

Clinton, Assange and the War on Truth

Australia's public broadcasting network gave Hillary Clinton an open mike to defame WikiLeaks' Julian Assange as "a tool of Russian intelligence" without giving him a chance to respond, as John Pilger describes.

By John Pilger

On Oct. 16, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation aired an interview with Hillary Clinton: one of many to promote her score-settling book about why she was not elected President of the United States.

Wading through the Clinton book, *What Happened*, is an unpleasant experience, like a stomach upset. Smears and tears. Threats and enemies. "They" (voters) were brainwashed and herded against her by the odious Donald Trump in cahoots with sinister Slavs sent from the great darkness known as Russia, assisted by an Australian "nihilist," Julian Assange.

In *The New York Times*, there was a striking photograph of a female reporter consoling Clinton, having just interviewed her. The lost leader was, above all, "absolutely a feminist." The thousands of women's lives this "feminist" destroyed while in government – Libya, Syria, Honduras – were of no interest.

In *New York* magazine, Rebecca Trainster wrote that Clinton was finally "expressing some righteous anger." It was even hard for her to smile: "so hard that the muscles in her face ache." Surely, she concluded, "if we allowed women's resentments the same bearing we allow men's grudges, America would be forced to reckon with the fact that all these angry women might just have a point."

Drivel such as this, trivializing women's struggles, marks the media hagiographies of Hillary Clinton. Her political extremism and warmongering are of no consequence. Her problem, wrote Trainster, was a "damaging infatuation with the email story." The truth, in other words.

The leaked emails of Clinton's campaign manager, John Podesta, revealed a direct connection between Clinton and the foundation and funding of organized jihadism in the Middle East and Islamic State (known as ISIS, ISIL or Daesh). The ultimate source of most Islamic terrorism, Saudi Arabia, was central to her career.

One email, in 2014, sent by Clinton to Podesta soon after she stepped down as U.S. Secretary of State, discloses that Islamic State is funded by the governments of Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Clinton accepted huge donations from both

governments for the Clinton Foundation.

As Secretary of State, she approved the world's biggest ever arms sale to her benefactors in Saudi Arabia, worth more than \$80 billion. Thanks to her, U.S. arms sales to the world – for use in stricken countries like Yemen – doubled.

This was revealed by WikiLeaks and published by *The New York Times*. No one doubts the emails are authentic. The subsequent campaign to smear WikiLeaks and its editor-in-chief, Julian Assange, as “agents of Russia,” has grown into a spectacular fantasy known as “Russiagate.” The “plot” is said to have been signed off on by Vladimir Putin himself. There is not a shred of public evidence.

Smear and Omission

The ABC Australia interview with Clinton is an outstanding example of smear and censorship by omission. I would say it is a model.

“No one,” the interviewer, Sarah Ferguson, says to Clinton, “could fail to be moved by the pain on your face at that moment [of the inauguration of Trump] ... Do you remember how visceral it was for you?”

Having established Clinton's visceral suffering, Ferguson asks about “Russia's role.”

CLINTON: I think Russia affected the perceptions and views of millions of voters, we now know. I think that their intention coming from the very top with Putin was to hurt me and to help Trump.

FERGUSON: How much of that was a personal vendetta by Vladimir Putin against you?

CLINTON: ... I mean he wants to destabilize democracy. He wants to undermine America, he wants to go after the Atlantic Alliance and we consider Australia kind of a ... an extension of that ...

(The opposite is true. It is a combination of Western armies massing on Russia's border for the first time since the Russian Revolution 100 years ago.)

FERGUSON: How much damage did [Julian Assange] do personally to you?

CLINTON: Well, I had a lot of history with him because I was Secretary of State when, ah, WikiLeaks published a lot of very sensitive, ah, information from our State Department and our Defense Department.

(What Clinton fails to say – and her interviewer fails to remind her – is that

in 2010, WikiLeaks revealed that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had ordered a secret intelligence campaign targeted at the United Nations leadership, including the Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon and the permanent Security Council representatives from China, Russia, France and the U.K. A classified directive, signed by Clinton, was issued to U.S. diplomats in July 2009, demanding forensic technical details about the communications systems used by top U.N. officials, including passwords and personal encryption keys used in private and commercial networks. This was known as Cablegate. It was lawless spying.)

CLINTON: He [Assange] is very clearly a tool of Russian intelligence. And, ah, he has done their bidding.

(Clinton offered no evidence to back up this serious accusation, nor did Ferguson challenge her.)

CLINTON: You don't see damaging negative information coming out about the Kremlin on WikiLeaks. You didn't see any of that published.

(This was false. WikiLeaks has published a massive number of documents on Russia – more than 800,000, most of them critical, many of them used in books and as evidence in court cases.)

A 'Nihilistic Opportunist'

CLINTON: So I think Assange has become a kind of nihilistic opportunist who does the bidding of a dictator.

FERGUSON: Lots of people, including in Australia, think that Assange is a martyr for free speech and freedom of information. How would you describe him? Well, you've just described him as a nihilist.

CLINTON: Yeah, well, and a tool. I mean he's a tool of Russian intelligence. And if he's such, ah, you know, martyr of free speech, why doesn't WikiLeaks ever publish anything coming out of Russia?

(Again, Ferguson said nothing to challenge this or correct her.)

CLINTON: There was a concerted operation between WikiLeaks and Russia and most likely people in the United States to weaponize that information, to make up stories ... to help Trump.

FERGUSON: Now, along with some of those outlandish stories, there was information that was revealed about the Clinton Foundation that at least in some of the voters' minds seemed to associate you ...

CLINTON: Yeah, but it was false!

FERGUSON: ... with the peddling of information ...

CLINTON: It was false! It was totally false!

FERGUSON: Do you understand how difficult it was for some voters to understand the amounts of money that the [Clinton] Foundation is raising, the confusion with the consultancy that was also raising money, getting gifts and travel and so on for Bill Clinton that even Chelsea had some issues with? ...

CLINTON: Well you know, I'm sorry, Sarah, I mean I, I know the facts ...

Generational 'Icon'

The ABC interviewer lauded Clinton as "the icon of your generation." She asked her nothing about the enormous sums she creamed off from Wall Street, such as the \$675,000 for speaking to Goldman Sachs, one of the banks at the center of the 2008 crash. Clinton's greed deeply upset the kind of voters she abused as "deplorables."

Clearly looking for a cheap headline in the Australian press, Ferguson asked her if Trump was "a clear and present danger to Australia" and got her predictable response.

This high-profile journalist made no mention of Clinton's own "clear and present danger" to the people of Iran whom she once threatened to "obliterate totally," and the 40,000 Libyans who died in the attack on Libya in 2011 that Clinton orchestrated. Flushed with excitement, the Secretary of State rejoiced at the gruesome murder of the Libyan leader, Colonel Gaddafi.

"Libya was Hillary Clinton's war," Julian Assange said in a filmed interview with me last year. "Barack Obama initially opposed it. Who was the person championing it? Hillary Clinton. That's documented throughout her emails ... there's more than 1,700 emails out of the 33,000 Hillary Clinton emails that we've published, just about Libya. It's not that Libya has cheap oil. She perceived the removal of Gaddafi and the overthrow of the Libyan state – something that she would use in her run-up to the general election for President.

"So in late 2011 there is an internal document called the Libya Tick Tock that was produced for Hillary Clinton, and it's the chronological description of how she was the central figure in the destruction of the Libyan state, which resulted in around 40,000 deaths within Libya; jihadists moved in, ISIS moved in, leading to the European refugee and migrant crisis.

"Not only did you have people fleeing Libya, people fleeing Syria, the

destabilization of other African countries as a result of arms flows, but the Libyan state itself was no longer able to control the movement of people through it.”

This – not Clinton’s “visceral” pain in losing to Trump nor the rest of the self-serving scuttlebutt in her ABC interview – was the story. Clinton shared responsibility for massively de-stabilizing the Middle East, which led to the death, suffering and flight of thousands of women, men and children.

Ferguson raised not a word of it. Clinton repeatedly defamed Assange, who was neither defended nor offered a right of reply on his own country’s state broadcaster.

In a tweet from London, Assange cited the ABC’s own Code of Practice, which states: “Where allegations are made about a person or organisation, make reasonable efforts in the circumstances to provide a fair opportunity to respond.”

‘Putin’s Bitch’

Following the ABC broadcast, Ferguson’s executive producer, Sally Neighbour, re-tweeted the following: “Assange is Putin’s bitch. We all know it!”

The slander, since deleted, was even used as a link to the ABC interview captioned ‘Assange is Putins (sic) b****. We all know it!’

In the years I have known Julian Assange, I have watched a vituperative personal campaign try to stop him and WikiLeaks. It has been a frontal assault on whistleblowing, on free speech and free journalism, all of which are now under sustained attack from governments and corporate Internet controllers.

The first serious attacks on Assange came from the Guardian, which, like a spurned lover, turned on its besieged former source, having hugely profited from WikiLeaks’ disclosures. With not a penny going to Assange or WikiLeaks, a Guardian book led to a lucrative Hollywood movie deal. Assange was portrayed as “callous” and a “damaged personality.”

It was as if a rampant jealousy could not accept that his remarkable achievements stood in marked contrast to that of his detractors in the “mainstream” media. It is like watching the guardians of the status quo, regardless of age, struggling to silence real dissent and prevent the emergence of the new and hopeful.

Today, Assange remains a political refugee from the war-making dark state of which Donald Trump is a caricature and Hillary Clinton the embodiment. His

resilience and courage are astonishing. Unlike him, his tormentors are cowards.

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Man Bites Dog: NYT Does Journalism

Exclusive: When the Trump administration blamed Cuba for a "sonic attack" on U.S. diplomats, a New York Times reporter did something unusual for his newspaper: he tried objectively to assess the evidence, as Robert Parry reports.

By Robert Parry

I often criticize The New York Times, Washington Post and other major mainstream media outlets for a very simple reason: they deserve it – especially for their propagandistic, unprofessional and reckless coverage of foreign crises.

But there are occasional moments when some reporter at an MSM outlet behaves responsibly and those instances should be noted at least under the classic definition of "news" – something that is unexpected – or as the old saying goes, "dog bites man is not news; man bites dog is news."

One such moment occurred earlier this month when a Times science editor assigned science reporter Carl Zimmer to look into the mysterious illnesses affecting U.S. diplomats in the recently reopened U.S. embassy in Cuba.

About two dozen U.S. diplomats supposedly were suffering hearing loss and cognitive difficulties due to what has been labeled a "sonic attack." The Trump administration blamed the Cuban government even though the Cubans claimed to be mystified and would seem to have little motive for disrupting a long-sought détente with Washington along with the expected boon to their tourist industry. President Trump "retaliated" by expelling 15 Cuban diplomats.

Zimmer recounted [the background](#) to his story in a reporter's notebook piece on Oct. 6: "On Tuesday, Michael Mason, my editor on the science desk, shot me an email. Would I consider writing an article about 'this sonic "attack" business'? I knew exactly what he was talking about. I had been vaguely puzzled about this business for months."

Checking Out the Story

Zimmer then did what professional journalists are supposed to do: he started contacting impartial experts to get their assessments of what was possible, what was likely, and what didn't make sense.



"I decided to try to find something out – not as a political reporter but as a science writer," Zimmer wrote in the sidebar that accompanied his news article. "I usually base my ideas on scientific research that has matured far enough that it is beginning to get published in peer-reviewed journals. ... I knew that an article on sonic weapons would be very different from the ones I usually write. ..."

"I learned there was not even an official medical report. I decided to try to draw some boundary lines for all the speculation swirling around the story. Is the idea of a sonic attack plausible, based on what scientists know about sound and the human body? ..."

"So I hit the phone. I didn't want to talk with just anyone – I looked for people with lots of experience in research that had direct bearing on this question. I started with Timothy Leighton, whose job title at Southampton University is, literally, professor of ultrasonics and underwater acoustics. Better yet, Dr. Leighton has published the only thorough recent scientific review of the effects of environmental ultrasound that I'm aware of."

"When I interviewed Dr. Leighton and others, I made clear I didn't expect them to solve this mystery; I just wanted them to reconcile the question with what we know through science. ..."

"The consensus was that it was extremely unlikely the diplomats were the victims of a sonic weapon. It would be necessary to rule out less exotic possibilities before taking that one seriously."

Yet, despite this skeptical scientific consensus among experts, Zimmer noted, "The notion [of a sonic attack] has ricocheted like mad around the press, making it possible for readers to assume that [the sonic attack explanation] has been generally accepted by experts. But it most certainly has not. I'll be curious to see if articles like mine can put the brakes on the speculation."

Suspecting Putin

Well, Zimmer could have read the Times editorial in the same day's (Oct. 6) newspaper for a partial answer. While critical of the Trump administration for rushing to judgment in blaming the Cuban government and expelling 15 diplomats, the editorial concluded: "The sonic attacks on Americans are too serious to be used for cynical political ends."

So much for the editorial writers reading their own newspaper, but clearly they were driven by a higher agenda. A New York Times editorial about some unpleasant topic anywhere in the world these days wouldn't be complete without taking the opportunity to blame Russia or, in this case, at least suggest Russia as a possible villain in the mystery.

The Times wrote: "Other parties, most notably Russia, must also figure as suspects: President Vladimir Putin would probably welcome a setback to American-Cuban relations."

Yes, every possible conspiracy theory must somehow circle back to Vladimir Putin, a real-life Dr. Evil. When he is not plotting how to flood Facebook with images of puppies or manipulate Americans in their pursuit of Pokemon Go characters, he is building secret sonic weapons to disorient U.S. diplomats in Havana and provoke President Trump to act rashly (when we all know how cool and collected Trump normally is).

But I thought the earlier conspiracy theory was that Putin had secret videos of Trump cavorting with prostitutes in a five-star Moscow hotel – knowing years ago that Trump would surely become the U.S. president – and thus all Putin would have needed to do was call Trump up and tell his Manchurian Candidate to ship home some Cuban diplomats.

Why would the evil Putin go to the trouble of inventing a sonic weapon when simply pulling Trump's puppet strings would have done the trick? Perhaps it's just that Putin is so evil that he delights in dastardly tricks for the sheer sadistic joy of hurting people. Yes, that must be the ticket!

Once again, the Times editors seem to be onto something – if only they could rein in their one journalist who still seems to think it's necessary to report a story by seeking out genuine experts who don't have some axe to grind or some lucrative government contract to audition for. It saves so much time and energy to just blame Putin.

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).

Blaming Russia for the Internet ‘Sewer’

Exclusive: As the Russia-gate hysteria spirals down from the implausible to the absurd, almost every bad thing is blamed on the Russians, even how they turned the previously pristine Internet into a “sewer,” reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

With the U.S. government offering tens of millions of dollars to combat Russian “propaganda and disinformation,” it’s perhaps not surprising that we see “researchers” such as Jonathan Albright of the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University making the absurd accusation that the Russians have “basically turned [the Internet] into a sewer.”

I’ve been operating on the Internet since 1995 and I can assure you that the Internet has always been “a sewer” – in that it has been home to crazy conspiracy theories, ugly personal insults, click-bait tabloid “news,” and pretty much every vile prejudice you can think of. Whatever some Russians may or may not have done in buying \$100,000 in ads on Facebook (compared to its \$27 billion in annual revenue) or opening 201 Twitter accounts (out of Twitter’s 328 million monthly users), the Russians are not responsible for the sewage coursing through the Internet.

Americans, Europeans, Asians, Africans and pretty much every other segment of the world’s population didn’t need Russian help to turn the Internet into an informational “sewer.” But, of course, fairness and proportionality have no place in today’s Russia-gate frenzy.

After all, your “non-governmental organization” or your scholarly “think tank” is not likely to get a piece of the \$160 million that the U.S. government authorized last December to counter primarily Russian “propaganda and disinformation” if you explain that the Russians are at most responsible for a tiny trickle of “sewage” compared to the vast rivers of “sewage” coming from many other sources.

If you put the Russia-gate controversy in context, you also are not likely to have your “research” cited by The Washington Post as Albright did on Thursday because he supposedly found some links at the home-décor/fashion site Pinterest to a few articles that derived from a few of the 470 Facebook accounts and pages that Facebook suspects of having a link to Russia and shut them down. (To put that 470 number into perspective, Facebook has about two billion monthly users.)

Albright's full quote about the Russians allegedly exploiting various social media platforms on the Internet was: "They've gone to every possible medium and basically turned it into a sewer."

But let's look at the facts. According to Facebook, the suspected "Russian-linked" accounts purchased \$100,000 in ads from 2015 to 2017 (compared to Facebook's annual revenue of about \$27 billion), with only 44 percent of those ads appearing **before** the 2016 election and many having little or nothing to do with politics, which is curious if the Kremlin's goal was to help elect Donald Trump and defeat Hillary Clinton.

Even former Clinton political strategist Mark Penn has acknowledged the absurdity of thinking that such piddling amounts could have any impact on a \$2.4 billion presidential campaign, plus all the billions of dollars worth of free-media attention to the conventions, debates, etc. Based on what's known about the Facebook ads, Penn calculated that "the actual electioneering [in battleground states] amounts to about \$6,500."

In a Wall Street Journal op-ed on Monday, Penn added, "I have 40 years of experience in politics, and this Russian ad buy mostly after the election anyway, simply does not add up to a carefully targeted campaign to move voters. It takes tens of millions of dollars to deliver meaningful messages to the contested portion of the electorate."

Puppies and Pokemon

And, then there is the curious content. According to The New York Times, one of these "Russian-linked" Facebook groups was dedicated to photos of "adorable puppies." Of course, the Times tried hard to detect some sinister motive behind the "puppies" page.

Similarly, CNN went wild over its own "discovery" that one of the "Russian-linked" pages offered Amazon gift cards to people who found "Pokémon Go" sites near scenes where police shot unarmed black men – if you would name the Pokémon after the victims.

"It's unclear what the people behind the contest hoped to accomplish, though it may have been to remind people living near places where these incidents had taken place of what had happened and to upset or anger them," CNN mused, adding:

"CNN has not found any evidence that any Pokémon Go users attempted to enter the contest, or whether any of the Amazon Gift Cards that were promised were ever awarded – or, indeed, whether the people who designed the contest ever had any intention of awarding the prizes."

So, these dastardly Russians are exploiting “adorable puppies” and want to “remind people” about unarmed victims of police violence, clearly a masterful strategy to undermine American democracy or – according to the original Russia-gate narrative – to elect Donald Trump.

A New York Times article on Wednesday acknowledged another inconvenient truth that unintentionally added more perspective to the Russia-gate hysteria.

It turns out that some of the mainstream media’s favorite “fact-checking” organizations are home to Google ads that look like news items and lead readers to phony sites dressed up to resemble People, Vogue or other legitimate content providers.

“None of the stories were true,” the Times reported. “Yet as recently as late last week, they were being promoted with prominent ads served by Google on PolitiFact and Snopes, fact-checking sites created precisely to dispel such falsehoods.”

There is obvious irony in PolitiFact and Snopes profiting off “fake news” by taking money for these Google ads. But this reality also underscores the larger reality that fabricated news articles – whether peddling lies about Melania Trump or a hot new celebrity or outlandish Russian plots – are driven principally by the profit motive.

The Truth About Fake News

Occasionally, the U.S. mainstream media even acknowledges that fact. For instance, last November, The New York Times, which was then flogging the Russia-linked “fake news” theme, ran a relatively responsible article about a leading “fake news” Web site that the Times tracked down. It turned out to be an entrepreneurial effort by an unemployed Georgian student using a Web site in Tbilisi to make some money by promoting pro-Trump stories, whether true or not.

The owner of the Web site, 22-year-old Beqa Latsabidse, said he had initially tried to push stories favorable to Hillary Clinton but that proved unprofitable so he switched to publishing anti-Clinton and pro-Trump articles, including made-up stories. In other words, the Times found no Russian connection.

The Times article on Wednesday revealed the additional problem of Google ads placed on mainstream Internet sites leading readers to bogus news sites to get clicks and thus advertising dollars. And, it turns out that PolitiFact and Snopes were at least unwittingly profiting off these entrepreneurial ventures by running their ads. Again, there was no claim here of Russian “links.” It was all about good ole American greed.

But the even larger Internet problem is that many “reputable” news sites, such as AOL, lure readers into clicking on some sensationalistic or misleading headline, which takes readers to a story that is often tabloid trash or an extreme exaggeration of what the headline promised.

This reality about the Internet should be the larger context in which the Russia-gate story plays out, the miniscule nature of this Russian “meddling” even if these “suspected ... links to Russia” – as the Times initially described the 470 Facebook pages – turn out to be true.

But there are no lucrative grants going to “researchers” who would put the trickle of alleged Russian “sewage” into the context of the vast flow of Internet “sewage” that is even flowing through the esteemed “fact-checking” sites of PolitiFact and Snopes.

There are also higher newspaper sales and better TV ratings if the mainstream media keeps turning up new angles on Russia-gate, even as some of the old ones fall away as inconsequential or meaningless (such as the Senate Intelligence Committee dismissing earlier controversies over Sen. Jeff Sessions’s brief meeting with the Russian ambassador at the Mayflower Hotel and minor changes in the Republican platform).

Saying ‘False’ Is ‘True’

And, there is the issue of who decides what’s true. PolitiFact continues to defend its false claim that Hillary Clinton was speaking the truth when – in referencing leaked Democratic emails last October – she claimed that the 17 U.S. intelligence agencies “have all concluded that these espionage attacks, these cyberattacks, come from the highest levels of the Kremlin, and they are designed to influence our election.”

That claim was always untrue because a reference to a consensus of the 17 intelligence agencies suggests a National Intelligence Estimate or similar product that seeks the judgments of the entire intelligence community. No NIE or community-wide study was ever done on this topic.

Only later – in January 2017 – did a small subset of the intelligence community, what Director of National Intelligence James Clapper described as “hand-picked” analysts from three agencies – the Central Intelligence Agency, National Security Agency and Federal Bureau of Investigation – issue an “assessment” blaming the Russians while acknowledging a lack of actual evidence.

In other words, the Jan. 6 “assessment” was comparable to the “stovepiped” intelligence that influenced many of the mistaken judgments of President George W. Bush’s administration. In “stovepiped” intelligence, a selected group of

analysts is closeted away and develops judgments without the benefit of other experts who might offer contradictory evidence or question the groupthink.

So, in many ways, Clinton's statement was the opposite of true both when she said it in 2016 and later in 2017 when she repeated it in direct reference to the Jan. 6 assessment. If PolitiFact really cared about facts, it would have corrected its earlier claim that Clinton was telling the truth, but the fact-checking organization wouldn't budge – even after The New York Times and The Associated Press ran corrections.

In this context, PolitiFact showed its contempt even for conclusive evidence – testimony from former DNI Clapper (corroborated by former CIA Director John Brennan) that the 17-agency claim was false. Instead, PolitiFact was determined to protect Clinton's false statement from being described for what it was: false.

Of course, maybe PolitiFact is suffering from the arrogance of its elite status as an arbiter of truth with its position on Google's First Draft coalition, a collection of mainstream news outlets and fact-checkers which gets to decide what information is true and what is not true – for algorithms that then will exclude or downplay what's deemed "false."

So, if PolitiFact says something is true – even if it's false – it becomes "true." Thus, it's perhaps not entirely ironic that PolitiFact would collect money from Google ads placed on its site by advertisers of fake news.

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How Netanyahu Pulls Trump's Strings

Special Report: It turns out that Hillary Clinton was partly correct: President Trump is a "puppet," but his puppet master isn't Russian President Putin but Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

In the final presidential debate of 2016, Hillary Clinton famously called Donald Trump the "puppet" of Russian President Vladimir Putin. But what's increasingly

clear is that Trump has a more typical puppet master for a U.S. politician – Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Since Sept. 18, when the two men met in New York around the United Nations General Assembly, Netanyahu has been pulling Trump's strings on almost every foreign policy issue. Arguably, the puppet/puppeteer relationship began much earlier, but I've been told that Trump bridled early on at Netanyahu's control and even showed a few signs of rebellion.

For instance, Trump initially resisted Netanyahu's demand for a deeper U.S. commitment in Syria by ordering the shutdown of the CIA operation supporting anti-government rebels, along with the Trump administration's statement that U.S. policy no longer sought "regime change" in Damascus.

Immediately after that announcement, Netanyahu had some success in getting Trump to reverse direction and fire 59 Tomahawk missiles at a Syrian air base on April 6. The attack followed what one intelligence source told me was a staged chemical weapons incident by Al Qaeda operatives in the rebel-controlled town of Khan Sheikhoun in Idlib province, possibly using sarin delivered via drone from a Saudi/Israeli special operations base in Jordan. Yet, although apparently duped by the subterfuge into the missile strike, Trump still balked at a complete reversal of his Syrian policy.

Then, in May, Trump picked Saudi Arabia and Israel as his first overseas trip as president – essentially following the advice of his son-in-law Jared Kushner – but I'm told he came away feeling somewhat humiliated by the over-the-top treatment that involved him getting pulled into a ceremonial sword dance in Saudi Arabia and facing condescension from Netanyahu.

So, over the summer, Trump listened to advice about a possible major overhaul of U.S. foreign policy that would have checked Israeli/Saudi regional ambitions, opened diplomatic doors to Iran, and addressed the Korean crisis by brokering negotiations between the North and the South over some form of loose confederation.

There was even the possibility of a Nixon-goes-to-China moment with tough-guy Trump meeting with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and the two countries restoring diplomatic ties, a process that could have given U.S. companies a better chance to compete in the Iranian market.

Those proposed moves had the advantage of reducing international tensions, saving the U.S. government money on future military adventures, and freeing U.S. corporations from the tangle of economic sanctions – exactly the "America First" strategy that Trump had promised his working-class base.

However, instead Netanyahu succeeded in pulling Trump's strings during their conversations on Sept. 18 in New York, although exactly how is still a mystery to some people close to these developments. One source said the Kushner family real-estate company has exposure to substantial Israeli financing that could be yanked, although Jared Kushner's financial disclosure form only lists a \$5 million unsecured line of credit, held jointly with his father, from the Israel Discount Bank.

Trump also has major pro-Netanyahu donors to his political war chest and his legal defense fund who are strong advocates for war with Iran, including casino tycoon Sheldon Adelson, who has plowed \$35 million into the pro-Trump Super PAC Future 45 and has publicly called for dropping a nuclear bomb on Iran as a negotiating tactic. So, Netanyahu had a number of potential strings to pull.

Going on Rants

Whatever the precise reasons, on Sept. 19, Trump turned his maiden speech to the U.N. General Assembly into a war-like rant, personally insulting North Korean leader Kim Jong Un as "Rocket Man," threatening to "totally destroy" his nation of 25 million people, and parroting Netanyahu's calls for another regime change project aimed at Iran.

Most diplomats in the audience sat in stunned silence as Trump threatened aggressive war from the podium of an organization created to prevent the scourge of war. The one notable exception was Netanyahu who enthusiastically applauded his success in jerking Trump into the neocon camp.

So, rather than shift U.S. policy away from confrontation, Trump jettisoned the diplomatic strategy although it already had dispatched intermediaries to make contacts with the Iranians and North Koreans. Instead, Trump opted for the classic neocon approach favored by Netanyahu, albeit with Trump dressing up his neocon surrender in some "America First" rhetoric.

The U.N. speech left some of the U.S. intermediaries scrambling to explain to their contacts in Iran and North Korea why Trump had repudiated the messages that they had been carrying. Privately, Trump explained to one that he just liked to "zigzag" and that the intended end point hadn't change.

Some of these tensions surfaced in late September when Secretary of State Rex Tillerson took the extraordinary step of announcing the behind-the-scenes contacts with North Korea during a state visit to China.

"We are probing, so stay tuned," Tillerson said. "We ask, 'Would you like to talk?' We have lines of communications to Pyongyang – we're not in a dark situation, a blackout." Tillerson added, "We have a couple, three channels open

to Pyongyang ... We do talk to them. , , , Directly. We have our own channels.”

In reaction to Tillerson’s efforts to salvage the backchannel initiatives, Trump showed that his obeisance to Netanyahu and the neocons outweighed loyalty to either his Secretary of State or the intermediaries who had ventured into dicey situations on Trump’s behalf.

In Twitter messages, Trump belittled the idea of a dialogue with North Korea, tweeting: “I told Rex Tillerson, our wonderful Secretary of State, that he is wasting his time trying to negotiate with Little Rocket Man.”

“Save your energy Rex,” Trump added, before slipping in another thinly veiled threat of a military strike: “we’ll do what has to be done!”

While on the surface, Trump’s repudiation of Tillerson might have been viewed as another “zigzag,” it is now clear that Trump’s “zigzag” explanation was just another lie. Rather than zigzagging, he is instead following a straight line marked out by Netanyahu.

Meanwhile, in Syria, Netanyahu seems to have won more concessions from Trump. The U.S. military appears to be helping the remnants of Islamist forces still fighting the government, according to Russian officials. Their accusation is that the U.S. is secretly aiding the Islamist terror groups with weapons, tactical advice and aerial reconnaissance.

In other words, Trump appears to be continuing U.S. military intervention in Syria – just as Netanyahu desires.

Falling in Line

Trump further showed that he is following Netanyahu’s marching orders with the extremist speech about Iran on Friday, essentially repeating all the Israeli propaganda lines against Iran and burning whatever bridges remained toward a meaningful diplomatic approach.

Trump’s Iran speech was so ludicrous it almost defies serious analysis. It ranks with the reckless rhetoric of President George W. Bush when he pronounced an “axis of evil,” with the incongruous linking of Iraq and Iran (two bitter enemies) and North Korea accompanied by Bush’s bogus claims about Iraq’s WMD and Iraq’s alleged collaboration with Al Qaeda.

In Friday’s speech, which looked like the handiwork of John Bolton, one of Bush’s neocon advisers who was seen entering the White House last week, Trump repeated all the nonsense tying Iran to Al Qaeda, presumably thinking that the American people still don’t understand that Al Qaeda is a fanatical Sunni terror

group that targets both the West and Shiites, the dominant Muslim faith in Iran, as heretics deserving death.

The inconvenient truth is that Al Qaeda has long been connected to Saudi Arabia, which has supported these fanatics since the 1980s when Saudi citizen Osama bin Laden was supported in his jihad against Soviet troops in Afghanistan, who were there trying to protect a secular regime.

Though officially the Saudi monarchy insists that it is opposed to Al Qaeda, Saudi intelligence has used Al Qaeda as essentially an unconventional fighting force deployed to destabilize and terrorize adversaries in the region and around the world. [For details, see Consortiumnews.com's "[The Need to Hold Saudi Arabia Accountable](#)."]]

As the Israelis have developed a de facto alliance with Saudi Arabia in recent years, they also have expressed [a preference for an Al Qaeda victory in Syria](#) if necessary to destroy what Michael Oren, former Ambassador to the U.S. and now a deputy minister under Netanyahu, has described as the Shiite "strategic arc" running from Tehran through Damascus to Beirut.

One of the frequent Israeli complaints about Iran is that it has assisted the sovereign government of Syria in defeating Al Qaeda and its militant allies (as well as Al Qaeda's spinoff Islamic State), which should tell you a lot about where Netanyahu's loyalties lie.

A Compromised Media

Yet, as dishonest as Trump's Iran speech was, the U.S. mainstream media won't criticize it as harshly as it deserves because virtually all the important journalists and talking heads have swallowed Israel's anti-Iran propaganda whole. They have frequently repeated the canard about Iran as "the world's chief sponsor of terrorism" when that title clearly should go to the Saudis and the Qataris if not others.

The West's major news outlets also have ingested all the sophisticated propaganda against the Assad government in Syria, particularly the claims about chemical weapons attacks while ignoring evidence that Al Qaeda's operatives and their "civil defense" collaborators have staged attacks with the goal of provoking a direct U.S. military intervention. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[A New Hole in Syria-Sarin Certainty](#)."]]

In his Friday speech, Trump also touted one of the [earliest canards about Iranian "terrorism,"](#) the attack by Lebanese Shiite militants on the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983 killing 241 Americans.

When that attack happened, I was working at The Associated Press as an investigative reporter specializing in national security issues. While the precise Iranian role was not clear, what should have been obvious was that the attack was not “terrorism,” which is classically defined as violence toward civilians to achieve a political goal.

Not only were the Marines not civilians but the Reagan administration had made them belligerents in the Lebanese war by the decision to order the USS New Jersey to shell Muslim villages. Reagan’s National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane, who often represented Israel’s interests inside the administration, was the spark plug for this mission creep, which killed Lebanese civilians and convinced Shiite militants that the United States had joined the war against them.

Shiite militants struck back, sending a suicide truck bomber through U.S. security positions, demolishing the high-rise Marine barracks in Beirut. Reagan soon repositioned the surviving U.S. forces offshore. At the AP, I unsuccessfully argued against calling the Beirut attack “terrorism,” a word that other news organizations also sloppily applied. But even senior Reagan officials recognized the truth.

“When the shells started falling on the Shiites, they assumed the American ‘referee’ had taken sides,” Gen. Colin Powell wrote in his memoir, *My American Journey*. In other words, Powell, who was then military adviser to Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, recognized that the actions of the U.S. military had altered the status of the Marines in the eyes of the Shiites.

(Although this “terrorism” is always blamed on Hezbollah, the group did not officially come into existence until 1985 as a resistance movement against the Israeli occupation of Lebanon which did not end until 2000.)

Opposed to Putin

So, Trump is now on the path to wars with both North Korea and Iran, neither of which Russian President Putin favors. Putin, who played a key role in helping President Obama achieve the Iran-nuclear agreement, now sides with the Europeans in opposition to Trump’s decertification.

Putin also favors a prompt end to the Syrian conflict with the defeat of Al Qaeda and its allies, and he wants peaceful negotiations with North Korea over its desire for security against threatened American aggression. Trump is on the opposite side of all these Putin priorities.

In other words, not only does the Russia-gate hysteria have core evidentiary problems – both on the issues of “hacking” Democratic emails and claims about

suspected “Russia-linked” entities paying for an infinitesimal number of ads on social media (including some about puppies and another promoting a critical documentary about Donald Trump’s golf course in Scotland) – but Trump is behaving in ways that are directly contrary to Putin’s desires and interests.

If indeed Clinton were right that Trump was Putin’s “puppet,” then he would have agreed to negotiations to address the North Korean crisis; would have accepted constructive diplomacy toward Iran; and would have ended all U.S. support for the Syrian militants and encouraged a quick end to the bloodletting.

Instead, Trump is moving in opposite directions, lining up with Netanyahu and the neocons, whom some European allies refer to as “America’s Israeli agents.” Although dressing up his capitulation to Netanyahu in tough-guy phrasing, Trump is doing what most U.S. politicians do – they grovel before Bibi Netanyahu.

And, if you have any doubts about that reality, you can watch how often both Republicans and Democrats jump to their feet when Netanyahu addresses a joint session of Congress, an honor that he has received three times, tying him with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill.

Those moments of American humiliation – as almost all 535 members of Congress act like puppets on invisible strings – represent the actual subservience of the U.S. government to a foreign power. And that power is not Russia.

President Trump is just the latest American politician to have his strings yanked by Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu.

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).

Fueling More Bloodshed in Ukraine

Exclusive: In the U.S., Russia-hating liberals are joining the neocons in seeking more war in Ukraine, as the prospects for a rational and peaceful resolution to the crisis continue to fade, explains James W. Carden.

By James W. Carden

Last January, Sen. John McCain led a delegation along with his longtime sidekick, Sen. Lindsey Graham, to a contingent of Ukrainian troops not far from

the front line in eastern Ukraine. In the presence of Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, Graham told the soldiers: “Your fight is our fight ... 2017 will be the year of offense. All of us will go back to Washington and we will push the case against Russia.”

McCain promised the assembled troops, “we will do everything we can to provide you with what you need to win.”

When contemplating the long careers of the two Republican senators, it is hard to escape the conclusion that McGeorge Bundy’s quip about the famed Cold War columnist Joe Alsop – that he had “never known him to go to any area where blood could be spilled that he didn’t come back and say more blood” – applies equally to McCain and Graham.

Indeed, last month’s National Defense Authorization Act shows that – if nothing else – McCain and Graham are as good as their word: the recently passed defense appropriations bill provides for \$500 million, including “defensive lethal assistance” to Kiev, as part of a \$640 billion overall spending package.

The aid comes at a good time for the embattled Ukrainian President Poroshenko, whose approval rating hovers around 16 percent. In a bid to stave off the possibility of a far-right *coup d’etat*, Poroshenko is back to banging the war drums, promising, well, more blood.

In a little covered speech at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point on Sept. 19, Poroshenko promised that “American weapons will help us liberate the Donbas and return Ukrainian territories.” He also noted that Ukraine spends roughly 6 percent of its GDP on defense, “a figure,” he observed, “much bigger than the obligation for the NATO members.”

Clearly Washington’s condemnation of governments that wage war “against their own people” remains selective, contingent upon who is doing the killing and who is doing the dying. In this case, it would seem that Russian-speaking Ukrainians simply don’t rate.

In addition to promising a wider war in the Donbas, Poroshenko has repeatedly promised that he will seek NATO membership. In August, during a visit by U.S. Defense Secretary James Mattis, Poroshenko declared: “Our Ukrainian caravan is on a roll and we have one road to travel upon – a wide Euro-Atlantic highway, leading to membership in the European Union and NATO.”

Ukraine’s Human Rights Abuses

There are a number of objections to yet another round of NATO expansion. As I reported in February 2015: “The current [Ukrainian] government has, according to

organizations that could hardly be described as Kremlin friendly (Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe), committed war crimes in its attempt to defeat the Russian-backed separatists in the Donbas. ... NATO's principal consideration should not be whether NATO will make Ukraine more secure, but whether Ukraine will make NATO more secure. The answer is self-evident."

It is true that NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, as recently as this month, insisted to Russian state media that NATO is not contemplating Ukrainian membership, telling Sputnik that "There is no MAP [membership action plan] on the agenda." Yet Stoltenberg has also said, as he did in a speech to the Ukrainian parliament in July, that he believes Ukraine "has the right to choose its own security arrangements" further noting that "last month, NATO welcomed Montenegro as the 29th member of our Alliance. This shows that NATO's door remains open."

So the issue doesn't seem to be going away.

Poroshenko's push to join NATO, which is being made against the backdrop of ever-worsening relations between the U.S. and Russia, ignores, perhaps purposefully, one of the principal causes of the morass in which Kiev and Moscow find themselves. It was Moscow's not unfounded fear that Ukraine might join NATO that helped spark the Ukrainian crisis in early 2014.

In the weeks prior to Russia's annexation of Crimea (and just over a month before the outbreak of full hostilities in the Donbas), three former presidents of Ukraine (Leonid Kravchuk, Leonid Kuchma and Viktor Yushchenko) called on the post-Maidan regime to renounce the 2010 Kharkiv agreement which allowed for Russia to base its Black Sea naval fleet in Crimea (in return for discounted prices on Russian natural gas).

It is perhaps not unreasonable that this last move, in addition to the foreign policy and security protocols embedded within the European Union Association agreement (which Poroshenko signed in June 2014), would cause the Russian government to at the very least suspect that NATO was setting the stage for Ukraine's eventual absorption into the alliance.

Indeed, Kiev's launch of its violent and indiscriminate "Anti-Terrorist Operation" against the Donbas – with the effect of intimidating and alienating otherwise loyal Russian-speaking citizens in the eastern part of the country – surely played a role in the Kremlin's decision to come to the aid of the rebels later in the summer of 2014 and again at Debaltseve early the following year.

Less Dangerous Options

One reasonable alternative to NATO membership would be a treaty along the lines of the 1955 Austrian State Treaty, which was an agreement reached between the four post-World War II occupying powers (U.S., USSR, Great Britain and France) that granted Austria its independence “with the understanding,” according to the U.S. State Department, “that the newly independent state of Austria would declare its neutrality, creating a buffer zone between the East and the West,” meaning it would join neither NATO nor the Soviet-run Warsaw Pact.

Charles Bohlen, the legendary American diplomat who served as ambassador to Moscow from 1953-57, recalled in his memoir *Witness To History* that, with regard to the Austrian State Treaty, he believed “that the Kremlin leaders, and probably the Soviet military chiefs, decided that a genuinely neutral Austria was of more value to Soviet Russia than the maintenance of a divided country where the Red Army would occupy only the poorer half.”

The situation in postwar Austria – occupied by East and West – is not perfectly analogous to the situation that obtains in Ukraine today, but there seem to be lessons from what Bohlen intuited were the Kremlin’s motives that might be drawn upon to inform Western diplomacy.

But instead of trying to implement the Minsk peace agreement (which calls for the Donbas to remain as part of Ukraine but with more autonomy from Kiev) or search for a reasonable alternative to what are indeed perplexing and pressing matters of national security, Poroshenko has continued to ring the alarm over the another, this time illusory, Russian invasion.

In a recent speech before the Ukrainian parliament, Poroshenko claimed “there is more and more evidence for [Russia’s] preparations for an offensive war of continental proportions.”

Yet perhaps the danger isn’t as clear and present as Poroshenko portrayed it. As Mary Dejevesky of the U.K.’s Independent has observed: “Nato itself had held exercises in the Black Sea and before that in and around the western borderlands of Ukraine. Who, it has to be asked here, is threatening whom?”

Indeed, if Russia was on the precipice of launching a land war in Eastern Europe, would it have cut its defense budget by 25 percent to \$48 billion a year, as was recently announced by the Kremlin?

As difficult as it might be for our hearty band on new cold warriors to believe (some of whom have scant knowledge about the topic of U.S.-Russia relations on which they so frequently choose to declaim), the push for a peaceable settlement in Ukraine is coming not from Washington, but from Moscow and Berlin.

Nevertheless, the stalemate continues: a resolution to the Ukrainian conflict –

through the implementation of the Minsk agreements, as well as a settlement of the outstanding security concerns of *all* parties to the conflict – seems to remain tragically out of reach.

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.

Russia-gate Jumps the Shark

Exclusive: Russia-gate has jumped the shark with laughable new claims about a tiny number of “Russia-linked” social media ads, but the U.S. mainstream media is determined to keep a straight face, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

A key distinction between propaganda and journalism is that manipulative propaganda relies on exaggeration and deceit while honest journalism provides context and perspective. But what happens when the major news outlets of the world’s superpower become simply conveyor belts for warmongering propaganda?

That is a question that the American people now face as The New York Times, The Washington Post, CNN and virtually the entire mainstream media hype ridiculously minor allegations about Russia’s “meddling” in American politics into front-page hysteria.

For instance, on Tuesday, the major news outlets were filled with the latest lurid chapter of Russia-gate, how Google, the Internet’s dominant search engine, had detected suspected “Russia-linked” accounts that bought several thousand dollars worth of ads.

The Washington Post ran this item as front-page news entitled “Google finds links to Russian disinformation in its services,” with the excited lede paragraph declaring: “Russian operatives bought ads across several of Google’s services without the company’s knowledge, the latest evidence that their campaign to influence U.S. voters was as sprawling as it was sophisticated in deploying the technology industry’s most powerful tools.”

Wow! That sounds serious. However, if you read deeply enough into the story, you discover that the facts are a wee bit less dramatic. The Post tells us:

“Google’s internal investigation found \$4,700 of search ads and display ads that the company believes are Russian-connected, and found \$53,000 of ads with political content that were purchased from Russian Internet providers, building addresses or with Russian currency, people familiar with the investigation said.

...

“One Russian-linked account spent \$7,000 on ads to promote a documentary called ‘You’ve Been Trumped,’ a film about Donald Trump’s efforts to build a golf course in Scotland along an environmentally sensitive coastline, these people said. Another spent \$30,000 on ads questioning whether President Obama needed to resign. Another bought ads to promote political merchandise for Obama.”

A journalist – rather than a propagandist – would immediately follow these figures with some context, i.e., that Google’s net digital ad sales revenue is about \$70 billion annually. In other words, these tiny ad buys – with some alleged connection to Russia, a nation of 144 million people and not all Vladimir Putin’s “operatives” – are infinitesimal when put into any rational perspective.

A Dangerous Hysteria

But rationality is not what the Post and other U.S. mainstream news outlets are engaged in here. They are acting as propagandists determined to whip up a dangerous hysteria about being at “war” with nuclear-armed Russia and to delegitimize Trump’s election last year.

It doesn’t seem to matter that the facts don’t fit the desired narrative. First of all, none of this content, detected by Google, is “disinformation” as the Post claims, unless you consider a critical documentary about Trump’s Scottish golf course to be “disinformation,” or for that matter criticism and/or support for President Obama.

And, by the way, how does any of this material reveal a Russian plot to put Trump in the White House and to ensure Hillary Clinton’s defeat, which was the original Russia-gate narrative? Now, we’re being told that any Internet ads bought by Russians or maybe even by Americans living in Russia are part of some nefarious Kremlin plot even if the content is an anti-Trump documentary or some ads for or against President Obama, but nothing attacking Hillary Clinton.

This surely does not seem like evidence of a “sophisticated” campaign to influence U.S. politics, as the Post tells us; it is either an indication of a totally incoherent campaign or no campaign at all, just some random ads taken out by people in Russia possibly to increase clicks on a Web site or to sell some merchandise or to express their own opinions.

And, if you think that this latest Post story is an anomaly – that maybe some editor was having a bad day and just forgot to include the requisite perspective and balance – you’d be wrong.

The same journalistic failures have appeared in similar articles about Facebook and Twitter, which like Google didn’t detect any Russian operation until put under intense pressure by influential members of Congress and then “found” a tiny number of “Russia-linked” accounts.

At Facebook, after two searches found nothing – and after a personal visit from Sen. Mark Warner, D-Virginia, vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee and a key legislator on the high-tech industry – the social media company turned up \$100,000 in “Russia-linked” ads spread out over three years (compared to its annual revenue of \$27 billion). Facebook also reported that only 44 percent of the ads appeared *before* the 2016 election.

Facing similar pressures from key members of Congress, Twitter identified 201 “Russia-linked” accounts (out of Twitter’s 328 million monthly users).

Tiny Pebbles

However, rather than include the comparative numbers which would show how nutty Russia-gate has become, the U.S. mainstream media systematically avoids any reference to how tiny the “Russia-linked” pebbles are when compared to the size of the very large lake into which they were allegedly tossed.

The mainstream Russia-gate narrative also keeps running up against other inconveniently contrary facts that then have to be explained away by the “responsible media.” For instance, The New York Times discovered that one of the “Russia-linked” Facebook groups was devoted to photos of “adorable puppies.” That left the “newspaper of record” musing about how nefarious the Russians must be to cloak their sinister operations behind puppies. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “The Mystery of the Russia-gate Puppies.”]

The alternative explanation, of course, is unthinkable at least within the confines of “acceptable thought”; the alternative being that there might be no sinister Kremlin campaign to poison American politics or to install Trump in the White House, that what we are witnessing is a mainstream stampede similar to what preceded the Iraq War in 2003.

In the run-up to that disastrous invasion, every tidbit of suspicion about Saddam Hussein hiding WMD was trumpeted loudly across the front pages of The New York Times, The Washington Post and other major U.S. news outlets. The handful of dissenters who questioned the groupthink were ignored or dismissed as “Saddam apologists”; most were essentially banned from the public square.

Another similarity is that in both cases the U.S. government was injecting large sums of money that helped finance the pro-war propaganda. In the Iraq case, Congress funded the Iraqi National Congress, which helped generate false WMD claims that were then accepted credulously by the U.S. mainstream media.

In the Russia-gate case, Congress has authorized tens of millions of dollars to combat alleged Russian “propaganda and disinformation,” a sum that is creating a feeding frenzy among “scholars” and other “experts” to produce reports that support the anti-Russia narrative. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “[The Slimy Business of Russia-gate.](#)”]

Of course, the big difference between Iraq in 2003 and Russia in 2017 is that as catastrophic as the Iraq invasion was, it pales against the potential for thermo-nuclear war that could lie at the end of this latest hysteria.

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](#)).

Citadels of Paranoia: An Occupation by Phantoms

The frantic fear-mongering of American culture – Russians, North Koreans, Iranians, the Others are out to get us – has generated an alienation that fuels violence, globally and in random acts of murder, writes poet Phil Rockstroh.

By Phil Rockstroh

The bad news is we have been deluged with bad, even mortifying, news, and for such an extended period of time, the mind reels in bafflement as the spirit sinks. Despair seems an apt response to events one cannot reconcile, of circumstances of which one cannot gain perspective nor control.

“The only sadnesses that are dangerous and unhealthy are the ones that we carry around in public in order to drown them out with the noise; like diseases that are treated superficially and foolishly, they just withdraw and after a short interval break out again all the more terribly; and gather inside us and are life, are life that is un-lived, rejected, lost, life that we can die of.” ?
Rainer Maria Rilke, excerpt from Letters to a Young Poet

Depression can be a compensatory response to the inherently manic nature of capitalist dominance of every aspect of life in late modernity. The affliction knocks you on your ass and keeps you there until the psyche can find a better means of using the agency of libido, which, under the extant corporate/consumer/surveillance state panopticon has been usurped.

Under the system's economic despotism and attendant anomie and alienation, one's longings, more often than not, do not lead to the connecting eros of a life-enhancing vocation or deepening interpersonal encounters but only as a vehicle that hijacks one's life into the service of a soul-crushing system, wholly designed to exploit every moment of this fleeting life for the benefit of an overclass of parasites, a klavern of vampires and ghouls.

Depression is the soul's way of saying, to paraphrase the Vietnam-era antiwar chant, "Hell no, I won't go."

Alienation is an apt response to negotiating a soulless landscape. Where is the eros in Big Box/strip-mall encounters? The ad hoc architecture of the consumer culture, which manages to be both utilitarian and garish, renders the heart dry as dust and grinds the mind to spittle. The psyche is in constant communion with its outer surroundings.

Thus, what comes to pass if what is extant is a nadascape of vapid commercialization, designed to deliver the shallow sensations concomitant to consumerism but lacking a connecting eros to both numinous inner realities and binding human encounters? A mortification occurs. Some individuals are driven to lash out in anger, even in acts of mass murder. The rage remains inchoate thus is displayed in acts of road rage... in nebulous hatred of outsiders and minorities and the foreign other.

Creating Enemies

The propagandists of empire are privy to the fact. Hence, so many are convinced, so easily, that North Korea and Iran are threat to the homeland; that Russiagate is a thing; that the U.S. military and the nation's so-called intelligence agencies are a force for good and act as agents of protection against a hostile world.

But with some, their soul isn't buying it. Depression pulls one deep into oneself; therefore, manic compensation and displacement is not possible. They have opted out of the collective madness. Depression's descent into the self becomes the option to surface level tropes of distraction. Compulsions fall away like autumn leaves, the sap of life is seemingly frozen, the winds of the world howl through barren branches of one's inner wilderness – to wit, an accurate

apprehension of the sound of propaganda and its affront to mind and soul.

Yet: All too many cannot envisage the veritable dangers of our age: ecocide and their threatened extinction of the human species; blanched coral reefs, scoured of life; dying oceans, gagging in plastic particulates; the sky burning, the ashes of charred forests stippling the wind. Shooting sprees. As American as convenience store hotdogs, mass incarceration and drone murder.

Las Vegas, the crass and sterile U.S. landscape on stilts and steroids, retails in empty sensation. Dominion of night where coruscating lights have scoured away the stars. Perpetual, meretricious come-ons. City of towering, schlock temples wherein what the U.S. holds sacred is worshipped: legal larceny, the deification of empty sensation, and the transubstantiation of everything it touches, flesh and material, into fodder for exploitation. Kitsch über Alles. A 24/7 neon Pentecost of Mammon.

A wilderness of the collective mind howling with hungry ghosts. Vengeful spirits ... inundate the air of the U.S. cult of death. The imprecatory prayers of millions of slaughtered Indians ride the western winds and are funneled into the void of vapidness that is Las Vegas.

A man, eaten hollow by alienation, his soul rancid with displaced rage, stands at a hotel window. The heft of his firearm is the only thing that feels tangible in his hollowness and amid the weightless sheen of the architecture of the city below.

The life of an Iraqi, Libyan, Yemeni, Syrian, Palestinian et. al. translates into nothing in the U.S. American system of value. "The only thing those people understand is brutality. When we rain down death ... that is the fate they demand."

The shooter's mind roils. He acts as he has been conditioned to act. Now, he has achieved the power and control he has been denied. He is a military empire of one. His birthright as a U.S. American has been fulfilled. God bless the USA.

Selling Death

After mass shootings in the U.S., the sale of firearms rises. The phenomenon is very much like the reaction of alcoholics whose solution to the stress-inducing trouble, pain and chaos that their addiction inflicts upon their lives is to attempt to remedy the situation by careening into another drinking binge. U.S. Americans are attracted to guns in the same manner drunks are in love with their chosen killer.

They are seeking sanctuary from fear. All too many view the world as a hostile

place, and the remedy, U.S. culture has instructed them, is to dispatch the threat by means of violence. These tormented souls believe they will be provided safety on a weapons-bristling citadel built on a mountain of corpses. (Floridians had to be advised that it would be a less than propitious act to fire weaponry into the fury of Hurricane Irma.)

Thus discussions of “gun control” will only exacerbate more fear, will cause gun sales to rise, and will increase the body count. The great unspoken is: U.S. Americans fear the wrong things. The culture roils in a miasma of confused apprehensions and displaced responses. The threat U.S. Americans are attempting to ward off is comprised by an occupation of ghosts, the ghost of history that stalks the precincts of their own minds.

If the habit of communal engagement is forsaken, the heart atrophies from a lack of practice. The presence of others, even the panoply of life itself, is misapprehended as menacing ... Others are perceived as malevolent, inhuman – as phantoms, devoid of face, heart and blood.

Empathy is cultivated through participation mystique. Denied of the experience, the heart is at risk of being rendered a cold citadel of angst and paranoia. Without empathy’s agency, passion cannot be transmuted into compassion. Sans the sublimation of the heart’s hearth, psychical fires threaten to become a raging wildfire of collective madness:

“Putin’s neo-Cossack hacker squads have invaded my hard drive; Iran craves nukes; North Korea is a coiled, nuclear viper of seething crazy. Or the madness is made manifest as shooting sprees whereby the mass murderer attempts to cut down with barrages of semiautomatic weapon fire internal phantoms that torment him from within .” – Paranoid thoughts such as those can be read as, a confused soul’s dark fantasies of release from ego-ossified bondage although by means of the agency of death.

Moreover, I have noticed that often the true state of mind crouched beneath paranoia is envy. Envy... unconsciously evinced as, others are taking up your space in the world and are plotting to maintain the arrangement by your undoing.

There is a solution: Go take a survey of the world beyond your self-circumscribed range and insist on your portion of life – your portion of fate. Yes, of course all too many situations in this life are rigged, e.g., the capitalist state. But life itself is too vast, too intricate to be fully controlled; the world is too big to rig.

First release yourself from the stultifying confinement attendant to self-inflicted bondage. Then proceed into the midst of life and show your face to the

world.

Storms will pass, the landscape glistens with renewing rain...

Set barriers and barricades aflame ... their flames caress the future.

Phil Rockstroh is a poet, lyricist and philosopher bard living, now, in Munich, Germany. He may be contacted: philrockstroh.scribe@gmail.com And at FaceBook: <http://www.facebook.com/phil.rockstroh>

A Deaf Ear to Dire Russian Warnings

Official Washington is so obsessed with the hyped Russia-gate allegations that it isn't picking up on dire warnings from Russia that continued U.S. military interference in Syria won't be tolerated, as Gilbert Doctorow notes.

By Gilbert Doctorow

From time to time, the Kremlin uses the Sunday evening weekly news wrap-up program of Dmitry Kiselyov on state television, channel Rossiya-1, to send blunt and public warnings to Washington without diplomatic niceties. Last night was one such case and we must hope that the intended audience within the Beltway can put aside all its distractions about Russia-gate long enough to read a real message from Moscow.

The last such message came in the week following President Trump's April 6 decision to launch 59 Tomahawk missiles at a Syrian air base to punish the Syrian government for an alleged but disputed chemical attack on a village in Idlib province. TV host Kiselyov used his airtime to spell out Russia's disdainful response, which he characterized as unprecedented in scope and seriousness.

It was essential to put all the elements of the warning together in one place, as he did, because the Pentagon sought to downplay the elements in isolation, such as Russia's installation of the Iskander nuclear potential missiles in Kaliningrad, a Russian city on the Baltic Sea surrounded by Poland and Lithuania; or the abrogation of the deconfliction agreement relating to air space over Syria; or the dispatch of still more Russian vessels to the Eastern Mediterranean equipped to sink U.S. Navy ships.

While U.S. generals were saying that the Russians didn't really mean it, Kiselyov put the whole picture on the screen: an ultimatum to Washington to back

off or be prepared for war.

A still earlier message of this kind to Washington aired on the Kiselyov news show in the week following the supposedly accidental Sept. 17, 2016 bombing by U.S. and allied warplanes against Syrian army positions inside the encircled eastern town of Deir Ezzor, which killed more than 80 Syrian soldiers and prepared the way for a renewed offensive by the Islamic State. That bombing scuttled the agreement on a Syrian cease-fire concluded with the approval of President Obama less than a week earlier by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry after a 14-hour negotiating session.

Lavrov was shown on the Kiselyov program openly accusing U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter of directing "friendly fire" against Kerry and of dangerous insubordination to his boss, the U.S. President, which put in question any possibility of reaching agreements with the Americans on anything.

Who's in Charge Here?

That last question about who's in charge in Washington has now re-emerged in the program that Kiselyov presented on Sunday evening. The Americans were identified as the "main obstacle" to the mopping up operation in Syria, at a time when Kiselyov indicated that people could finally see "the light at the end of the tunnel" for the horrific six-year conflict with more than 90 percent Syrian territory now back under government control.

The core of the accusation is that the United States is secretly aiding the Islamist terror groups at the center of the remaining resistance to President Bashar al-Assad's regime: supplying the terror groups with weapons, helping them to move around, removing them from hostile fire, and giving them the findings of aerial reconnaissance, maps of where Syrian government forces are operating and even the locations of Russian military detachments.

Things have gotten to the point where the Russians feel that it is not the military capability of the Islamic State that stands in the way of routing the remaining terrorists from Syrian territory but this American assistance to the terrorists. This analysis, said Kiselyov, is not his own idea: it is the official position of the Russian Ministry of Defense as issued through its spokesman this week, Igor Konashenkov.

Kiselyov added: "The Americans deny everything. But the RF Ministry of Defense does not believe their words, relying instead on facts. We recall in the past week how part of the main road connecting Palmyra and Deir Ezzor was taken over by the fanatics. This is the main artery supplying the Syrian forces leading the

offensive from Deir Ezzor against the remaining forces of the terrorists in Syria. De facto this was an attack in the rear. This was planned and facilitated by the Americans. In parallel, on 28 September a large group of terrorists numbering about 300 men left the area of the American base in al-Tanf at the Jordanian border. In this area there is a refugee camp numbering tens of thousands.”

According to Kiselyov, the Americans have cut off the refugee camp, not allowing in United Nations or other humanitarian relief convoys, so as to use the camp as cover, a human shield, for the Islamic State fighters whom the U.S. military is supporting.

Striking at ‘Random Events’

According to the warning from Russian defense spokesman Konashenkov, if the U.S. forces see these attacks by mobile units of terrorists whom the Americans are assisting as “unforeseen random events,” then Russian armed forces in Syria are prepared to totally destroy all such “random events” directed against the zone under their control.

Kiselyov asked why is this American behavior happening and whether President Trump made this decision. But the question is rhetorical. Though it may seem “amazing,” Kiselyov suggested that it appears Trump was not a party to this behavior, that it more likely resulted from what the TV host called sloppy management when the military gets out from under political control.

On the territory of Syria, Kiselyov said, “they start wandering around quite on their own” and “flirting” with the terrorist groups.

Throughout the six-year war, the United States and its allies – including Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Jordan and Israel – have provided support for Islamist militants and other rebels who have fought in close coordination with and often shared sophisticated U.S. weapons with Al Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate, Nusra Front, and at times Al Qaeda’s spinoff, the Islamic State.

However, whatever the U.S. intentions may be, said Kiselyov, the result is extremely unpleasant both for Russia and for the American leadership as its generals are being pushed toward adventurism.

Konashenkov characterized the area in Syria under American control near the Jordanian border as a “black hole” that is 100 kilometers long. From this “black hole,” the terrorists come out to stage their attacks on Syrian troops and against the peaceful civilian population.

The Sunday program’s feature segment then shifted to a calmer note with the

insistence that Russian President Vladimir Putin remains confident in the victory over the terrorists regardless of who is aiding them. To demonstrate this confidence, the show presented footage of Putin's response to questions put to him at the Energy Forum in Moscow at mid-week. Putin said, "in the end, we all [presumably including the Americans] have common interests in securing Syria and the region against terrorists and that will bring us together for cooperative action."

In the meantime, however, videos showed the results of Russian air activity in Syria this past week, including more than 400 sorties of Russian planes based in Syria, plus SU-134 and SU-135 bombers arriving from Russian territory that killed a dozen or more terrorist leaders together with 50 security personnel and seriously injured a top official who lost an arm and sank into a coma.

Russian air attacks destroyed the terrorists' main underground weapons caches amounting to 1,000 tons, according to the report, and an attack by Kalibr cruise missiles launched from submarines in the Mediterranean destroyed Islamic State command installations and vehicles as well as weapons supplies. This attack cleared the way for Syrian troops to begin the liberation of the town of Meyadin.

The program left the dots unconnected, but the Russian threat is clear: Moscow will use its air power to eliminate all forces standing in the way of complete victory including U.S. forces on the ground near the Jordanian border.

The Saudi Visit

The same news round-up had another segment that relates in less direct fashion to the Russian success in Syria: a state visit to Russia by the king of Saudi Arabia, the first in the two countries' 90-plus years of diplomatic relations. And it was not a simple affair.

Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud brought with him a contingent of 1,000 people, including business leaders, ministry officials and senior military officers. They came with a reported 100 tons of baggage, including favorite carpets and other accouterments of the royal lifestyle.

All aspects of this visit were impressive, including the signing of contracts and letters of intent for multi-billion-dollar joint investments in industrial projects in both countries, possible Saudi purchases of Russian Liquefied Natural Gas from yet another mega-project seeking financing and multi-billion dollar military procurement, said to include the latest S-400 air defense system that Russia agreed to supply to Turkey a few weeks ago in exchange for a \$2.5 billion down-payment and which Turkey accepted gratefully over NATO objections.

Putin quipped to the moderator of the Moscow Energy Forum, also held during the past week, that nothing is forever, not even the U.S. hold on the Saudis.

Kiselyov placed the visit in the context of Russian foreign policy in the region generally. Putin, he said, is pursuing a policy of seeking peaceful harmony in the Near East that takes into account the balance of interests of all countries in the region, a policy which is paying off: Russia is now the only country in the world to have good relations with Saudi Arabia, Iran, Israel, Turkey, Iraq and, of course, Syria.

From both segments it would appear that U.S. longstanding domination of the region is unraveling.

Gilbert Doctorow is an independent political analyst based in Brussels. His next book, *Does the United States have a Future?* will be published during October 2017.

The Mystery of the Russia-gate Puppies

Exclusive: The U.S. mainstream media is determined to prove Russia-gate despite the scandal's cracking foundation and its inexplicable anomalies, such as why Russia would set up a Facebook "puppies" page, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry (Updated Oct. 5 with dropping of two Russia-gate claims)

What is perhaps most unprofessional, unethical and even immoral about the U.S. mainstream media's coverage of Russia-gate is how all the stories start with the conclusion – "Russia bad" – and then make whatever shards of information exist fit the preordained narrative.

For instance, we're told that Facebook executives, who were sent back three times by Democratic lawmakers to find something to pin on Russia, finally detected \$100,000 worth of ads spread out over three years from accounts "suspected of links to Russia" or similar hazy wording.

These Facebook ads and 201 related Twitter accounts, we're told, represent the long-missing proof about Russian "meddling" in the U.S. presidential election after earlier claims faltered or fell apart under even minimal scrutiny.

For example, not only have major questions been raised about whether Russian intelligence operatives were behind the "hacking" of Democratic emails, but the Senate Intelligence Committee announced on Wednesday that two early elements of

the Russia-gate hysteria – minor changes that were made to the Republican platform and a brief meeting between Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak and then-Sen. (now Attorney General) Jeff Sessions at Washington’s Mayflower Hotel – have been dropped as innocent or inconsequential.

But like all good conspiracy theories, once one allegation is dismissed as meaningless, it is replaced by another and another.

In the old days, journalists might have expressed some concern that Facebook “found” the “Russia-linked” ads only under extraordinary pressure from powerful politicians, such as Sen. Mark Warner, D-Virginia, the vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee and a leading legislator on the tech industry. But today’s mainstream reporters took Warner’s side and made it look like Facebook had been dragging its heels and that there must be much more out there.

However, it doesn’t really seem to matter how little evidence there is. Anything will do.

Even the paltry \$100,000 is not put in any perspective (Facebook has annual revenue of \$27 billion), nor the 201 Twitter accounts (compared to Twitter’s 328 million monthly users). Nor are the hazy allegations of “suspected ... links to Russia” subjected to serious inspection. Although Russia is a nation of 144 million people and many divergent interests, it’s assumed that everything must be personally ordered by President Vladimir Putin.

Yet, if you look at some of the details about these \$100,000 in ads, you learn the case is even flimsier than you might have thought. The sum was spread out over 2015, 2016 and 2017 – and thus represented a very tiny pebble in a very large lake of Facebook activity.

But more recently we learned that only 44 percent of the ads appeared before Americans went to the polls last November, according to Facebook; that would mean that 56 percent appeared afterwards.

Facebook added that “roughly 25% of the ads were never shown to anyone. ... For 50% of the ads, less than \$3 was spent; for 99% of the ads, less than \$1,000 was spent.”

So, as minuscule as the \$100,000 in ad buys over three years may have seemed, the tiny pebble turns out really to be only a fraction of a tiny pebble if the Russians indeed did toss it into the 2016 campaign.

What About the Puppies?

We further have learned that most ads weren’t for or against a specific

candidate, but rather addressed supposedly controversial issues that the mainstream media insists were meant to divide the United States and thus somehow undermine American democracy.

Except, it turns out that one of the issues was puppies.

As Mike Isaac and Scott Shane of The New York Times reported in Tuesday's editions, "The Russians who posed as Americans on Facebook last year tried on quite an array of disguises. ... There was even a Facebook group for animal lovers with memes of adorable puppies that spread across the site with the help of paid ads."

Now, there are a lot of controversial issues in America, but I don't think any of us would put puppies near the top of the list. Isaac and Shane reported that there were also supposedly Russia-linked groups advocating gay rights, gun rights and black civil rights, although precisely how these divergent groups were "linked" to Russia or the Kremlin was never fully explained. (Facebook declined to offer details.)

At this point, a professional journalist might begin to pose some very hard questions to the sources, who presumably include many partisan Democrats and their political allies hyping the evil-Russia narrative. It would be time for some lectures to the sources about the consequences for taking reporters on a wild ride in conspiracy land.

Yet, instead of starting to question the overall premise of this "scandal," journalists at The New York Times, The Washington Post, CNN, etc. keep making excuses for the nuttiness. The explanation for the puppy ads was that the nefarious Russians might be probing to discover Americans who might later be susceptible to propaganda.

"The goal of the dog lovers' page was more obscure," Isaac and Shane acknowledged. "But some analysts suggested a possible motive: to build a large following before gradually introducing political content. Without viewing the entire feed from the page, now closed by Facebook, it is impossible to say whether the Russian operators tried such tactics."

The Joe McCarthy of Russia-gate

The Times then turned to Clinton Watts, a former FBI agent and a top promoter of the New McCarthyism that has swept Official Washington. Watts has testified before Congress that almost anything that appears on social media these days criticizing a politician may well be traceable to the Russians.

For instance, last March, Watts testified in conspiratorial terms before the

Senate Intelligence Committee about “social media accounts discrediting U.S. Speaker of the House Paul Ryan.” At the time, Ryan was under criticism for his ham-handed handling of a plan to “repeal and replace” Obamacare, but Watts saw possible Russian fingerprints.

Watts also claimed that Sen. Marco Rubio’s presidential bid “anecdotally suffered” from an online Russian campaign against him, though many of you may have thought Rubio flamed out because he was a wet-behind-the-ears candidate who performed robotically in the debates and received the devastating nickname “Little Marco” from Donald Trump.

Watts explained that these nefarious Russian schemes left no discernible earmarks or detectable predictability. Russians attack “people on both sides of the aisle ... solely based on what they [the Russians] want to achieve in their own landscape, whatever the Russian foreign policy objectives are,” Watts complained.

Watts’s vague allegations appear to have been the impetus behind Sen. Warner’s repeated demands that Facebook find some evidence to support the suspicions. After Facebook came up empty twice, Warner flew to Silicon Valley to personally confront Facebook executives who then found what Warner wanted them to find, the \$100,000 in suspected Russia-linked ad buys.

So, it perhaps made sense that the Times would turn to Watts to explain the rather inexplicable Russian exploitation of puppies. According to Isaac and Shane, Watts “said Russia had been entrepreneurial in trying to develop diverse channels of influence. Some, like the dogs page, may have been created without a specific goal and held in reserve for future use. ‘They were creating many audiences on social media to try to influence around,’ said Mr. Watts, who has traced suspected Russian accounts since 2015.”

In other words, if you start with the need to prove Russian guilt, there are no alternative explanations besides Russian guilt. If some fact, like the puppies page, doesn’t seem to fit the sinister conspiracy theory, you simply pound it into place until it does.

Yes, of course, Russian intelligence operatives must be so sneaky that they are spending money (but not much) on Facebook puppy ads so they might sometime in the future slip in a few other ideological messages. It can’t be that perhaps the ads were not part of some Russian government intelligence operation.

The Russ-kie Plot

But even if we want to believe that these ads are a Russ-kie plot and were somehow intended to sow dissension in the U.S., the totals are insignificant, a

subset of a subset of a subset of \$100,000 in ad buys over three years that, as far as anyone can tell, had no real no impact on the 2016 election – and surely much, much, much less than the political influence from, say, Israel.

If we apply Facebook's 44 percent figure, that would suggest the total spending in the two years before the election was around \$44,000 and much of that focused on a diverse set of issues, not specific candidates. So, if some Russians did spend money to promote gay rights and to push gun rights, any negligible impact on the 2016 election would more or less have been canceled out between Clinton and Trump.

Yet, over these still unproven and speculative allegations of Russian "links" to these Facebook ads, the national Democrats and their mainstream media allies are stoking a dangerous and expensive New Cold War with nuclear-armed Russia.

I realize that lots of Democrats were upset about Hillary Clinton's humiliating defeat and don't want to believe that she could have lost fairly to a buffoon like Donald Trump. So, they are looking for any excuses rather than looking in the mirror.

The major U.S. news outlets also have joined the anti-Trump Resistance, rather than upholding the journalistic principles of objectivity and fairness. The Post even came up with a new melodramatic slogan for the moment: "Democracy Dies in Darkness."

But yellow journalism is not the way to shed light into darkness; it only blinds Democrats from seeing the real reasons behind Trump's appeal to many working-class whites who feel disaffected from a Democratic Party that seems disinterested in their suffering.

Yes, I know that some Democrats are still hoping against hope that they can ride Russia-gate all the way to Trump's impeachment and get him ridden out of Washington D.C. on a rail, but the political risk to Democrats is that they will harden the animosity that many in the white working class already feel toward the party.

That could do more to strengthen Trump's appeal to these voters than to weaken him, while hollowing out Democratic support among millions of peace voters who may simply declare a plague on both parties.

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](#)).

Russians Battle Western Sanctions

Given Russia's imbalanced economy – heavily dependent on energy income – it seemed an easy target for Western sanctions, but instead Russians have responded by creating new industries, big and small, writes Gilbert Doctorow.

By Gilbert Doctorow

In 2014, when the United States and the European Union slapped sanctions on Russian officials and businesses, many observers both in Russia and the West predicted serious problems for the Russian economy and near-certain failure of the Russian government's efforts to substitute for the lost access to foreign products. But those dire predictions were based on a complete misreading of the mood and general political situation in Russia.

The American legislators who initiated the sanctions believed that the punishment directed at the Kremlin leadership and Russia's corporate chieftains would alienate the so-called oligarchs from President Vladimir Putin and possibly lead to regime change or, at a minimum, a change in Russia's foreign policy to suit better the wishes of Washington.

U.S. and European politicians justified the sanctions as punishment for what they called Russia's "annexation" of Crimea and Russia's military intervention in the Donbas region of Ukraine in reaction to what Moscow and many eastern Ukrainians called a Western-orchestrated "coup" that overthrew the elected government of Ukraine in February 2014.

Russia responded to the Western sanctions with an embargo on food products from the sanctioning countries and rolled out a generalized policy of "import substitution" to sharply curtail the dependency of the Russian economy on outside commercial products and political pressures.

More than two years later – although Russia has faced some difficulties – the evidence is now clear that the sanctions against Russia have largely failed, on both an economic and political level. Reunification with Crimea and the ensuing Western sanctions aroused a swelling of national pride and patriotic feelings in the broad public.

So, instead of caving in to Western pressure, the Kremlin doubled down and has stayed the course on Crimea, on Donbas and – more recently – in Syria where its military support for the regime of Bashar al-Assad has gone directly against U.S. and Western policies of backing violent insurgents in another "regime change" project, a conflict in which Assad now appears to have largely

prevailed.

So, in terms of domestic politics and international geopolitics, Putin and Russia appear to have frustrated the U.S. and the European Union as well as U.S. regional allies, Saudi Arabia and Israel, which were strong advocates for Syrian "regime change." But what about Russia's strategy of creating domestic sources for what can no longer be imported?

Expectations of Failure

Within months of the Kremlin's announcement of this policy, commentators were publishing statistics showing that "import substitution," i.e., Russian products replacing Western ones, was negligible, that the strategy was failing. To explain why, these skeptics pointed to the unbalanced structure of the Russian economy, heavily dependent on the extraction of raw materials with massive resources invested in the highly profitable energy industry, which boosted the ruling elites. Moreover, Russia received low ratings as an "investor friendly" country, which limited outside investments.

Those doubts had validity and there were other problems, particularly the cost of money and its scarcity. In 2014, the Russian economy was experiencing high inflation and suffering from the attempts of the Bank of Russia to contain it with tight-money policies. The costs of borrowing for small businesses were particularly usurious. Indeed, lack of working capital at competitive prices was the main contributor to the flooding of the Russian market with imports and the collapse of local industry.

Yet, despite these headwinds, the Russian government began to make significant progress. Though the creation of industrial sectors can take years, the Kremlin identified priority sectors and provided various kinds of government assistance that included credit subsidies. The Kremlin also took steps to maintain the ruble at a low exchange rate to protect against imports whatever happens to the sanctions and embargo.

Agriculture is one sector where the potential payback was relatively quick, for example, by prioritizing wheat over livestock or poultry over pork. When the oxygen of subsidized credit was applied, the results were stunning. In 2017, despite negative weather conditions in the spring and early summer, Russia is expecting its largest ever grain harvest, possibly reaching 130 million metric tons, and the country is retaking its position as the world's top wheat exporter and leading exporter of other grains and of beet sugar.

What is happening in other sectors of the economy which the government prioritized for import substitution will be obvious only in the years to come,

precisely because of the greater capital and knowhow required and thus the slower payback. But given the way agriculture has responded to stimuli from the Kremlin, it is reasonable to expect similar success stories in manufacturing and service industries like banking, insurance and computer programming over time.

Since arising tide raises all ships, the initial agricultural success has attracted big business interest not only to industrial-scale farming of grain crops but also to many other sides of the food supply and its processing. Such investments are being made not only by start-up small- and medium-sized businesses but also by the oligarchs, for whom this is a point of pride and a direct response to the wave of patriotism that has swept the country.

Thus, as *The Financial Times* recently reported oligarch Viktor Vekselberg has been pouring vast capital via his Renova holding company into the construction of greenhouses for vegetable crops that are in great demand among Russia's urban populations. Payback on these investments is measured in years, not months, and demonstrates great confidence of Russian competitiveness against ground crops from Turkey and Central Asia and from hothouse crops from Western Europe whenever the sanctions are lifted.

The result of these various undertakings is that Russian Federation Minister of Agriculture Alexander Tkachev, himself a farmer with large-scale interests in the sector, can report regularly on the dramatic progress being made in all areas of agricultural self-sufficiency. Indeed, in many product groupings quite apart from grains, Russia is becoming an exporter for the first time since before World War I.

The Fish Turnaround

This economic transformation has included progress in a surprising area, given Russian national traditions that favor meat over fish. This prejudice was long justified by the quality of fish products that were available in the market from Soviet times. The improvement in assortment and appeal of these products dates from the middle of the first decade of the new millennium.

The Financial Times article gave statistics for the Murmansk-based LLC Russkoye More, an ambitious firm that is rapidly expanding to occupy the leading position as supplier of farmed salmon in what is a major import substitution project. The Russian market for fresh salmon, like the E.U. market, was until two years ago entirely dominated by the Scandinavians, now on the embargo list.

Whereas *The Financial Times* addresses the changes in the fish sector at the corporate and macroeconomic level, there is also the microeconomic level where people live and where demand meets supply. From my own visits to supermarkets,

to independent fish vendors, to covered street markets in cities and in the countryside up to 80 km from St Petersburg, I can speak from first-hand experience about how these fish supplies are reaching consumers. The distribution and logistical chain is all the more important in products as perishable as fresh fish.

Some specific fish varieties are locally grown in the Russian Northwest region, including the *sig*, a fresh water member of the salmon family native to Lake Ladoga, Europe's largest body of fresh water that is 50 km east of Petersburg, and also the minnow-sized *koryushka*, another native of Ladoga that each spring travels down the Neva River to the lightly saline Gulf of Finland to lay its eggs and is caught on the way in vast quantities to the great pleasure of Petersburgers.

But the bigger picture is that – as the largest country on earth representing more than 10 percent of the world's land surface – Russia has tremendous fresh water resources in terms of lakes and rivers that still abound in fish enjoying local reputation and retail distribution. This is particularly true of the Siberian rivers; smoked delicacy fish from there are sold at high prices across the Russian Federation. In addition, Russian fishing fleets based in Murmansk, to the north and in Vladivostok to the east have been and remain large suppliers of ocean fish.

What has changed is the scale of production and distribution of fish whether from fresh salt water or from lakes and rivers or farmed fish. In the past, the fish section in Russian supermarkets meant shelves of tinned sardines or catfish in tomato sauce, today every respectable market offers fresh fish, in filets or whole, presented on beds of ice.

Specialized fish stores have sprung up even in the hinterland in the Northwest, receiving daily shipments of farmed salmon, wild *gorbusha* and hefty flounders, among other varieties. By local standards, these fish are all substantially more expensive sources of protein than domestic chickens or pork chops. But they obviously do find their consumers and they are priced 30 percent or more below West European store prices for similar fish.

Until recently, ocean fish were brought to market frozen. The Soviet Union developed a large fleet of trawlers and fish processing ships that brought frozen product to port, much of it going into export. The fish were usually low grade, bony, good only for stews and soups. Higher-grade fish like cod appeared for sale in shops in bulk in contorted stages of rigor mortis, not very appealing to the faint of heart.

Meeting Demand

Now, in the past couple of years, the frozen foods bins of super markets are stocked with fish steaks packaged in clear plastic that are as attractive and as high quality as anything sold in Western Europe. These cod steaks, wild salmon (*gorbusha*) steaks have been flash frozen and are offered in half-kilogram portions. The labeling stresses that no preservatives have been used, that the products are natural and healthful, with detailed nutritional information provided.

In the days of the Soviet Union, the Russian fishing industry produced some world-beating tinned products including red and black caviar and Chatka brand king crab meat. These exclusive and very pricey products are exported, where they enjoy demand and are available domestically in specialty shops. But most tinned fish traditionally fell into the category of low-grade fish in tomato sauce or very poor grade vegetable oil.

Over the past several years, that has changed beyond recognition. Tinned fish of world-class quality is making its appearance on store shelves. For example, a week ago I discovered a new arrival: "premium" class chunk tuna in olive oil packaged in 200 gram glass jars. The producer is the Far East fishing fleet, and the fish name is given in Japanese as well as Russian. The product is similar in design and presentation to premium tuna on sale in Belgium at twice the price.

And finally another fish product category is worth mentioning: the salted, smoked or otherwise processed and unit-packed fish sold in the chilled products sections of supermarkets. This has expanded in product range and quality so as to be beyond recognition when compared with similar offerings just a few years ago.

Many different suppliers vie in the category of cold or hot smoked, salted salmon shrink-wrapped in units of 200 grams plus or minus. Herrings filets in oil or in sauces are now very attractive and of generally high quality. Anchovies and other small fish filets have proliferated. And hitherto unknown product categories such as "seafood cocktails" consisting of baby octopus and squid, pink shrimp and mussels in brine are offered in small plastic pots; quality is in no way inferior to what you would find in an upscale supermarket in Western Europe.

All such alien – "indescribably awful" (???????) foods in the judgment of your average Soviet consumer – are today welcomed as the basis for salads, as stuffing for avocados, themselves a relatively new food item to the Russian shopper.

Travel abroad, and 10 million Russians do travel abroad each year, has turned them into quite sophisticated shoppers and diners. And what they have come to

love they now can largely find in their supermarkets supplied by domestic producers, including all varieties of fish specialties.

The point is, that from nowhere, the Russian fishing industry has made enormous strides and, unlike the cheese industry, is fully replacing imports with equal or better quality contents and lower prices.

This is the consequence of change in demand as well as change in supply. Demand has changed because before 2014 Russians still distrusted their compatriots and believed that everything made in their country was rubbish. The Ukraine crisis, the reunification with Crimea, the war in Donbas, and the upsurge of patriotism prodded folks to try their own. What Russia has now is a virtuous cycle: the Russian people expect better and what they are getting is better.

Gilbert Doctorow is an independent political analyst based in Brussels. His last book *Does Russia Have a Future?* was published in August 2015. His forthcoming collection of essays *Does the United States Have a Future?* will be published in October 2017. © Gilbert Doctorow, 2017
