

Mainstream Media's 'Victimhood'

Exclusive: Just weeks ago, mainstream U.S. media decried “fake news” and backed a blacklist of independent news sites over “Russian propaganda.” Now, under fire from President Trump, the MSM loves a free press, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

It's heartwarming that The New York Times and The Washington Post are troubled that President Trump is loosely throwing around accusations of “fake news.” It's nice that they now realize that truth does not reliably come from the mouth of every senior government official or from every official report.

The Times is even taking out full-page ads in its own pages to offer truisms about truth: “The truth is hard. The truth is hidden. The truth must be pursued. The truth is hard to hear. The truth is rarely simple. The truth isn't so obvious. ...” On Sunday, those truth truisms ran opposite an alarmist column by Jim Rutenberg entitled, “Will the Real Democracy Lovers Please Stand Up?” Meanwhile, The Washington Post launched its own melodramatic slogan, “Democracy Dies in Darkness.”

Yet, it was only weeks ago when the Post and Times were eagerly promoting plans for silencing or blacklisting independent news sites that didn't toe the line on what the U.S. government and its allies were claiming was true.

On Nov. 20, the Times published a lead editorial calling on Facebook and other technology giants to devise algorithms that could eliminate stories that the Times deemed to be “fake.” The Times and other mainstream news outlets – along with a few favored Internet sites – joined a special Google-sponsored task force, called the First Draft Coalition, to decide what is true and what is not. If the Times' editorial recommendations were followed, the disfavored stories and the sites publishing them would no longer be accessible through popular search engines and platforms, essentially blocking the public's access to them. [See Consortiumnews.com's “What to Do About 'Fake News.'”]

On Thanksgiving Day, the Post ran a front-page story citing an anonymous group, called PropOrNot, blacklisting 200 Web sites, including Consortiumnews.com and other important sources of independent journalism, because we supposedly promoted “Russian propaganda.”

Although PropOrNot and the Post didn't bother to cite any actual examples or to ask the accused for comment, the point was clear: If you didn't march in lockstep behind the Official Narrative on, say, the Ukraine crisis or the war in Syria, you were to be isolated, demonized and effectively silenced. In the

article, the Post blurred the lines between “fake news” – stories that are simply made up – and what was deemed “propaganda,” in effect, information that didn’t jibe with what the U.S. State Department was saying.

Back then, in November, the big newspapers believed that the truth was easy, simple, obvious, requiring only access to some well-placed government official or a quick reading of the executive summary from some official report. Over the last quarter century or so, the Times, in particular, has made a fetish out of embracing pretty much whatever Officialdom declared to be true. After all, such well-

dressed folks with those important-sounding titles couldn’t possibly be lying.

That gullibility went from the serious, such as rejecting overwhelming evidence that Ronald Reagan’s Nicaraguan Contra rebels were deeply involved in drug trafficking, to the silly, trusting the NFL’s absurd Deflategate allegations against Tom Brady. In those “old” days, which apparently ended a few weeks ago, the Times could have run full-page ads, saying “Truth is whatever those in authority say it is.”

In 2002, when the George W. Bush administration was vouching for a motley crew of Iraqi “defectors” describing Saddam Hussein’s hidden WMDs, Iraq’s purchase of some “aluminum tubes” must have been for building nuclear bombs. In 2003, when Secretary of State Colin Powell showed some artist drawings of “mobile chemical weapons labs,” they must really exist – and anyone who doubted Powell’s “slam-dunk” testimony deserved only contempt and ridicule.

When the Obama administration issued a “government assessment” blaming the Syrian military for the sarin gas attack outside Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013, there was no need to scrutinize its dubious assertions or ask for actual proof. To do so made you an “Assad apologist.”

When a bunch of U.S. allies under the effective control of Ukraine’s unsavory SBU intelligence service presented some videos with computer-generated graphics showing Russians supplying the Buk missile that shot down Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over eastern Ukraine on July 17, 2014, there was no need to examine the holes in the evidence or note that the realistic-looking graphics were fictional and based on dubious assumptions. To do so made you a “Moscow stooge.”

In other words, when the U.S. government was gluing black hats on an “enemy” and white hats on a U.S. “ally,” the Times never seemed to object. Nor did pretty much anyone else in the mainstream media. No one seemed to note that both sides usually deserved gray hats. With very few exceptions – when the State Department or other U.S. agencies were making the charges – the Times and its cohorts

simply stopped applying responsible journalistic skepticism.

Of course, there is a problem with “fake news,” i.e., stories that are consciously made up for the purpose of making money from lots of clicks. There are also fact-free conspiracy theories that operate without evidence or in defiance of it. No one hates such bogus stories more than I do – and they have long been a bane of serious journalism, dating back centuries, not just to the last election.

But what the Times, the Post and the rest of the mainstream media have typically ignored is that there are many situations in which the facts are not clear or when there are alternative explanations that could reasonably explain a set of facts. There are even times when the evidence goes firmly against what the U.S. government is claiming. At those moments, skepticism and courage are necessary to challenge false or dubious Official Narratives. You might even say, “The truth is rarely simple. The truth isn’t so obvious...”

A Tough Transition

During the transition from the Obama administration to the Trump team, the Times, the Post and other mainstream media outlets got caught in their own transition from trusting whatever the outgoing officials said to distrusting whatever the incoming officials said. In those final days, big media accepted what President Obama’s intelligence agencies asserted about Russia supposedly interfering in the U.S. election despite the lack of publicly available evidence that could be scrutinized and tested.

Even something as squirrely as the attack on Trump’s National Security Adviser Michael Flynn – with Obama holdovers citing the never-prosecuted Logan Act from 1799 as the pretext for ginning up some kind of criminal-sounding case that scared Trump into firing Flynn – was treated as legitimate, without serious questions asked. Since Obama officials were doing the feeding, the no-skepticism rule applied to the eating. But whatever statements came from Trump, even his few lucid moments explaining why war with nuclear-armed Russia wasn’t such a great idea, were treated as dangerous nonsense.

When Trump scolded the mainstream press for engaging in “fake news” and then applied the phrase “enemy of the people,” the Times, the Post and the rest went into full victimization-mode. When a few news companies were excluded from a White House news briefing, they all rushed to the barricades to defend freedom of the press. Then, Trump went even further – he rejected his invitation to the White House Correspondents Dinner, the black-tie/evening-gown event where mainstream media stars compete to attract the hottest celebrity guests and hobnob with important government officials, a walking-talking conflict-of-

interest-filled evening, an orgy of self-importance.

So, the Times, the Post and their mainstream-media friends now feel under attack. Whereas just weeks ago they were demanding that Google, Facebook and other powerful information platforms throttle those of us who showed professional skepticism toward dubious claims from the U.S. government, now the Times, the Post and the others are insisting that we all rally around them, to defend their journalistic freedom. In another full-page ad on Sunday, the Times wrote: "Truth. It's more important now than ever."

I would argue that truth is always important, but especially so when government officials are leading countries toward war, when lives are at stake, whether in Iraq or Syria or Ukraine or the many other global hotspots. At those moments in the recent past, the Times did not treat truth – in all its subtlety and nuance – as important at all.

I would argue, too, that the stakes are raised even higher when propagandists and ideologues are risking the prospect of nuclear war that could kill billions and effectively end human civilization. However, in that case, the American people have seen little truly professional journalism nor a real commitment to the truth. Instead, it's been much more fun to demonize Russian President Vladimir Putin and paint black-and-white pictures of the evil Russians.

At such moments, those New York Times' truisms about truth are forgotten: "The truth is rarely simple. The truth isn't so obvious. ..."

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](#)).

Risks in Rush to Crush ISIS

President Trump's vow to crush the Islamic State quickly may lead to hasty actions that could compound the problem rather than solve it, notes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

A couple of tendencies that are all too common in policymaking and policy debate

tend to make for unwise foreign commitments or overextended foreign expeditions. One is to treat a goal that is at most an intermediate objective as if it were an end in itself. Doing so obfuscates clear analysis of means and ends, overlooks other ways to achieve the same ends, and distorts perception of the costs and benefits associated with achieving the immediate objective.

The other tendency is to give insufficient attention to what comes after achieving the immediate objective. One only has to recall the example of insufficient attention given to what would come after the objective of overthrowing Saddam Hussein to appreciate the problems involved.

One could add a third phenomenon, which is less common but sometimes arises, which is to try to fulfill a campaign promise for the sake of fulfilling a campaign promise.

All three factors appear to be present now with the issue of next steps for the U.S. military in Syria in going after ISIS. The head of U.S. Central Command is saying, "It could be that we take on a larger burden ourselves." His comment comes amid the Department of Defense coming up with a plan requested by President Trump, who promised during the campaign to hasten the defeat of ISIS.

Of course ISIS is a horrible group, and everyone not in it agrees that the world will be better off without it. But before U.S. forces take up any larger share of the burden of fighting it, three realities ought to be carefully considered.

One is that the ISIS mini-state in Syria and Iraq already is well on the way to being extinguished, at the hands of the forces already engaging it. This should not be surprising, given the group's lack of external support and the way its brutal methods lose it any support among the populations with which it has come into contact. The issue involved in considering any escalation with U.S. forces is not whether the mini-state will be killed off, but only how quickly it will be.

Second, if our main concern is with how ISIS could endanger American lives through acts of terrorism, we should realize that the connection between that danger and the fate of the mini-state in Syria and Iraq has always been tenuous at best, and less than is commonly supposed. There has been more of a tension than a direct connection between ISIS fomenting terrorism in the West on one hand, and on the other hand the group using its available resources to defend and shore up the mini-state. To the extent the overseas terrorist threat has materialized, it has been far more a matter of inspiration and ideology than of organizational dependence on a piece of real estate in the Middle East.

Third, the ISIS problem will not go away when the mini-state is

extinguished. The problem will continue in the form of the ideology and the inspiration, and probably also in the form of insurgency in the lands in which the mini-state has existed.

This last point leads to the further observation that as far as not only anti-Western terrorism but also instability in the Middle East are concerned, what matters most is not how hastily the ISIS mini-state is crushed but rather what arrangements are left on the ground after the crushing.

Fertile Climate

The more that chaos, disputes, and uncertainty prevail there, the more that ground will remain fertile for violent extremism, whether under the ISIS label or some other brand. The rest of the political, diplomatic, and military story of conflict in Syria still has a good way to go before providing a more promising and stable alternative for what comes after ISIS. It would not be advantageous for the anti-ISIS military campaign to get ahead of that story. Speed in this case is not necessarily good.

All of this is in addition to one of the biggest downsides of U.S. forces assuming more of a military role: playing into the ideology and propaganda of ISIS and similar extremists, who appeal for support with a message about how the United States uses its armed might to intervene in Muslim lands and to kill Muslims.

This set of issues will be an early test for new national security adviser H. R. McMaster. He is a highly regarded military officer whose professional focus, from study of war in Vietnam to the practice of war in Iraq, has been on what use of force and how much force are needed to achieve an objective of military victory. His natural inclination, as much as of others, may be to take the swift extinguishing of the ISIS mini-state as such an objective and to treat it more as an end than a means. A more thorough and careful performance as national security adviser would instead broaden the policy question and take into account the considerations mentioned above.

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Trump's Embattled 'Revolution'

President Trump's domestic "revolution" on behalf of "forgotten" Americans requires a complementary foreign policy of reduced warfare and a weaker dollar, explains ex-British diplomat Alastair Crooke.

By Alastair Crooke

Pat Buchanan – perhaps the U.S. politician with the greatest feel (as a thrice-times U.S. presidential candidate himself) for what President Trump is trying to achieve – tells us compellingly, just why Trump is now the US President:

[Simply,] ...“He [Trump], read the nation and the world, better than his rivals. He saw the surging power of American nationalism at home, and of ethno-nationalism in Europe. And he embraced Brexit. While our bipartisan establishment worships diversity, Trump saw Middle America recoiling from the demographic change brought about by Third World invasions. And he promised to curb them.

“While our corporatists burn incense at the shrine of the global economy, Trump went to visit the working-class casualties. And those forgotten Americans in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan and Wisconsin, responded. And while Bush II and President Obama plunged us into Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Syria, Trump saw that his countrymen wanted to be rid of the endless wars, and start putting America first. [And] He offered a new foreign policy ... Putin's Russia is not 'our number one geopolitical foe.'”

That's it. That's Trump's domestic, and his foreign policy, in one.

What we all presently are obsessed with, is the bellicosity and hysteria to which Trump and his agenda has given rise: Is détente with Russia now effectively dead, as a consequence of the new Russo-phobic McCathyism? Or, is that which we are witnessing nothing more than “a mere tantrum by a clutch of 'spooks' whose jobs are under threat ... along with the liberal press having a 'parallel tantrum': [not believing] that they lost the election to Donald Trump” – as one American commentator told MK Bhadrakumar? Or, are we seeing a brittle American Establishment splitting apart, in a more profound way?

We do not know the answer. The notion of removing Trump from office seems somewhat far-fetched (see here). Certainly, America is deeply divided: Trump plainly evokes strong, emotional reactions. Three-fourths of Americans react to him strongly – either positively or negatively.

The *Pew Research Center's* latest survey shows that only eight percent of

Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents approve Trump's job performance, which is the lowest rating for any new president from the opposing party in more than three decades. But interestingly, Pew also finds that *84 percent* of Republicans and Republican-leaning, regard Trump's initial job performance as president "favorably."

A Divided Administration

But then, Gilbert Doctorow relates, as the new Administration got underway, "came a stunning about-face in the early roll-out of Donald Trump's new foreign policy, which looked a lot like Barack Obama's old foreign policy. We heard presidential press secretary Sean Spicer say Trump 'expected the Russian government to ... return Crimea' to Ukraine.

"Then we heard Defense Secretary James Mattis in Brussels (NATO headquarters), Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in Bonn (G20 Foreign Ministers meeting) and Vice President Pence in Munich (Security Conference) collectively pledge unswerving loyalty to the NATO alliance, insist that any new talks with Russia must be conducted from 'a position of strength,' and vow to hold Russia accountable for the full implementation of the Minsk Accords, meaning all sanctions stay in place pending that achievement which the Ukrainian government has consistently blocked, while blaming Moscow.

"Amid these signals of surrender from the Trump Administration – suggesting continuation of the disastrous foreign policy of the last 25 years – the newly revived enemies of détente on Capitol Hill added more anti-Russian sanctions and threats. In response to alleged violations by the Kremlin of the Treaty on Intermediate and Short-range Missiles (INF) dating back to 1987, Sen. Tom Cotton, R-Arkansas, introduced a bill enabling the re-installation of American nuclear-tipped cruise missiles in Europe. If enacted, this would undo the main achievements of disarmament from the Reagan years, and bring us back to a full-blown Cold War."

This has unnerved Trump supporters; apparently disappointed some in Moscow; and also failed to reassure anxious Europeans at the Munich Security Conference. They are puzzling over which Administration faction to believe more correctly reflects future U.S. policy: the Pence/Mattis/Haley 'wing', that Europeans would like to hope is dominant; or, the Trump/Bannon/Miller triumvirate, which Steve Bannon hints views the European Union as a flawed construct, and who foresees conducting future relations with Europe, on a bilateral basis.

Which of these two, reflects America's likely path, more accurately? Has the Establishment now succeeded in walking-back Trump's agenda? Who now speaks for the President?

The answer is not hard to fathom: return to Pat Buchanan's clear explanation of how Trump became President: "He saw the surging power of American nationalism at home, and of ethno-nationalism in Europe. And he embraced Brexit. While our bipartisan establishment worships diversity, Trump saw Middle America recoiling from the demographic change, brought about by Third World invasions. And he promised to curb them."

Obviously, it is the Trump-Bannon wing. Were Trump to abandon his reading of the nation and of the Europeans that brought him to the Presidency, he might as well throw in the towel now. He will not be re-elected.

Weakening the Dollar

And Mr. Trump is showing no signs of reversing (for all the mixed messaging that has emanated from his diverse team). So, back to basics. What then is his foreign policy? Simply this: If President Trump wishes to keep his 84 percent (Republican) approval rating – and stay elected – there is only one way that he can do that: he must continue to carry "the working-class casualties and those forgotten Americans" (as Buchanan called them) of the Midwest, Michigan, Indiana, Ohio, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania.

And the only way to do that is to bring back manufacturing jobs to this (white), Middle America, (hurting) constituency. And the only way you can bring those jobs back, is with a weak dollar. A strong dollar would be deadly to Trump's project.

Today, the dollar is too strong to allow any real return of manufacturing to the U.S. Trump needs to staunch any propensity for the dollar to rise. And, in his very first interview upon taking office (with the Wall Street Journal), Trump's main point, was that he wanted the U.S. dollar "down."

Here it is, then: Trump's main foreign policy objective is the return of jobs to Middle America – and that means, in practical terms, avoiding a strong dollar. Secondly, the ultimate point of détente with Russia – apart from Trump's reading that Middle America is experiencing war fatigue – is that détente can release a "peace dividend" which would be vital for the task of rebuilding America's frayed infrastructure. (His tax proposals ultimately will have to be revenue neutral if Trump is to avoid an ugly row with his Tea Party supporters, who are aggressively fiscal conservative.)

Again, détente with Russia *is a domestic need*, required to attend to the rebuilding of the frayed structures of the communities who voted him into office. It is not anchored in any particular foreign policy ideology, but merely in a sense of peoples' fatigue.

Of course, wanting a weaker dollar *and* wanting détente with Russia, does not mean that Trump will get either; he will continue to face stiff internal resistance and filibustering. But these two aims, as it were, may be seen to constitute the overriding prism by which Trump views his foreign policy aims, in the longer term.

In the shorter term – perhaps – what we are seeing now, is a tactical pause, dictated by the malicious leaks from within the system, and by the unrelenting “war” being waged by the mainstream media – a pause to allow Trump to get on with sorting out his Administration – purging the leaks, putting in place his people, and contending with certain of the mainstream media.

It seems the purge is slowly happening (it must be a huge process, and be imposing a heavy demand on time). It is however, simply not very realistic for Trump to pursue an accord with either Russia or China while he is under siege, and when his very survival is being widely questioned. And, as is now widely known, Trump believes in negotiating from a position of strength, and not weakness. Pence and Mattis may well have been dispatched to Europe to apply some anaesthetizing balm, while the difficulties of the first month are being resolved.

So, how might this “foreign policy” be conducted in practice? Well, if Trump were to impose protectionist measures on other states (China, say), this would likely result in their currencies depreciating, as a consequence. A 30 percent tax might result in a 30 percent currency devaluation. We have seen something of the sort happening with the peso, in the case of Mexico. And, *ipso facto*, if the Mexican or Chinese currency weakens, the dollar appreciates (thus weakening U.S. capacity to compete).

There are two possible routes ahead: one is for Trump to negotiate bilaterally with (say) Germany, Japan, China and others, to warn them that either they revalue their currencies (or, at minimum, hold their foreign exchange value stable), or else to suffer the consequences of a U.S.-imposed protectionism, which would badly damage the health of their economies.

Or, Trump can revert to the Reagan tactic of the mid-1980s, when the then the U.S. President pulled together all the main global central banks and finance ministers in Paris, to instruct that the dollar was not to be allowed to rise in value any further (after its rapid appreciation in the early 1980s). This was known as the “Plaza Accord.”

Going with ‘Bilateralism’

It seems that Trump will pursue the first course (bilateralism), as he has

already made it clear that he wants to negotiate on a fuller field than just the stability of foreign exchange values. Specific trade deals, and inward investment into the U.S., will be on the agenda – as well as his declared aim of leveraging U.S. defense provision as a bilaterally negotiated *quid pro quo*, in return further economic benefit to the U.S. – rather than having the U.S. defense umbrella being provided as a highly subsidized “good.”

The implications of this bilateral approach are significant. It does not imply, *per se*, that Trump should want to split Russia from China. Trump, by his own logic, would not want, ultimately, to resort to protectionism against China (other than as a negotiating ploy). Imposing punitive tariffs on China would likely lead to a strengthening of the dollar, and risk a devaluation of the yuan – even possibly a maxi-devaluation of the yuan. Rather, he wants a *deal*. One that would bring additional jobs and Chinese infrastructure investment to America.

The notion that America needs to divide Russia from China (or Iran) for strategic reasons (though one probably embraced by some of his team) is essentially “old think.” It belongs to the neoconservative era, which held that America must remain as a global defense and financial hegemon. And therefore must contain and weaken any contending rising power.

Russia will not, in any case, break with China. But in the Trumpian logic, why should that matter, so long as Trump has achieved satisfactory commercial deals with each? (Kissinger though, may try to persuade Trump otherwise.)

Again, pursuing the war on radical Islam (for which Trump has called for proposals from the Pentagon) would not necessarily call for decisive military U.S. interventions in the Middle East, on this logic. A change in policy, *and in ethos*, by a reformed CIA – away from using radical Islam as “a tool” by which to pursue its “interests” (as it has from Afghanistan in the 1980s to Syria in recent years), would *in and of itself*, bring about a profound change. It would quickly percolate through to European intelligence services – and more slowly – marinate Gulf thinking.

Changing the ‘Group Think’

Pat Lang, a former senior U.S. Defense Intelligence officer, notes how a small shift in bureaucratic “group think” from one paradigm to another can bring crucial change, simply by virtue of approaching a problem from a different direction:

“1. General Dunford, USMC, the uniformed head of the US armed forces, is meeting the week at Baku in Azarbaijan with General Gerasimov, the head of the Russian

General Staff.

"2. My sources tell me that US and Russian air forces are increasingly coordinating and de-conflicting their air actions in Syria and Iraq. This can clearly be seen in USAF and US Navy air attacks on 'moderate' (in fact jihadi forces) in Idlib Province. These obviously have been coordinated with Russian air defenses.

"3. *The CIA has stopped providing assistance to aforesaid 'moderate' jihadi and FSA forces in Syria. They would not have done that without instructions from outside and above CIA.*

All of that tells me that sanity reigns in the Trump Administration no matter what lunatics like Schumer, Waters and McCain may do, think or say." (*emphasis added*).

What then are the major risks to the Trump "paradigm"? They are not negligible. Any increase in international tension usually will lead to a flight to the "safety" of the U.S. dollar – thus to a "strengthening" of the dollar. (One good reason why Trump may stick with *rhetoric* against Iran, rather than *action*).

Secondly, although Trump has been trying to "talk down" the value of the U.S. dollar, most of his policies (de-offshoring of corporate cash, de-regulation and tax cuts) are seen as inflationary – and therefore are pushing the dollar upwards. So, too, are pronouncements by the Federal Reserve about the prospects for an interest rate hike next month. It is not clear that Trump will be able to keep the dollar weak, against a general sense that interest rates are heading upwards. David Stockman's inflation index for the U.S., which uses more realistic values for energy, food, shelter and medical insurance than the official CPI index, is now rising at better than a 4 percent annual rate.

And thirdly, China may yet undo Trump's plans. As one well-versed economic commentator notes:

"I strongly contend that a more than one-half Trillion (\$) one-month Chinese Credit expansion in early 2017 will exert divergent inflationary impacts to those from early 2016...

"Inflationary biases evolve significantly over time...Liquidity will tend to further inflate the already inflating asset class(s); 'hot money' will chase the hottest speculative Bubble. Inflationary surges in Credit growth can, as well, have profoundly different impacts depending on inflationary expectations, economic structure and the nature of financial flows.

"I would argue that Chinese officials today face a more daunting task of

containing mounting financial leverage and imbalances than just a few months ago. *The clock continues to tick, with rising odds that Beijing will be forced to take the types of forceful measures that risk an accident.*"

These inflationary risks threaten Trump, more than the unlikely prospect of impeachment. He has been consistent in warning that whomsoever won this Presidential election, would, sooner or later, face a financial crisis – and then possibly a concomitant social crisis. Like most revolutions, Trump's revolution cannot afford to stand still: if it cannot, or does not, go forward, it will go backwards. We will return to the past. Trump, no doubt, grasps this.

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

Syrian War Propaganda at the Oscars

The Western-backed war in Syria, like the invasion of Iraq, was so smothered by propaganda that truth was not only the first casualty but has been steadily suffocated for five years, now reaching the Oscars, says Rick Sterling.

By Rick Sterling

The Netflix movie "The White Helmets" may win an Oscar in the "short documentary" category at the Academy Awards on Sunday. It would not be a surprise despite the fact that the group is a fraud and the movie is a contrived infomercial.

Awarding "The White Helmets" an Oscar would fit with the desire of Hollywood to appear supportive of "human rights," even if that means supporting a propaganda operation to justify another bloody "regime change" war in the Middle East.

Much of what people think they know about the White Helmets is untrue. The group is not primarily Syrian; it was initiated by British military contractor James LeMesurier and has been heavily funded (about \$100 million) by the U.S., U.K. and other governments. The White Helmets are not volunteers; they are paid, which is confirmed in a [Al Jazeera video](#) that shows some White Helmet "volunteers" talking about going on strike if they don't get paid soon.

Still, most of the group's heavy funding goes to marketing, which is run by "The Syria Campaign" based in New York. The manager is an Irish-American, Anna Nolan,

who has never been to Syria. As an example of its deception, “The Syria Campaign” website features video showing children dancing and playing soccer implying they are part of the opposition demand for a “free and peaceful” Syria. But the video images are taken from a 2010 BBC documentary about education in Syria under the Baath government.

There is also something almost dated about the Academy selecting this infomercial as an Oscar finalist, let alone the possibility of giving it the award. It’s as if the Syrian propaganda narrative of “good” rebels vs. “bad” government was still viable. In the case of the White Helmets, they were literally made into “white hats” bravely resisting the government’s “black hats.”

Yet, we now know that the propaganda around the “noble” rebels holding out in east Aleppo – with the help of the White Helmets – was largely a lie. The rebels mostly fought under the command structure of Al Qaeda’s Nusra affiliate and its fellow jihadists in Ahrar al-Sham. A video shows White Helmet workers picking up the corpse of a civilian after execution by Nusra/Al Qaeda and celebrating the extremists’ battle wins.

Western “human rights” groups touted not only the White Helmets but the “moderate rebels” who we now know were largely a P.R. cover for the terrorists and jihadists, as well as an excuse for the U.S. and its allies to funnel in weapons that were then turned over to the extremists.

When eastern Aleppo was finally freed from the armed militants, it was discovered that the White Helmets headquarters were alongside the headquarters of Al Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate. Civilians from east Aleppo reported that the White Helmets primarily rallied their “humanitarian” operations when the militants were attacked.

Soon after departing Aleppo in government-supplied buses, the White Helmets showed up in the mountains above Damascus where they allied with terrorist groups responsible for poisoning and then shutting off the water source for five million people in Damascus.

Neither Neutral Nor Independent

The White Helmets’s claim to be neutral and independent is another lie. They only work in areas controlled by the rebel groups, primarily Al Qaeda’s Nusra, and their leaders seek to bring in direct U.S. and NATO military intervention to assure a “regime change” in Syria although it likely would create a vacuum that the extremists would exploit to the further suffering of the Syrian people.

The film is as fraudulent as the group it tries to turn into heroes. The

filmmakers never set foot in Syria. Their video footage takes place in southern Turkey where they show White Helmet trainees in a hotel and talking on cell phones. The footage from inside Syria is not from independent journalists but from the White Helmets themselves – and much of it looks contrived.

Khaled Khatib, the White Helmets's photographer who says he filmed the footage inside Syria, reportedly received a U.S. visa and will attend the Oscars. Khatib tweeted the first video he took showing the White Helmets, with a girl who was totally buried being removed without injuries or wounds or even much dirt.

The original video has the logo of Aleppo Media Center (AMC), which was created by the Syrian Expatriates Organization. Their address on K Street in Washington DC suggests this is yet another Western-funded operation similar to the Iraqi National Congress that lobbied and lied on behalf of the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

In the past few days, with perfect timing for the upcoming Oscars, there was yet another "miracle" rescue, another girl buried but then removed and whisked away in record-breaking time – perfect for social media.

The momentum in support of the White Helmets infomercial raises a question about how this Oscar is awarded. Is it for journalistic authenticity or is it to conform with the political passions of the moment, which themselves are partly contrived by a well-funded propaganda campaign mounted by Western/Israeli/Gulf governments.

Investigative Reports

The true source and real purpose of the White Helmets were exposed almost two years ago by investigative journalists. Max Blumenthal has written a two-part detailed examination of the "shadowy PR firm" behind the White Helmets. And Jan Oberg has written an overview survey of the "pro" and "con" examinations in his work "Just How Gray are the White Helmets".

More recently, Vanessa Beeley has documented the fact that the White Helmets pretends to be the Syrian Civil Defense when there is a real Syrian Civil Defense, which was begun in the 1950s and is a member of the International Civil Defense Organizations. The White Helmets group was launched as "Syria Civil Defense" in Turkey in 2013 before being re-branded as the "White Helmets" in 2014.

According to on-the-ground interviews in Aleppo, militants began supplying this operation by killing real Syrian rescue workers and stealing their equipment. Since then the White Helmets have been supplied by the West through Turkey with brand new ambulances and related rescue equipment.

Despite exposés about the group, the West’s mainstream media and some “alternative” outlets continue to uncritically promote the White Helmets myth and rely on the group as a source of news about Syria. In 2014-2015, the White Helmets became a rallying point for columnist [Nicholas Krisof](#), the activist group [Avaaz](#) and others to campaign for all-out Western assault on the Syrian government and its military.

Perhaps ironically – given the Israeli government’s desire for a “regime change” in Syria – the Israeli mainstream TV program I24 presented both sides of the issue and titled the segment “White Helmets: Heroes or Hoax?” By contrast, the progressive program “DemocracyNow” in the United States has only broadcast a [puff piece](#) promoting the “White Helmet” disinformation.

Whether or not the White Helmets snag the Academy Award, they surely deserve recognition for their skillful marketing and advertising. In 2016, the group received the [Rights Livelihood Award](#) and was seriously considered for a Nobel Peace Prize. The Oscar nomination for “The White Helmets” movie is just the latest success in the ongoing campaign of distortion and deception around Syria.

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How Trump Could Be a Truth-teller

Exclusive: Viewed as uncaring about facts, President Trump could change his image by releasing important information about recent turning-point moments that President Obama chose to hide from the people, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

One positive thing about a change in party control of the White House is that the new occupants sometimes release information that the old residents kept hidden because the facts were politically embarrassing or did not support some favored policy.

We saw this in the first days of the Obama administration when President Barack Obama declassified some documents relating to President George W. Bush’s internal policy debates about torture and other abuses from the “war on terror.”

However, as yet, we have seen nothing similar from the Trump administration even though some truth-telling might work very well for President Donald Trump,

especially given his reputation for getting facts wrong. A commitment to transparency – giving some truth to the American people on important topics – could change Trump’s image for the better.

Plus, by releasing information that was unjustifiably kept hidden during Obama’s second term, Trump could underscore how Obama grew increasingly obsessive about secrecy the longer he remained in the White House, treating the American people as objects to be manipulated rather than citizens to be informed.

For instance, Obama kept the clamps on CIA analyses relating to the Ukrainian crisis, even regarding the shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over eastern Ukraine on July 17, 2014, killing 298 people and leading to a dangerous escalation in the New Cold War with Russia.

After the crash, the Obama administration quickly steered the Western media toward blaming President Vladimir Putin and got the European Union to join in economic sanctions against Russia.

However, after exploiting the rush to judgment against Putin, the Obama administration went silent, withholding U.S. intelligence evidence even from the official crash investigators. The more the administration learned about the tragic event and who was responsible the less it wanted to say.

At the time, I was told that the reason was that some senior CIA analysts were uncovering evidence that went in an inconvenient direction, suggesting a rogue Ukrainian operation connected to a hardline oligarch with the intent of shooting down a Russian jetliner, possibly even the one carrying Putin back from a state visit in South America, but instead brought down MH-17, which had similar markings.

To spread confusion and create some deniability for the attack, the scheme supposedly called for launching the missile from as deep inside “rebel-controlled” territory as possible.

A Closed File

The source described getting this briefing from U.S. intelligence analysts, but I was unable to get the CIA or the Office of Director of National Intelligence to provide any guidance. Instead, they clammed up, claiming that they didn’t want to “prejudice” the official Dutch-led investigation (although I pointed out that the hasty U.S. finger-pointing at Russia had already done that).

The refusal of the Obama administration to open its MH-17 files allowed the “Dutch-led” Joint Investigation Team (JIT) to be effectively taken over by Ukraine’s unsavory SBU intelligence agency, which oversaw the care and feeding

of Dutch and Australian investigators who decamped for long periods in Kiev.

The SBU's "evidence" became central to the JIT's investigation although the SBU was deeply involved in the war against the ethnic-Russian Ukrainian rebels and was even denounced by United Nations investigators for blocking access to alleged SBU torture centers. Beyond that, part of the SBU's mandate was to protect Ukrainian government secrets, so the SBU had obvious conflicts of interest.

Nevertheless, the JIT relied on SBU-provided telephone "intercepts" of cryptic Russian-language conversations to base its conclusion that Russia provided the rebels a Buk missile system on the night of July 16, 2014, which was then taken on a strangely circuitous route far to the west before circling back to the east to a location far from the battlefield where it shot down MH-17 on July 17 and then was driven back to Russia that evening, again taking an unnecessarily long way home.

Though there were numerous holes in the SBU's evidence and serious questions about why the Buk would have taken its bizarrely long ride – when a much more direct and discreet route was available – the Western media again showed no skepticism, simply accepting Russian guilt as established fact and dismissing any alternative explanation as "fanciful."

The Value of Truth

However, whatever the truth is – whether the Russians and their rebel allies were responsible for the tragedy or whether a rogue Ukrainian operation brought down MH-17 – there is no reason why President Trump shouldn't instruct CIA Director Mike Pompeo to release as much of the U.S. intelligence analysis as possible.

First, the families of the dead deserve all the help that the U.S. government can provide to identify the killers and bring them to justice. Second, by releasing the MH-17 file, President Trump can demonstrate that he does care about truth in contrast to President Obama who mysteriously withheld this information for 2½ years and thus gave the culprits, whoever they are, time to escape and cover their tracks.

Further, if the file blames the Russians, releasing it would show that Trump is not in Putin's pocket, as many people in Official Washington claim. And, if the file implicates an element of the Ukrainian government – even a rogue faction – that might relieve geopolitical tensions with Russia and open possible paths for resolving the Ukrainian crisis.

The Trump administration also could consider other topics for declassification,

such as the circumstances surrounding the U.S-backed coup that ousted elected Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich on Feb. 22, 2014. U.S. intelligence surely was following those events closely and could clarify the roles of Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland, U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt and Sen. John McCain, who all cheered on and encouraged violent protests that preceded the coup.

Obama also hid the intelligence regarding [the mysterious sarin gas attack](#) outside Damascus, Syria, on Aug. 21, 2013, which Secretary of State John Kerry and others blamed on the Syrian government although later evidence seemed to implicate jihadist rebels who wanted to trick the U.S. military into intervening directly in the war on their side.

Given the importance of those turning-point moments – and the Obama administration’s attempts to exploit them for geopolitical ends – the American people deserve to know what the U.S. intelligence analysts ultimately concluded and whether President Obama’s team was telling the truth or had gotten lost in the Orwellian idea of “perception management.”

President Trump might find that he can begin to turn around his reputation as a person who doesn’t care about the truth by becoming a truth-teller.

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](#)).

Trump Needs to Rethink Terror Policies

President Trump vows to restructure his travel ban for seven mostly Muslim countries – and consider a “safe zone” in Syria – but those ideas create more risks than they eliminate, says Ivan Eland.

By Ivan Eland

Although Donald Trump had good inclinations on some foreign policy issues during his campaign and transition period – for example, staying out of unneeded brushfire wars, reexamining U.S. alliances, and pushing wealthy allies to do more for their own security – his policy toward “radical Islamic terrorism” always needed some work.

Now, having been president for only a short time, this policy – including slamming the door shut on the legal immigration of refugees (including desperate Syrians fleeing from the country’s civil war) and entry of people from seven predominantly Muslim countries – needs a lot of work.

In the meantime, to show that he is doing at least something for Syrian refugees, he is talking to Arab allies not affected by the ban – Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates – about setting up safe zones in Syria to keep refugees there.

Trump somehow believes that such tough policies will prevent Middle Eastern terrorists from attacking the United States. Yet refugees coming to the United States are already vetted thoroughly, and an average American citizen’s chances of ever getting killed by a “refugee-gone-wild” is very remote. In fact, the radical ISIS group has had little luck recruiting people to come to America to attack, thus requiring the group to rely on “inspiring” untrained people already here to conduct largely incompetent, amateurish attacks.

Therefore, one must conclude that the security gains from this ill-conceived, chaotic, and likely illegal and unconstitutional executive order (the U.S. Constitution says that only Congress, not the president, will establish a uniform rule on naturalization). On the other hand, such demagoguery allows the President to throw political red meat to his populist base by fulfilling a campaign promise.

Because that promise was originally advertised as advocating a “total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States,” and now covers seven predominantly Muslim countries while giving preference to Christians and other minority religions in Muslim nations, the Islamic world can be forgiven for assuming he is accelerating the American post-9/11 “war on Islam.”

And although Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama claimed they were not conducting such a wide war, they were both attacking or bombing at least seven Muslim countries. These wars continue to this day and roughly coincide with the seven Muslim nations covered by the immigration ban, including Iraq, a U.S. ally in the fight against ISIS.

Because the United States depends on Muslims worldwide to get information, ground forces, and other assistance to use against the small percentage of radical Islamist terrorists, this immigration ban will probably prove as disastrous as U.S. torture at the Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo prisons did to the “war on terror.” Trump has made noises about bringing back such practices abhorrent to American values.

A Macho Image

Trump has a macho image, which his loyal followers eagerly gobble up, yet seems so scared of the remote probability that an already comprehensively vetted refugee will misbehave.

Shouldn't America instead be courageous and say that we'll take the (very low) risk to help people desperately fleeing turmoil in countries, including those that happen to be largely Muslim, such as Syria? For most of our history, welcoming immigrants has been seared into the American identity, and we even think of ourselves as "a nation of immigrants."

However, Trump could be initiating another one of the periodic dark periods in which immigrants were treated very badly. For example, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, for political gains, turned away a ship full of persecuted Jews during the Holocaust, refused to increase immigration quotas for such Jews during that horrible period, and threw Japanese residents, and even Japanese-Americans, into concentration camps during the same period. The indefinite ban on desperate Syrian refugees may very well become a similar stain on America's legacy.

And a "safe zone" created in Syria will not make up for it. The underlying message is "keep those undesirable Muslims over there, not accept them here." Besides, a safe zone may require the United States to get sucked into escalating the type of brushfire war that Trump, in the campaign, said he wanted to avoid. Setting up a safe zone could very well require the insertion of U.S. ground forces and the tangle of American air forces with those of nuclear-armed Russia.

Thus, Trump's is the opposite of a sensible policy, which would be: Increase the amount of already thoroughly vetted Syrian and other refugees accepted into the United States and forget about creating a safe zone in Syria, which is much riskier for the United States than admitting some more refugees.

Using American armed force in Islamic countries, such as Syria, in the decades since World War II and getting the reputation for treating Muslims unfairly is the main reason the United States and its Western allies are targets of Islamist terrorist attacks, such those on 9/11, in the first place.

Ivan Eland is Senior Fellow and Director of the Center on Peace & Liberty at the Independent Institute. Dr. Eland is a graduate of Iowa State University and received an M.B.A. in applied economics and Ph.D. in national security policy from George Washington University. He spent 15 years working for Congress on national security issues, including stints as an investigator for the House Foreign Affairs Committee and Principal Defense Analyst at the Congressional

Tulsi Gabbard vs. 'Regime Change' Wars

Rep. Tulsi Gabbard is a rare member of Congress willing to take heat for challenging U.S. "regime change" projects, in part, because as an Iraq War vet she saw the damage these schemes do, as retired Col. Ann Wright explains.

By Ann Wright

I support Rep. Tulsi Gabbard, D-Hawaii, going to Syria and meeting with President Bashar al-Assad because the congresswoman is a brave person willing to take criticism for challenging U.S. policies that she believes are wrong.

It is important that we have representatives in our government who will go to countries where the United States is either killing citizens directly by U.S. intervention or indirectly by support of militia groups or by sanctions.

We need representatives to sift through what the U.S. government says and what the media reports to find out for themselves the truth, the shades of truth and the untruths.

We need representatives willing to take the heat from both their fellow members of Congress and from the media pundits who will not go to those areas and talk with those directly affected by U.S. actions. We need representatives who will be our eyes and ears to go to places where most citizens cannot go.

Tulsi Gabbard, an Iraq War veteran who has seen first-hand the chaos that can come from misguided "regime change" projects, is not the first international observer to come back with an assessment about the tragic effects of U.S. support for lethal "regime change" in Syria.

Nobel Peace Laureate Mairead Maguire began traveling to Syria three years ago and now having made three trips to Syria. She has come back hearing many of the same comments from Syrians that Rep. Gabbard heard – that U.S. support for "regime change" against the secular government of Syria is contributing to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Syrians and – if the "regime change" succeeded – might result in the takeover by armed religious-driven fanatics who would slaughter many more Syrians and cause a mass migration of millions fleeing the carnage.

Since 2011, the Obama administration supported various rebel groups fighting for “regime change” in Syria while U.S. allies – Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey – backed jihadist groups including Islamic State and Al Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate, some of the same extremists whom the U.S. military is fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. If Assad were overthrown, these extremists might take power and create even worse conditions for Syrians.

This possibility of jihadists imposing perverted extremist religious views on the secular state of Syria remains high due to international meddling in the internal affairs of Syria. This “regime change” project also drew in Russia to provide air support for the Syrian military.

Critical of Obama’s ‘Regime Change’

During the Obama administration, Rep. Gabbard spoke critically of the U.S. propensity to attempt “regime change” in countries and thus provoking chaos and loss of civilian life.

On Dec. 8, 2016, she introduced a bill entitled the “Stop Arming Terrorists Act” which would prohibit the U.S. government from using U.S. funds to provide funding, weapons, training, and intelligence support to extremists groups, such as the ones fighting in Syria – or to countries that are providing direct or indirect support to those groups.

In the first days of the Trump administration, Rep. Gabbard traveled to Syria to see the effects of the attempted “regime change” and to offer a solution to reduce the deaths of civilians and the end of the war in Syria. A national organization Veterans For Peace, to which I belong, has endorsed her trip as a step toward resolution to the Syrian conflict.

Not surprisingly, back in Washington, Rep. Gabbard came under attack for the trip and for her meeting with President Assad, similar to criticism that I have faced because of visits that I have made to countries where the U.S. government did not want me to go – to Cuba, Iran, Gaza, Yemen, Pakistan, North Korea, Russia and back to Afghanistan, where I was assigned as a U.S. diplomat.

I served my country for 29 years in the U.S. Army/ Army Reserves and retired as a colonel. I also served 16 years in the U.S. diplomatic corps in U.S. Embassies in Nicaragua, Grenada, Somalia, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Sierra Leone, Micronesia, Afghanistan and Mongolia. I resigned from the U.S. government nearly 14 years ago in March 2003 in opposition to President George W. Bush’s “regime change” war on Iraq.

In my travels since my resignation, I didn’t agree with many of the policies of the governments in power in those countries. But I wanted to see the effects of

U.S. government policies and, in particular, the effects of attempts at “regime change.”

I wanted to talk with citizens and government officials about the effects of U.S. sanctions and whether the sanctions “worked” to lessen their support for the government that the U.S. was attempting to change or overthrow.

For making those trips, I have been criticized strongly. I have been called an apologist for the governments in power. Critics have said that my trips have given legitimacy to the abuses by those governments. And I have been called a traitor to the United States to dare question or challenge its policy of “regime change.”

But I am not an apologist, nor am I a traitor ... nor is Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard for her recent trip to Syria.

Ann Wright served 29 years in the US Army/Army Reserves and retired as a colonel. She also was a U.S. diplomat for 16 years and served in U.S. Embassies in Nicaragua, Grenada, Somalia, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Sierra Leone, Micronesia, Afghanistan and Mongolia. She resigned in March 2003 in opposition to the war in Iraq. She has lived in Honolulu since 2003. [A version of this story originally appeared at

<http://www.civilbeat.org/2017/02/why-i-support-tulsi-gabbard-going-to-syria/#.WKU0jn7-I5I.twitter>

Amnesty International Stokes Syrian War

The West’s vast propaganda machine has pulled in many formerly respectable groups, such as Amnesty International, which just released a dubious “human rights” report aimed at stoking the war in Syria, reports Rick Sterling.

By Rick Sterling

Amnesty International (AI) has done some good investigations and reports over the years, which has won the group widespread support. However, less well recognized, Amnesty International has also carried out faulty investigations with bloody and disastrous consequences.

One prominent example is in Iraq, where AI “corroborated” the false story that Iraqi soldiers were stealing incubators from Kuwait, leaving babies to die on the cold floor. The deception was planned and carried out in Washington to

influence the U.S. public and Congress.

A more recent example is from 2011 where false accusations were being made about Libya and Muammar Gaddafi as Western and Gulf powers sought to overthrow his government. AI leaders joined the campaign claiming that Gaddafi was using "mercenaries" to threaten and kill peacefully protesting civilians. The propaganda was successful in muting criticism of what became an invasion and "regime change."

Going far beyond a United Nations Security Council resolution to "protect civilians," NATO launched sustained air attacks and toppled the Libyan government leading to chaos, violence and a flood of refugees. AI later refuted the "mercenary" accusations but the damage was done.

Now, on Feb. 7, Amnesty International released a new report titled "Human Slaughterhouse: Mass Hangings and Extermination at Saydnaya Prison," which accuses the Syrian government of executing thousands of political prisoners, a set of accusations that has received uncritical treatment in the mainstream news media.

Like the Iraq/Kuwait incubator story and the Libyan "mercenary" story, the "Human Slaughterhouse" report is coming at a critical time. It accuses and convicts the Syrian government of horrible atrocities against civilians – and AI explicitly calls for the international community to take "action." But the AI report is deeply biased and amounts to a kangaroo-court conviction of the Syrian government.

AI's Standards Ignored

The Amnesty International report violates the organization's own research standards. As documented by Professor Tim Hayward here, the Secretary General of Amnesty International, Salil Shetty, claims that Amnesty does its research "in a very systematic, primary, way where we collect evidence with our own staff on the ground. And every aspect of our data collection is based on corroboration and cross-checking from all parties, even if there are, you know, many parties in any situation because of all of the issues we deal with are quite contested. So it's very important to get different points of view and constantly cross check and verify the facts."

But the Amnesty report fails on all counts: it relies on third parties, it did not gather its information from different points of view, and it did not cross-check with all parties. The report's conclusions are not based on primary sources, material evidence or AI's own staff; the findings are solely based on the claims of anonymous individuals, mostly in southern Turkey from where the

war on Syria is coordinated.

Amnesty gathered witnesses and testimonies from only one side of the conflict: the Western- and Gulf-supported opposition. For example, AI consulted with the Syrian Network for Human Rights, which is known to seek NATO intervention in Syria. AI “liased” with the Commission for International Justice and Accountability, an organization funded by the West to press criminal charges against the Syrian leadership. These are obviously not neutral, independent or nonpartisan organizations.

If AI were doing what its Secretary General claims the organization always does, AI would have consulted with organizations within or outside Syria to hear different accounts of life at Saydnaya Prison. Since the AI report has been released, the AngryArab has published the account of a Syrian dissident, Nizar Nayyuf, who was imprisoned at Saydnaya. He contradicts many statements in the Amnesty International report, the type of cross-checking that AI failed to do for this important study.

Amnesty’s accusation that executions were “extrajudicial” is exaggerated or false. By Amnesty’s own description, each prisoner appeared briefly before a judge and each execution was authorized by a high government leader. We do not know if the judge looked at documentation or other information regarding each prisoner. One could argue that the process as described was superficial, but it’s clear that even if AI’s allegations are true, there was some kind of judicial process.

Amnesty’s suggestion that all Saydnaya prisoners are convicted is false. Amnesty quotes one witness who says about the court: “The judge will ask the name of the detainee and whether he committed the crime. Whether the answer is yes or no, he will be convicted.” But this assertion is contradicted by a former Saydnaya prisoner who is now a refugee in Sweden. In this news report, the former prisoner says the judge “asked him how many soldiers he had killed. When he said none, the judge spared him.” This is evidence that there is a judicial process of some sort and there are acquittals.

The Amnesty report includes satellite photographs with captions which are meaningless or erroneous. For example, as pointed out by Syrian dissident Nizar Nayyuf, the photo on page 30 showing a Martyrs Cemetery is “silly beyond silly.” The photo and caption show that the cemetery doubled in size. However, this does not prove hangings of prisoners who would never be buried in a “martyrs cemetery” reserved for Syrian army soldiers. On the contrary, it confirms the fact which Amnesty International otherwise ignores: Syrian soldiers have died in large numbers.

The Amnesty report falsely claims – based on data provided by one of the groups seeking NATO intervention – “The victims are overwhelmingly ordinary civilians who are thought to oppose the government.” While it’s surely true that innocent civilians are sometimes wrongly arrested, as happens in all countries, the suggestion that Saydnaya prison is filled with 95 percent “ordinary civilians” is preposterous. Amnesty International can only make this claim without facing ridicule because AI and other Western organizations have effectively “disappeared” the reality of Syria.

Missing Facts

Other essential facts, which are completely missing from the Amnesty report, include:

–Western powers and Gulf monarchies have spent billions of dollars annually since 2011 to recruit, fund, train, arm and support with sophisticated propaganda a violent campaign to overthrow the Syrian government;

–As part of this operation, tens of thousands of foreign fanatics have invaded Syria and tens of thousands of Syrians have been radicalized and paid by Wahhabi monarchies in the Gulf to overthrow the government;

–More than 100,000 Syrian Army and National Defense soldiers have been killed defending their country. Most of this is public information yet ignored by Amnesty International and other mainstream media in the West. This “regime change” operation has been accompanied by a massive distortion and cover-up of reality.

–Without providing evidence, Amnesty International accuses the highest Sunni religious leader in Syria, Grand Mufti Ahmad Badreddin Hassoun, of authorizing the execution of “ordinary civilians.” While the Grand Mufti is a personal victim of the war’s violence – his son was murdered by terrorists near Aleppo – he has consistently called for reconciliation. Following the assassination of his son, Grand Mufti Hassoun gave an eloquent speech expressing forgiveness for the murderers and calling for an end to the violence.

What does it say about Amnesty International that it makes specific personal accusations, against people who have personally suffered, yet provides no evidence of guilt?

In the report, Amnesty uses sensational and emotional accusations in place of factual evidence. The title of the report is “Human Slaughterhouse.” And what goes with a “slaughterhouse”? A “meat fridge.” So, the report uses the expression “meat fridge” seven separate times, presumably in an attempt to strengthen the central metaphor of a slaughterhouse.

Even the report's opening quotation is hyperbolic: "Saydnaya is the end of life – the end of humanity." The report is in sharp contrast with fact-based objective research and investigation; it appears designed to manipulate emotions and thus create new public support in the West for another escalation of the war.

Yet, Amnesty International's accusations that the Syrian government is carrying out a policy of "extermination" are contradicted by the fact that the vast majority of Syrians prefer to live in government-controlled areas. When the "rebels" were finally driven out of East Aleppo in December 2016, 90 percent of civilians rushed into areas under government control.

In recent days, civilians from Latakia province who had been imprisoned by terrorists for the past three years have been liberated in a prisoner exchange. [This video shows Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his wife meeting with some of the civilians.]

A Video

The Amnesty report is accompanied by a three-minute propaganda cartoon that reinforces the narrative that Syrian civilians who protest peacefully are imprisoned and executed. Echoing the theme of the report, the animation is titled "Saydnaya Prison: Human Slaughterhouse." Amnesty International appears to be in denial that there are tens of thousands of violent extremists in Syria, setting off car bombs, launching mortars and otherwise attacking civilian areas every day.

Given the national crisis – with so many violent jihadists to confront – it makes little sense that Syrian security or prison authorities would waste resources on non-violent civilians although that does not mean that the Syrian government has clean hands either. Mistakes and abuses surely happen in this war like all wars.

But the AI report is more like the propaganda that has surrounded the Syrian conflict from the beginning, lacking in balance and reminiscent of the "perception management" used to justify the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the West's assault on Libya in 2011. AI's hyperbole is also contradicted by the fact that Syria has many opposition parties that compete for seats in the National Assembly and campaign openly for public support from both the right and left of the Baath Party.

AI's claim that Syrian authorities brutally repress peaceful protests further ignores the Syrian reconciliation process. For the past several years, armed opposition militants have been encouraged to lay down their weapons and

peacefully rejoin society, a program largely unreported in Western media because it contradicts the “black hat” narrative of the Syrian government. [A recent example is reported [here](#).]

The Amnesty report cites the “Caesar” photographs as supporting evidence for its “slaughterhouse” accusations but ignores the fact that nearly half those photographs show the opposite of what was claimed. The widely publicized “Caesar photographs” was a Qatari-funded hoax designed to sabotage the 2014 Geneva negotiations as documented [here](#).

While the Amnesty report makes many accusations against the Syrian government, AI ignores the violation of Syrian sovereignty being committed by Western and Gulf countries. It is a curious fact that big NGOs such as Amnesty International focus on violations of “human rights law” and “humanitarian law” but ignore the crime of aggression, also called the crime against peace.

According to the Nuremberg Tribunal, aggression is “the supreme international crime, differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole.” Former Nicaraguan Foreign Minister and former President of the U.N. General Assembly, Father Miguel D’Escoto, is someone who should know. He says, “What the U.S. government is doing in Syria is tantamount to a war of aggression, which, according to the Nuremberg Tribunal, is the worst possible crime a State can commit against another State.” Amnesty International ignores this reality.

Background and Context

The co-author of this Amnesty International report is Nicolette Waldman (Boehland), who was uncritically [interviewed](#) on DemocracyNow on Feb. 9. The background and previous work of Waldman shows the inter-connections between influential Washington “think tanks” and the billionaires’ foundations that fund “non-governmental organizations” – NGOs – that claim to be independent but are clearly not.

Waldman previously worked for the “Center for Civilians in Conflict,” which is directed by leaders from George Soros’s Open Society, the Soros-funded Human Rights Watch, Blackrock Solutions and the Center for a New American Security (CNAS).

CNAS may be the most significant indication of political orientation since it is led by Michele Flournoy, who was expected to become Secretary of Defense if Hillary Clinton had won the election. CNAS has been a [leading force](#) behind neoconservative and liberal-interventionist plans to escalate the war in Syria. While past work or associations do not always define new or future work, in this

case the sensational and dubious accusations seem to align with those political goals. [Soros's Open Society has also provided funds to Amnesty International.]

So what to make of Amnesty International's new report? The once widely respected human rights organization has, in the recent past, let itself be used as a propaganda tool to justify Western aggression against Iraq and Libya, which seems to be the role that AI is playing now in Syria.

The Amnesty International report is a mix of hearsay accusations and sensationalism that tracks with the Western propaganda themes that have surrounded the Syrian war from the start. Because of Amnesty's undeserved reputation for independence and accuracy, the report has been picked up and broadcast widely. Liberal and supposedly progressive media outlets have joined in dutifully echoing the questionable accusations.

Little or no skepticism is applied when the target is the Syrian government, which has faced years of foreign-sponsored aggression. If this report justifies another escalation of the conflict, as Amnesty International seems to want, the group will again be serving as a rationalizer for Western aggression against Syria, just like it did in Iraq and Libya.

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Trump's Foreign Policy at a Crossroads

Exclusive: Recent U.S. foreign policy – driven by neocons and liberal hawks – has spread chaos and death around the globe. But can “crazy” Donald Trump bring sanity to how the U.S. approaches the world, asks Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

If you wanted to bring sanity to a U.S. foreign policy that has spun crazily out of control, there would be some immediate steps that you – or, say, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson – could take, starting with a renewed commitment to tell the truth to the American people.

Instead of the endless “perception management” or “strategic communication” or “psychological operations” or whatever the new code words are, you could open up the files regarding key turning-point moments and share the facts with the citizens – the “We the People” – who are supposed to be America's true

sovereigns.

For instance, you could release what the U.S. government actually knows about the Aug. 21, 2013 sarin gas attack in Syria; what the files show about the origins of the Feb. 22, 2014 coup in Ukraine; what U.S. intelligence analysts have compiled about the July 17, 2014 shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over eastern Ukraine. And those are just three examples of cases where U.S. government propagandists have sold a dubious bill of goods to the American and world publics in the “information warfare” campaign against the Syrian and Russian governments.

If you wanted to base U.S. foreign policy on the firm foundation of reality, you also could let the American people in on who is actually the principal sponsor of the terrorism that they’re concerned about: Al Qaeda, Islamic State, the Taliban – all Sunni-led outfits, none of which are backed by Shiite-ruled Iran. Yet, all we hear from Official Washington’s political and media insiders is that Iran is the chief sponsor of terrorism.

Of course, that is what Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states and Israel want you to believe because it serves their regional and sectarian interests, but it isn’t true. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states are the ones arming and financing Al Qaeda and Islamic State with Israel occasionally bombing Al Qaeda’s military enemies inside Syria and providing medical support for Al Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate operating near the Golan Heights.

The reason for this unsavory network of alliances is that Israel, like Saudi Arabia and the Sunni-led Gulf states, sees Iran and the so-called “Shiite crescent” – from Tehran through Damascus to Beirut – as *their* principal problem. And because of the oil sheiks’ financial wealth and Israel’s political clout, they control how pretty much everyone in Official Washington’s establishment views the Middle East.

But the interests of Israel, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states are not in line with the interests of the American people – nor the average European – who are not concerned about militant Shiites as much as militant Sunnis. After all, the worst terror attacks on Europe and the U.S. have come from Sunni extremists belonging to or inspired by Al Qaeda and Islamic State.

This gap between the reality of Sunni-extremist terrorism and the fantasy of Official Washington’s “group think” fingering Shiite-ruled Iran explains the cognitive dissonance over President Trump’s travel ban on people from seven mostly Muslim countries. Beyond the offensive anti-Muslim prejudice, there is the fact that he ignored the countries that produced the terrorists who have attacked the U.S., including the 9/11 hijackers.

This bizarre feature of Trump's executive order shows how deep Official Washington's dysfunction goes. Trump has picked a major constitutional battle over a travel ban that targets the wrong countries.

But there's a reason for this dysfunction: No one in Official Washington can speak the truth about terrorism without suffering severe political damage or getting blacklisted by the mainstream media. Since the truth puts Israel and especially Saudi Arabia in an uncomfortable position, the truth cannot be spoken.

Hope for Trump

There was some hope that President Trump – for all his irascibility and unpredictability – might break from the absurd “Iran is the principal source of terrorism” mantra. But so far he has not.

Nor has Trump moved to throw open the files on the Syrian and Ukraine conflicts so Americans can assess how the Obama administration sought to manipulate them into supporting these “regime change” adventures.

But Trump has resisted intense pressure to again entrust U.S. foreign policy to the neoconservatives, a number of whom lost their jobs when President Obama left office, perhaps most significantly Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland, who helped orchestrate the violent overthrow of Ukraine's elected president and is an architect of the New Cold War with Russia.

Other neocons who angled for jobs in the new administration, including John Bolton and James Woolsey, have failed to land them. Currently, there is pressure to ensconce Elliott Abrams, a top neocon dating back to the Reagan administration, in the key post of Deputy Secretary of State but that idea, too, has met resistance.

The neocon threat to Trump's stated intent of restoring some geopolitical realism to U.S. foreign policy is that the neocons operate almost as an ideological cabal linked often in a subterranean fashion – or as I. Lewis Libby, Vice President Dick Cheney's neocon chief of staff, once wrote in a cryptic letter to neocon journalist Judith Miller that aspen trees “turn in clusters, because their roots connect them.”

In other words, if one neocon is given a key job, other neocons can be expected to follow. Then, any Trump deviation from neocon orthodoxy would be undermined in the classic Washington tradition of strategic leaking to powerful media and congressional allies.

So far, the Trump inner circle has shown the administrative savvy to avoid bringing in ideologues who would dedicate their efforts to thwarting any significant change in U.S. geopolitical directions.

What is less clear is whether Trump, Tillerson and his fledgling State Department team have the intellectual heft to understand why U.S. foreign policy has drifted into the chaos and conflicts that now surround it – and whether they have the skill to navigate a route toward a safe harbor.

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](#)).

Steering Trump Back to Endless War

Exclusive: President Trump's chaotic first two weeks have seen senior aides reverse his most promising plans for restoring realism to U.S. foreign policy, especially regarding Russia and the Mideast, reports Daniel Lazare.

By Daniel Lazare

Well, that didn't take long, did it? The Trump administration hadn't even reached its two-week mark when it surrendered a major portion of its independence and fell in behind the reigning Washington orthodoxy. The turning point came at the United Nations Security Council on Thursday when Ambassador Nikki R. Haley blasted Russia for the upsurge of violence in the eastern Ukraine.

Haley's [statement](#) could hardly have been stronger. She not only assailed Russia for its "aggressive actions," but described them as "a replay of far too many instances over many years" when it has behaved the same. She called for a "clear and strong condemnation," declared that the crisis would not end "until Russia and the separatists it supports respect Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity," and demanded the return of Crimea as well.

"Crimea is a part of Ukraine," Haley said. "Our Crimea-related sanctions will remain in place until Russia returns control over the peninsula to Ukraine."

This must be disappointing news for *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman, among others, who has long bashed Trump as a "[Siberian candidate](#)" and on Friday

accused him of stirring up trouble with everyone except puppeteer Putin. “[T]he war with China will, it seems, have to wait,” he wrote. “First comes Australia. And Mexico. And Iran. And the European Union. (But never Russia.)” Thanks to Haley’s stirring call to arms, it looks like Moscow is now in America’s sights as well.

What does it mean? Simply that Trump’s foreign policy has already lost an engine before it has gotten off the ground. The man is a bully, a racist, a xenophobe, and more than bit crazy to boot. But despite all that – or perhaps because of it – he has shown an ornery streak in some of his thinking about foreign policy that placed him sharply at odds with Washington’s vast pro-war establishment. He favored a rapprochement with Russia, for example, as well as a new approach in Syria in which the problem of Bashar al-Assad would be put off in order to concentrate on fighting ISIS and Al Qaeda.

As he told the *Times* last March: “Well, I thought the approach of fighting Assad and ISIS simultaneously was madness and idiocy. They’re fighting each other and yet we’re fighting both of them. You know, we were fighting both of them. I think that our far bigger problem than Assad is ISIS, I’ve always felt that. Assad is – you know I’m not saying Assad is a good man, ’cause he’s not, but our far greater problem is not Assad, it’s ISIS.”

This was not very different from what Bernie Sanders was saying about the dangers of U.S.-imposed regime change in Syria, but utterly at odds with Hillary Clinton’s insistence that Assad had to go because he was somehow aiding ISIS and Al Qaeda when in fact he was engaged in a life-or-death struggle with both entities.

One Slim Reed

So amid all the bluster and braggadocio, racism and Islamophobia, there was one slim reed to hold onto: Trump seemed to be capable of at least a modicum of realism when it came to one or two trouble spots around the globe.

But then came the post-election back-tracking. On Nov. 18, Trump named Michael Flynn, a former chief of the Defense Intelligence Agency, as his national security adviser even though Flynn is renowned for his fierce anti-Russian views. Two weeks later, he named the no-less-hawkish James Mattis as his Secretary of Defense. At his confirmation hearing, Mattis described Russia as a “principal” threat to U.S. interests and declared that the U.S.-led world order was “under the biggest attacks since World War II from Russia, terrorist groups, and China’s actions in the South China Sea.”

After once predicting that Clinton’s proposal for a Syrian no-fly zone

would “end up in World War III,” Trump also vowed to fix “what’s going on in Syria” by building “safe zones ... so people can have a chance.” Then, just this past Sunday, he telephoned King Salman of Saudi Arabia and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan of neighboring Abu Dhabi to obtain their political and financial support.

“The President requested and the King agreed to support safe zones in Syria and Yemen,” a White House statement said, “as well as supporting other ideas to help the many refugees who are displaced by the ongoing conflicts.” Where Hillary Clinton had called for just one no-fly zone, Trump was now committing to two.

As if that wasn’t bad enough, Trump also gave the go-ahead for last Sunday’s disastrous raid on a reputed Al Qaeda hideout in southern Yemen that ended with one American commando killed along with as many as 30 civilians, including the eight-year-old daughter of Anwar al-Awlaki, the Al Qaeda propagandist and U.S. citizen who was eliminated in a drone strike in 2011.

On Wednesday, Trump allowed Flynn – whose resemblance to Brigadier General Jack D. Ripper, a character in “Dr. Strangelove,” grows ever more striking – to announce that the administration was “officially putting Iran on notice” for conducting a ballistic missile test and for backing Houthi rebels who a day earlier had fired a guided missile at a Saudi warship off the coast of Yemen.

In other words, Washington was returning to its usual disastrous ways as the administration took aim at all the usual suspects and dealt in the same self-serving half-truths that have long characterized Official Washington.

Not Making Sense

But none of it made any more sense than it did before the election. For example:

–Safe zones will not make Syria safer. To the contrary, they could well emerge as safe havens for jihadists and their families and come under attack by other rebel factions or by government forces. U.S. forces would have no choice but to respond and would thus find themselves drawn into another Middle East ground war.

–They would require the U.S. to secure the skies to prevent air attacks. This means taking out Syria’s sophisticated air defense system, an effort that, as Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, chairman at the time of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the White House in early 2012, would require as many as 70,000 American military personnel and cost as much as \$1 billion a month – and that was before Syria upgraded its defenses by adding advanced S-400 Russian anti-aircraft missiles.

–A safe zone in Yemen is even more bonkers. In August, the U.N. Human Rights Council reported that 84 percent of civilian deaths were due either to Saudi-backed ground forces or Saudi-led air strikes, strikes that the U.S. enables by providing Saudi Arabia with advanced weaponry, targeting data, and midair refueling. So what’s the point of a U.S.-backed safe zone if the problem is U.S.-backed air assaults?

–As for the botched raid in Yemen, the U.S. government again is in contradictory situation because the Houthi rebels who were fighting Al Qaeda’s local affiliate have lost ground to the terror group because of the U.S.-backed Saudi intervention against the Houthis. In a recent report, the International Crisis Group found that Al Qaeda “is thriving in an environment of state collapse, growing sectarianism, shifting alliances, security vacuums, and a burgeoning war economy.”

In “Yemen Under Siege,” a PBS documentary aired last May, journalist Safa Al Ahmad filmed Al Qaeda units fighting side by side with forces backed by the Saudis and the United Arab Emirates. (See clip starting at 8:38.) So, why battle Al Qaeda with one hand while aiding it with the other? Again, the U.S. has gotten itself into the bizarre position in which Al Qaeda is simultaneously its enemy and an ally of its best friend. [For more, see Consortiumnews.com’s “The Secret Behind the Yemen War.”]

–As for the flare-up in the eastern Ukraine, a dispatch by Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty – of all outlets – made it clear as to who is responsible: Ukraine.

As RFE wrote: “Frustrated by the stalemate in this 33-month war of attrition, concerned that Western support is waning, and sensing that US President Donald Trump could cut Kyiv out of any peace negotiations as he tries to improve fraught relations with Moscow, Ukrainian forces anxious to show their newfound strength have gone on what many here are calling a ‘creeping offensive’...

“[S]ince mid-December, Ukraine’s armed forces have edged farther into parts of the gray zone in or near the war-worn cities of Avdiivka, Debaltseve, Dokuchaievsk, Horlivka, and Mariupol, shrinking the space between them and the separatist fighters. In doing so, the pro-Kyiv troops have sparked bloody clashes with their enemy.”

Indeed, Republican Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham visited the front late last month along with Democratic Sen. Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota to urge the offensive on.

“Your fight is our fight,” Graham told one group of fighters. “2017 will be the

year of offense. ... Enough of Russian aggression. It is time for them to pay a heavier price.” Added McCain: “The world is watching because we cannot allow Vladimir Putin to succeed here, because if he succeeds here he will succeed in other countries.”

Haley’s False Claims

So the offensive that Nikki Haley denounced was not the work of Russia but of Ukraine with encouragement from two leading U.S. advocates of confrontation. The target was not only to bloody pro-Russian forces in eastern Ukraine but to mess up rapprochement with Russia in the West. The goal was not only to force Putin “to pay a heavier price,” but to checkmate Trump by presenting him with a case of cooked-up aggression that he wouldn’t dare deny amid Washington’s feverishly pro-war climate.

A savvy politician might have seen through the maneuver and turned tables on the hawks. But Trump is not savvy. Rather, he’s a failed real-estate man with little idea of how the world – beyond his narrow focus – works. He may be nonpareil on the campaign trail, but in Washington he’s easy prey for a couple of experienced operators like McCain and Graham.

What next? Maybe Trump has a card up his sleeve or is engaging in some arcane maneuver too subtle for ordinary observers to follow. Or maybe his young administration is beset with chaos from competing factions that Trump has been unable to bring under control.

Otherwise, it’s hard to see how he can avoid being locked into a policy of renewed confrontation. “The fog of war” may have given way to “the fog of policy,” as Anna Nemtsova observes in the right-of-center *Daily Beast*.

But the rough outlines are beginning to emerge of an on-going showdown in Ukraine and a renewed alliance with Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states. This means deepening U.S. intervention in Yemen and Syria on the pro-Saudi side and hence tacitly in alliance with Al Qaeda. It means more fighting, more chaos, and more refugees. The more things change, the more they remain the same.

Some will blame what’s known as the Deep State. It’s not the President or Congress who rules, they will argue, but a vast sprawl consisting of the Pentagon, the arms industry, and 17 intelligence agencies employing hundreds of thousands. All are deeply invested in a pro-war policy and will therefore have their way.

This is true. But it’s also worth pointing out that foreign policy is never just an idea. It’s a system of interlocking military alliances based on long-term strategic planning. The U.S. is partners with Riyadh not because it necessarily

likes the Saudis' extreme version of Sunni Islam known as Wahhabism, but because they sit on top of a fifth of the world's proven fossil fuel reserves, a prize that the United States has controlled since World War II and one that it will not easily relinquish.

Just as the U.S. built up the Saudi oil industry from scratch, it similarly built up NATO and will not easily walk away from that alliance either. The international architecture is not completely unchangeable, but it will take more than a single loud-mouthed businessman to do it, particularly one as reactionary and confused as Donald Trump.

Daniel Lazare is the author of several books including *The Frozen Republic: How the Constitution Is Paralyzing Democracy* (Harcourt Brace).
