an apartment in a multi-unit wooden house dating back 60 or 70 years that was neither comfortable nor attractive. In the past three years he has realized a long time dream and built for himself a two-story cement block house, now clad in siding. The interior space is perhaps 250 square meters. When you pass it from the road, in a row of several other very substantial recent houses, you would place it as solidly upper-middle class. And next to his house Sergei has put up a very fine and large greenhouse. Beyond that is an extensive field of splendid potatoes and vegetables.

To be sure, the second story of Sergei's house still needs work and he and his wife live now only on the ground floor. Moreover, the investment of all spare cash into the house has scuttled other needs. When Sergei's ancient Toyota pick-up finally rusted into irreparable condition, he found himself without motorized transport. Until further notice, until he can put together the down payment for a new vehicle, he gets around town on a bicycle.

Sergei is no fool. He gripes about local corruption and terrible roads. But on the whole he is satisfied with his lot and optimistic about the future. Any belt-tightening that has been made necessary by Western sanctions he takes in his stride. He is resolutely patriotic.

I realize full well that the observations taken from my personal experience of the Russian countryside and from the experience of close friends is anecdotal and so not statistically significant. But then neither are the observations of *The New York Times* reporter.

Russia is a vast land and you can pretty much find what you are looking for there. Nonetheless, the gross economic statistics published by Rosstat are upbeat and fully contradict the notion of a country in decline, including its rural component.

Gilbert Doctorow is an independent political analyst based in Brussels. His latest book *Does Russia Have a Future?* was published in August 2015. His forthcoming book is *Does the United States Have a Future?*

Endangering a Landmark Nuclear Treaty

Official Washington's political game of heightening tensions with nuclear-armed Russia to get better control of President Trump could destroy a landmark nuclear arms control treaty, as Jonathan Marshall explains.

By Jonathan Marshall

On Aug. 3, President Trump told millions of Twitter followers to “thank Congress” for the fact that “our relationship with Russia is at an all-time & very dangerous low.” The immediate impetus for his remark was congressional passage of new economic sanctions against Russia, but Trump might just as well have pointed to moves by the body to jeopardize a landmark arms control treaty negotiated in 1987 by President Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty was remarkable for prohibiting an entire class of existing weapons, with ranges between 500 and 5,500 kilometers. Ratified by the Senate in 1988, following one of the darkest periods of the Cold War, it led to the destruction of 2,700 missiles, both nuclear and conventional, over a period of about three years.

The treaty also opened the door to on-site inspections and other verification measures that made possible the first Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty in 1991, under President George H.W. Bush. Greg Thielmann, a former top State Department intelligence official who advised on the INF treaty negotiations, has called its success “unprecedented” and “one of the world's most dramatic achievements in curbing the nuclear arms race.”

Putting those great accomplishments at risk, the proposed new National Defense Authorization Act, which passed the House in July, authorizes the development of a new land-based missile banned by the INF treaty. A companion Senate bill, which will be considered after the August recess, would fund initial Pentagon development of a similarly prohibited missile.

In each case, the real target of the new missiles proposed by congressional hawks like Republican Sen. Tom Cotton of Arkansas isn't any particular Russian military capability, but the spirit of cooperation and shared interests that made arms control possible in the years from Nixon to Obama.

Objections to Risk

“The INF Treaty is fundamental to European security,” declared a team of distinguished U.S., German, and Russian nuclear arms experts in April. “If the

treaty unravels, it will open the door to an arms race in ground-launched intermediate-range missiles, which will diminish security in both Europe and Asia . . . and undermine the entire regime of nuclear arms control between the United States and Russia.”

The missile-rattling by members of Congress is rooted in Washington’s concern that Russia recently began to deploy an upgraded version of an existing ground-launched cruise missile, dubbed the SSC-8, with a prohibited range beyond 500 kilometers. Russia denies any violation of the treaty, but the U.S. responding to a possible violation by blowing up the entire treaty would be an act of strategic folly.

Tom Collina, an arms control expert with the Ploughshares Fund, told me that he and other independent analysts can’t assess the evidence because it’s so highly classified. But he was impressed by the fact that key members of the Obama administration vouched for it: “These were people I know supported arms control with Russia, and finding this [breach] was very inconvenient. The last thing they wanted was to have to tell the U.S. Senate that Russia is cheating.”

Gen. James Mattis told the Senate Armed Services Committee during its consideration of his nomination to President Trump’s Secretary of Defense, “If Russia is permitted to violate the treaty with impunity, such actions could erode the foundations of all current and future arms control agreements and initiatives.”

But the U.S. response doesn’t have to be hasty or extreme. U.S. defense planners aren’t losing any sleep over the limited Russian deployment of its questionable missiles.

“Given the location of the specific missile and the deployment, they don’t gain any advantage in Europe,” said Air Force Gen. Paul Selva, the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in Senate hearings last month.

Evidence and Inspections

A reasonable approach advocated by many experts is to start by confronting the Russians with more specific evidence of their alleged violation. At a press briefing in June, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said his government was ready for an “honest but specific dialogue” and had “no intention to break the treaty.”

The Russians may be using their cruise missile deployment as leverage to force discussion of their own complaint that NATO’s missile-interceptor systems in Eastern Europe have potential offensive uses. Russian military experts claim the launchers used in those systems can house intermediate-range cruise missiles

prohibited by the INF treaty.

Russian military leaders have expressed public concerns about the threat of a surprise attack on their command and control centers from such stealthy and precision-targeted missiles. The short flight times of those missiles to Moscow could facilitate the “decapitation” of Russia’s political and military leadership.

Russia’s fears may be misplaced or overblown, but they are fanned by the blatant dishonesty of NATO’s claims that its interceptors are merely designed to defend against ballistic missiles from Iran. Iran has no missiles capable of striking most of Europe. Nor does it have a nuclear weapons program, as confirmed by regular international inspections and the State Department’s own certification.

Moscow’s claims, like Washington’s concerns over Russia’s recent missile deployments, should be amenable to inspection and resolution by panels of technical experts, say nuclear arms experts. The INF treaty created a Special Verification Commission (SVC) to address just such issues.

“U.S. willingness to allow Russian access to deployed [missile interceptor] launchers and Russian willingness to accept on-site monitoring of SSC-8 [cruise missile] launchers at test sites and challenge inspections at suspect deployment sites could lead to a breakthrough in the current compliance stalemate,” writes Thielmann.

Political Obstacles

The technical challenges are real, but Thielmann and other experts suggest the political challenges are even greater. Many congressional hawks evidently don’t want a cooperative resolution of the issue. Although President Trump has sought to work with President Putin, he has also expressed contempt for arms control. (“Let it be an arms race,” Trump told an interviewer in December. “We will outmatch them at every pass and outlast them all.”)

Last but not least, the Pentagon is pushing for a trillion-dollar nuclear “modernization” program and a new generation of smaller nuclear warheads it deems suitable for “warfighting.” Russia, of course, is not standing still, either.

Jon Wolfsthal, the top White House arms control expert under President Obama, reminds us that in today’s poisonous political atmosphere, “The danger(s) of an accidental or unintended conflict . . . are as high as they have been since the collapse of the Soviet Union.”

Given the immense stakes for all humanity, Trump should invoke the spirit of

Ronald Reagan to quell moves by congressional conservatives to derail the INF treaty. Their misguided attempts to grab a temporary lead in the nuclear arms race, instead of pursuing a mutual end to that race altogether, will only put U.S. security more at risk.

Jonathan Marshall is a regular contributor to Consortiumnews.com.

Playing Politics with the World's Future

The strategy of neutering President Trump in his dealings with Russia – and his administration's own ignorance about complex Mideast issues – are combining to create grave dangers, writes ex-British diplomat Alastair Crooke.

By Alastair Crooke

Finally ... the U.S. Congress has produced a piece of legislation. And it passed with quasi-unanimous, bi-partisan support. Only its substance is not so much a deep reflection on the foreign policy interests of America, but rather, the desire to hurt, and incapacitate the U.S. President in any future dealings with Russia. (And never mind the worrying impulse towards conflict with Russia this entails, or its collateral damage on others).

The aim has been to see President Trump hog-tied, and "tarred and feathered" for his "risky behavior" on Russia. This aim simply has overpowered any other considerations – such as likelihood that the outside world will conclude that America's ability to pursue or even to have a foreign policy is non-existent in the face of its internal civil war. It is a key juncture. For an overwhelming majority of Democratic and Republican Senators and Congressmen, bringing down "The Donald" is all – and the devil take the consequences for America, in the world.

Senator Dianne Feinstein, D-California, blandly stated that the concerns of U.S. allies come second to the need to punish Russia for its election interference. When asked whether the bill took account of European Union's interests, one of the main authors, Senator John McCain, R-Arizona, said simply: "Not that I know of. Certainly not in the portion of the bill I was responsible for."

Another of the bill's author, Bob Menendez, D-New Jersey, laconically replied to the same question: "Not much, to be honest with you."

McCain carelessly then quipped that essentially that it was "the job of the E.U.

to come around to the legislation, not for the legislation to be brought around to them.”

The U.S. President had little option but to sign the legislation, but that does not mean that diplomacy is completely blocked. As expected, he issued a Signing Statement (see [here](#)), in which, while accepting the mandate of Congress, Trump took issue with the new Congressional encroachments into his prerogatives (Article Two of the Constitution) in terms of foreign policy, and he reserved the right to decide on how the Congressional mandate might be implemented (i.e. in respect to the quadrilateral negotiations over Ukraine). He has some wriggle room, especially in terms of how the legislation is enforced (or not, as the case might be), but certainly not enough wriggle room to mollify Europe – or, more pertinently, to persuade Russia that America now has anything, substantive to offer; or were it offered, able to be delivered. In other words, for Russia, the U.S., effectively, is severely agreement-incapacitated.

Medvedev’s Assessment

Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev wrote in response:

“The signing of new sanctions against Russia into law by the U.S. president leads to several consequences. First, any hope of improving our relations with the new U.S. administration is over. Second, the U.S. just declared a full-scale trade war on Russia. Third, the Trump administration demonstrated it is utterly powerless, and in the most humiliating manner, transferred executive powers to Congress. This shifts the alignment of forces in U.S. political circles.

“What does this mean for the U.S.? The American establishment completely outplayed Trump. The President is not happy with the new sanctions, but he could not avoid signing the new law. The purpose of the new sanctions was to put Trump in his place. Their ultimate goal is to remove Trump from power.” (Emphasis added).

The key new provision in law is dubbed *The Russia Sanctions Review Act of 2017*. It codifies into law past sanctions on Russia imposed by previous Administrations, and prohibits the President from lifting any existing sanction against Russia without the prior permission of Congress. The law states that the process of securing such consent requires that the President send to Congress a (prior) report stating and arguing the presumed benefit that would accrue to the U.S. through the lifting of any sanction. The Congress then may institute hearings on the President’s report, and on the merit of his argument about the potential quid pro quo – justifying his proposed action. In the light of these hearings, Congress may then consider a resolution of approval or disapproval (within 30 days of receiving the President’s statement).

The influential *Lawfare* site points out, however, that “the provision is drafted quite broadly to cover actions *that have any ameliorative effect* despite falling short of formally lifting sanctions. For example, congressional review is required for a waiver, “a licensing action that significantly alters United States’ foreign policy with regard to the Russian Federation,” and any action which would allow Russia to regain access to properties in Maryland and New York” (Emphasis added).

In short, Congress gave itself a 30-day review period to vote down any changes Trump tries to make in terms of America’s foreign relations with Russia.

Offending Europe

These are the teeth, but the Act has other little flourishes: The legislation targets the Russian energy sector, allowing the U.S. to sanction companies involved in developing Russian oil pipelines. It “would almost surely affect a controversial pipeline project between Russia and Germany known as Nord Stream 2, which is owned by Gazprom but includes financial stakes from European companies. The project aims to carry Russian natural gas under the Baltic Sea, bypassing countries like Ukraine, Poland and the Baltic States,” as the *New York Times* reports.

Some may see these events simply as the riposte to alleged Russian intervention in America’s internal affairs (as Feinstein has argued), but polls (even CNN polls) suggest that there are very obvious political limits to the Establishment (in both parties) using “Russia-gate” as a mechanism to mobilize and widen public support for removing President Trump. Polls indicate that 79 percent of Republicans are “not at all” or “not very” concerned about Trump’s alleged links with Russia, and that inversely, precisely the same proportion, 79 percent, of Democrats precisely are “very” or “somewhat” concerned. (55 percent of Independents side with Republicans with 37 percent “not at all” and 18 percent “not very” concerned). The point here is that the Republican support for Trump’s desire for détente with Russia has not eroded one jot, whereas the “concern” of the Independents and even among Democrats is eroding somewhat.

This is the crux: the clique around former CIA head John Brennan *et al* have put their shirt on “Russia-gate” to bring down Trump – claiming scandal. But what goes around – quite often – comes comes around. Unless the Establishment can keep up the tempo of innuendo or produce new revelations, “Russia-gate” may just become a stale narrative – or a butt of satire. Worse, the meme could turn and bite the hand of those who have been feeding it. There may too be other skeletons in the cupboard, but belonging to the other party: like who paid Fusion GPS (who were commissioned to produce the “dirty dossier” on Trump)? Might the murdered Seth Rich story take another turn? Or, the fugitive former

DNC Chairwoman's IT staffer, Imran Awan, give the narrative a different twist? Or something as yet unknown.

Vague Sanctions

How far will the anti-Russian attrition go? The *Ron Paul Institute* sees in one section of the Act, the possibility that websites which take a line in opposition to Russia sanctions could be held to be doing the work of Russian intelligence – by seeking to influence readers in a manner that Russian intelligence would want. Might this be interpreted as “engaging in transactions” – albeit, over the internet? (The Act specifies punishment for “persons” who are “engaging in transactions with the intelligence or defense sectors of the Government of the Russian Federation.”)

The author writes, [that] at first sight, one might think he is reading too much into the text, “however as a twelve-year Capitol Hill veteran bill-reader, I can assure you that these bills are never written in a simple, expository manner. There is always a subtext, and in this case we must consider the numerous instances where the Director of Central Intelligence and other senior leadership in the US intelligence community have attempted to establish the idea that foreign news channels such as RT or Sputnik News, are not First Amendment protected press, but rather tools of a foreign intelligence organization.”

So, are Trump's hopes for détente with Russia all done? Too early to say, I suggest. Medvedev seems categorical, but maybe his dark prognostication is intended more to underline to Americans that their relations with Russia are not some domestic “game show” – but rather, are profoundly serious. For the time being, substantive U.S. politics with Russia will be on “a long vacation.”

The deeper question is whether the U.S. Deep State is overreaching itself. First, we have this sanctions bill, and then the news that special counsel Robert Mueller, as part of his investigation into the Trump campaign's potential dealings with the Kremlin, is using a Grand Jury to issue subpoenas. While the use of a Grand Jury does not necessarily mean an indictment is imminent, it is a tool to compel witnesses to testify or force people to turn over sensitive documents that may aid investigators in their probe.

It is a sign of a yet more aggressive approach to gathering “Russia-gate” evidence – a search that will now encompass all the Trump family's financial affairs. Overreach? (So far, evidence of misdeed, is missing.)

As indicated earlier, Trump's Republican base (unlike support from the Republican establishment) is not eroding, but rather is becoming angered and resentful. The more the MSM and the East Coast élites attack the deplorables'

“alt” news and websites – the greater the pushback, it seems. The divisions in America are too embittered now, for any thought that America can somehow re-wind the tape, and just start again with Obama having left office – as though Trump never had happened.

Strategic Incoherence

Whereas, America’s Russia foreign policy clearly has been zombie-fied for now, the policy dysfunction goes much wider than Russia (and this cannot be laid at the feet of the Deep State). The policy in the Middle East simply, is strategically incoherent:

Last Tuesday, President Trump, standing beside Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri heaped Lebanon with praise: “Lebanon is on the front lines in the fight against ISIS, al-Qaeda *and* Hezbollah,” Trump said. Hariri had – delicately – to correct the President: Hizbullah is a member of his governing coalition, and is a part of his government, and is his ally in parliament. Actually, Lebanon is fighting ISIS and al-Qaeda in Syria, precisely via Hezbollah.

But this trivial incident should not be written off as some distracted President “mis-speaking”: rather it is symptomatic of how dysfunctional the West Wing has become in respect to the Middle East. There seems to be no adult in the team – just jaundiced ignorance that does not bother to try to understand Middle East complexities.

Joe Scarborough sums this condition well in an article which – whilst highly complimentary to the personal qualities of Trump’s family – also warns against “the stubborn arrogance that often infects the winning side of Presidential campaigns.” Trump’s victory led his son-in-law to believe “he could reinvent government like Al Gore, micromanage the White House like James Baker, and restructure the Middle East like Moses. Kushner’s confidence seemed to reach its apex,” Scarborough continues, “whenever the subject turned to Middle East peace. His bizarre belief that the world began anew the day Trump was inaugurated was exposed again this week when a leaked audiotape caught Kushner telling White House interns: “*We don’t want a history lesson. We’ve read enough books.*””

Well perhaps he needs to read some books on Iran, before deciding to call Iran in default on JCPOA (the accord that tightly restricts Iran’s nuclear program). He does not need to like Iran, but merely to understand that it is a major regional power (with real “battalions” at its command), and, unlike most in the Middle East, is capable of acting shrewdly, effectively and forcefully – if needs be.

Mishandling a Crisis

The sense of an absence of strategic knowledge in the West Wing is not confined to Trump's adversaries, by the way. Iran sees the U.S. calling "Iran in default of JCPOA" as merely serving to cement its fast growing alliance with Russia and China – but the complaint has also found an (unexpected) home in Israel, too – for example, see [this](#), from one of Israel's most well-connected journalists, Ben Caspit:

"The story that best illustrates this situation occurred last week when the Temple Mount crisis threatened to ignite the entire Middle East in a global conflagration originating in the Al-Aqsa Mosque. Throughout that entire crisis, the US administration was effectively AWOL. Although they attempted to take credit for some deep involvement in efforts to reach a solution, the truth is that the Americans were not a significant factor during the harshest days of the crisis, when it looked like the entire Middle East would spiral downward into a new round of violence.

"President Trump himself was not involved in events as they unfolded. His special envoy, Jason Greenblatt, lost his standing as an 'impartial mediator' in the very first days of the crisis. One senior Palestinian source told *Al-Monitor* on condition of anonymity that 'Greenblatt picked a side and represented Netanyahu throughout the crisis ... the Americans' behaviour throughout the crisis only furthered the feeling prevalent in Ramallah over the past few weeks that Greenblatt and Jared Kushner are irrelevant."

" 'They are completely unfamiliar with the other side,' [another Palestinian source told Caspit] 'they don't understand the region, and they don't understand the material. You can't learn about what is happening here in a seminar lasting just a few weeks...'

"A senior Israeli minister speaking on condition of anonymity added, 'The Americans aren't really a presence here. They let us do whatever we want. They don't set the tone, and they don't dictate the agenda.'

"Ostensibly, this near freedom of action should be the dream of the Israeli right. But even among them, people are beginning to express their concern about how things are unfolding. 'This was as clear as can be during the [Temple Mount crisis](#). There was no responsible adult in the mix.' "

Alastair Crooke is a former British diplomat who was a senior figure in British intelligence and in European Union diplomacy. He is the founder and director of the Conflicts Forum.
