

Trampling the US Constitution for War

Donald Trump's unilateral decision to attack Syria under a preposterous claim of protecting a "vital national security interest" of the U.S. was another case of a President violating the U.S. Constitution, as Daniel C. Maguire explains.

By Daniel C. Maguire

I am old enough to remember the last time the United States declared war in accord with Article 1, Section 8 of the U.S. Constitution. The date was Dec. 8, 1941, and I was ten-years-old. I remember hearing on the radio all the Yay votes and I was jarred to hear one female vote saying Nay. That was Rep. Jeannette Rankin of Montana.

War, by definition, is state sponsored violence. It kills people and animals and savages the natural environment. It is "development" in full reverse, a dreadfully serious undertaking, a power that kings once wielded arbitrarily on their own impulse and authority. But the Founders would have none of that.

So, the U.S. Constitution gave the war power to the Congress, "the immediate representatives of the people." Congress also received the crucial power of the purse to continue or discontinue war after it starts.

James Madison, the Constitution's principal architect, wrote: "In no part of the Constitution is more wisdom to be found than in the clause which confides the question of war and peace to the legislature and not to the executive department."

Yet, in recent decades, the United States has repeatedly trashed that wisdom and done so as recently as April 6, 2017, as President Trump displayed his bully virility and his need to use kill-power to bolster his sagging ratings.

As military analyst Robert Previdi writes: "We have distorted the Constitution by allowing all Presidents since Harry S. Truman to use military power on their own authority. ... For more than 160 years, from Washington to Roosevelt, no President claimed that he had the power to move the country from peace to war without first getting authority to do so from Congress."

But a servile Congress has whittled away its signal prerogative to make war. In the Tonkin Gulf Resolution in 1964, Congress gave President Lyndon Johnson a blank check signed by a responsibility-shedding Congress.

In 1973, with the War Powers Resolution, it allowed the President to commit troops anywhere in the world for up to 60 days without congressional

involvement. By that time in modern warfare, the die would be cast with Congress left holding the President's coat as he uses the power abandoned by congressional defection.

The Iraq Resolution in October of 2002 transferred war-making authority to President George W. Bush for him to use or not use at his whim and discretion. And so it came to pass that another George in American history was given kingly power with predictably disastrous results, much as the arrogance of King George III precipitated Great Britain's break with its American colonies.

Barack Obama, after winning the Nobel Peace prize, went on to make war in places such as Somalia, Yemen, Syria, Libya, Iraq Afghanistan, and Pakistan without a congressional declaration of war. The sort of abuse of executive power has become "second nature" to us now.

But at least Obama asked Congress to authorize war on Syria, a move that contributed to the decision to avoid a full-scale U.S. military intervention in another Mideast war. There were other moments of sanity when constitutional restraint peeked through. On April 5, 1954, when President Eisenhower was under pressure to do an air strike in Indochina, he replied to Secretary of State John Foster Dulles: "Such a move is impossible" and would be "completely unconstitutional and indefensible." (Remember when Republicans could say such things!)

Commander-in-Chief?

The term "Commander-in-Chief" is perverted to justify Congressional surrender of its constitutional war-declaring power to the royal president. The term runs like a greased pig through political discourse these days.

As Robert Previdi notes: "The President's power as Commander-in-Chief in time of war takes over only *after* authority to deploy our forces has been received from Congress." The key word there is *after*.

And here is another irony in this story of serially rampaging bombs-away presidents. Richard Falk writes that World War II ended with an historic understanding that recourse to war by individual nations could no longer be treated as "a matter of national discretion."

The legal framework embodied in the United Nations Charter, largely shaped by American jurists, was "to entrust the Security Council with administering a prohibition of recourse to international force (Article 2, Section 4) by states except in circumstances of self-defense, which itself was restricted to response to a prior 'armed attack' (Article 51) and only then until the Security Council had the chance to review the claim."

This is known in the literature as “the policing paradigm.” It means that state-sponsored violence can only be justified in a community context with legal and internationally enforceable restrictions comparable to the restraints we put upon our police. This civilizing understanding lies amid the smoking rubble of a world of endless war.

A president can become the despotic shepherd only when the people become his sheep. In recent decades, the *vox populi* has only bleated when it should have been screaming. Teddy Roosevelt said: “To announce that there must be no criticism of the President, or that we are to stand by the President, right or wrong, is not only unpatriotic and servile, but is morally treasonable to the American People.”

Yes, members of Congress, with a few noble exceptions, are groveling wimps and aliens to the lost art of diplomacy, but it’s also true that an ill-informed, lazy and indolent citizenry is neck high in treasonous negligence. In the end, the buck stops with us.

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Trump’s ‘Wag the Dog’ Moment

Exclusive: President Trump earned neocon applause for his hasty decision to attack Syria and kill about a dozen Syrians, but his rash act has all the earmarks of a “wag the dog” moment, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Just two days after news broke of an alleged poison-gas attack in northern Syria, President Trump brushed aside advice from some U.S. intelligence analysts doubting the Syrian regime’s guilt and launched a lethal retaliatory missile strike against a Syrian airfield.

Trump immediately won plaudits from Official Washington, especially from neoconservatives who have been trying to wrestle control of his foreign policy away from his nationalist and personal advisers since the days after his

surprise victory on Nov. 8.

There is also an internal dispute over the intelligence. On Thursday night, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said the U.S. intelligence community assessed with a “high degree of confidence” that the Syrian government had dropped a poison gas bomb on civilians in Idlib province.

But a number of intelligence sources have made contradictory assessments, saying the preponderance of evidence suggests that Al Qaeda-affiliated rebels were at fault, either by orchestrating an intentional release of a chemical agent as a provocation or by possessing containers of poison gas that ruptured during a conventional bombing raid.

One intelligence source told me that the most likely scenario was a staged event by the rebels intended to force Trump to reverse a policy, announced only days earlier, that the U.S. government would no longer seek “regime change” in Syria and would focus on attacking the common enemy, Islamic terror groups that represent the core of the rebel forces.

The source said the Trump national security team split between the President’s close personal advisers, such as nationalist firebrand Steve Bannon and son-in-law Jared Kushner, on one side and old-line neocons who have regrouped under National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster, an Army general who was a protégé of neocon favorite Gen. David Petraeus.

White House Infighting

In this telling, the earlier ouster of retired Gen. Michael Flynn as national security adviser and this week’s removal of Bannon from the National Security Council were key steps in the reassertion of neocon influence inside the Trump presidency. The strange personalities and ideological extremism of Flynn and Bannon made their ousters easier, but they were obstacles that the neocons wanted removed.

Though Bannon and Kushner are often presented as rivals, the source said, they shared the belief that Trump should tell the truth about Syria, revealing the Obama administration’s CIA analysis that a fatal sarin gas attack in 2013 was a “false-flag” operation intended to sucker President Obama into fully joining the Syrian war on the side of the rebels – and the intelligence analysts’ similar beliefs about Tuesday’s incident.

Instead, Trump went along with the idea of embracing the initial rush to judgment blaming Assad for the Idlib poison-gas event. The source added that Trump saw Thursday night’s missile assault as a way to change the conversation in Washington, where his administration has been under fierce attack from

Democrats claiming that his election resulted from a Russian covert operation.

If changing the narrative was Trump's goal, it achieved some initial success with several of Trump's fiercest neocon critics, such as neocon Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham, praising the missile strike, as did Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The neocons and Israel have long sought "regime change" in Damascus even if the ouster of Assad might lead to a victory by Islamic extremists associated with Al Qaeda and/or the Islamic State.

Wagging the Dog

Trump employing a "wag the dog" strategy, in which he highlights his leadership on an international crisis to divert attention from domestic political problems, is reminiscent of President Bill Clinton's threats to attack Serbia in early 1999 as his impeachment trial was underway over his sexual relationship with intern Monica Lewinsky. (Clinton also was accused of a "wag-the-dog" strategy when he fired missiles at supposed Al Qaeda bases in Afghanistan and Sudan in 1998 in retaliation for the bombing of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.)

Trump's advisers, in briefing the press on Thursday night, went to great lengths to highlight Trump's compassion toward the victims of the poison gas and his decisiveness in bombing Assad's military in contrast to Obama's willingness to allow the intelligence community to conduct a serious review of the evidence surrounding the 2013 sarin-gas case.

Ultimately, Obama listened to his intelligence advisers who told him there was no "slam-dunk" evidence implicating Assad's regime and he pulled back from a military strike at the last minute – while publicly maintaining the fiction that the U.S. government was certain of Assad's guilt.

In both cases – 2013 and 2017 – there were strong reasons to doubt Assad's responsibility. In 2013, he had just invited United Nations inspectors into Syria to investigate cases of alleged rebel use of chemical weapons and thus it made no sense that he would launch a sarin attack in the Damascus suburbs, guaranteeing that the U.N. inspectors would be diverted to that case.

Similarly, now, Assad's military has gained a decisive advantage over the rebels and he had just scored a major diplomatic victory with the Trump administration's announcement that the U.S. was no longer seeking "regime change" in Syria. The savvy Assad would know that a chemical weapon attack now would likely result in U.S. retaliation and jeopardize the gains that his military has achieved with Russian and Iranian help.

The counter-argument to this logic – made by The New York Times and other neocon-oriented news outlets – essentially maintains that Assad is a crazed

barbarian who was testing out his newfound position of strength by baiting President Trump. Of course, if that were the case, it would have made sense that Assad would have boasted of his act, rather than deny it.

But logic and respect for facts no longer prevail inside Official Washington, nor inside the mainstream U.S. news media.

Intelligence Uprising

Alarm within the U.S. intelligence community about Trump's hasty decision to attack Syria reverberated from the Middle East back to Washington, where former CIA officer Philip Giraldi reported hearing from his intelligence contacts in the field that they were shocked at how the new poison-gas story was being distorted by Trump and the mainstream U.S. news media.

Giraldi told Scott Horton's Webcast: "I'm hearing from sources on the ground in the Middle East, people who are intimately familiar with the intelligence that is available who are saying that the essential narrative that we're all hearing about the Syrian government or the Russians using chemical weapons on innocent civilians is a sham."

Giraldi said his sources were more in line with an analysis postulating an accidental release of the poison gas after an Al Qaeda arms depot was hit by a Russian airstrike.

"The intelligence confirms pretty much the account that the Russians have been giving ... which is that they hit a warehouse where the rebels – now these are rebels that are, of course, connected with Al Qaeda – where the rebels were storing chemicals of their own and it basically caused an explosion that resulted in the casualties. Apparently the intelligence on this is very clear."

Giraldi said the anger within the intelligence community over the distortion of intelligence to justify Trump's military retaliation was so great that some covert officers were considering going public.

"People in both the agency [the CIA] and in the military who are aware of the intelligence are freaking out about this because essentially Trump completely misrepresented what he already should have known – but maybe he didn't – and they're afraid that this is moving toward a situation that could easily turn into an armed conflict," Giraldi said before Thursday night's missile strike. "They are astonished by how this is being played by the administration and by the U.S. media."

One-Sided Coverage

The mainstream U.S. media has presented the current crisis with the same profound neocon bias that has infected the coverage of Syria and the larger Middle East for decades. For instance, The New York Times on Friday published a lead story by Michael R. Gordon and Michael D. Shear that treated the Syrian government's responsibility for the poison-gas incident as flat-fact. The lengthy story did not even deign to include the denials from Syria and Russia that they were responsible for any intentional deployment of poison gas.

The article also fit with Trump's desire that he be portrayed as a decisive and forceful leader. He is depicted as presiding over intense deliberations of war or peace and displaying a deep humanitarianism regarding the poison-gas victims, one of the rare moments when the Times, which has become a reliable neocon propaganda sheet, has written anything favorable about Trump at all.

According to Syrian reports on Friday, the U.S. attack killed 13 people, including five soldiers at the airbase.

Gordon, whose service to the neocon cause is notorious, was the lead author with Judith Miller of the Times' bogus "aluminum tube" story in 2002 which falsely claimed that Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein was reconstituting a nuclear-weapons program, an article that was then cited by President George W. Bush's aides as a key argument for invading Iraq in 2003.

Regarding this week's events, Trump's desperation to reverse his negative media coverage and the dubious evidence blaming Assad for the Idlib incident could fit with the "Wag the Dog" movie from 1997 in which an embattled president creates a phony foreign crisis in Albania.

In the movie, the White House operation is a cynical psychological operation to convince the American people that innocent Albanian children, including an attractive girl carrying a cat, are in danger when, In reality, the girl was an actor posing before a green screen that allowed scenes of fiery ruins to be inserted as background.

Today, because Trump and his administration are now committed to convincing Americans that Assad really was responsible for Tuesday's poison-gas tragedy, the prospects for a full and open investigation are effectively ended. We may never know if there is truth to those allegations or whether we are being manipulated by another "wag the dog" psyop.

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).

Dashed Hopes for Trump's Foreign Policy

President Trump's missile attack on Syria – without waiting for an investigation of Syria's alleged role in a poison-gas attack – has dashed hopes that he might take U.S. foreign policy in a less warlike direction, writes Gilbert Doctorow.

By Gilbert Doctorow

My days of hoping for the best from Donald Trump – and at least appreciating the fact that he was not the neocon/liberal hawk that Hillary Clinton is – are over along with my hopes that he might implement his campaign promise and take U.S. foreign policy in a more positive, less warlike, direction.

From being possibly part of the solution, President Trump has become an integral part of the problem. And with his bigger-than-life ego, petulance and stubbornness, Commander-in-Chief Trump is potentially a greater threat to world peace than his weak-willed predecessor Barack Obama.

This week, Trump ignored Russian calls for an investigation into Tuesday's alleged chemical gas attack in Idlib province before issuing hasty conclusions on culpability. Instead he accepted a narrative of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's guilt despite indications that the incident may have been either an accident (the release of poison gas at a damaged rebel warehouse) or a false-flag operation designed by Al Qaeda-affiliated rebels in Syria.

The Assad-did-it storyline was disseminated by the White Helmets and other phony NGOs that are financed by Washington and London, and that narrative was accepted by the White House. Without waiting for any comprehensive review, Trump ordered the firing of 50 or more Tomahawk missiles against a Syrian military air base in Homs province, thereby crossing all Russian "red lines" in Syria.

Until this point, the Kremlin had chosen not to react to signs coming from Washington that Trump's determination to change course on Russia and U.S. global hegemony was failing. The wait-and-see posture antedated Trump's accession to power when Russian President Vladimir Putin overruled the dictates of protocol and did not respond to Obama's final salvo, the seizure of Russian diplomatic property in the U.S. and the eviction of Russian diplomats.

The Russians also looked the other way when the new administration continued the same neocon rhetoric from the tribune of the United Nations Security Council and during trips to Europe by Vice President Mike Pence, Defense Secretary James Mattis and Secretary of State Tillerson.

But the missile attack in Syria is a game-changer. The pressure on Putin to respond in some serious way will be immense. Putin has a cool mind and we may anticipate that the Russian response will come at a time of his choosing and in a manner that is appropriate to the seriousness of the U.S. offense. Look for a response by the end of the month.

In the meantime, we who have been hoping for a change of direction – for the rooting out of the neocons and liberal hawks at the heart of the Deep State – should recognize the dangers and the challenges ahead. One way or another, the White House must be told that arranging foreign policy moves out of purely domestic calculations, such as likely happened on Thursday, puts the nation's very existence at risk.

Acting tough by striking out at Russia and its allies is not the way to form a coalition to pass a Republican tax bill or revive the repeal plans on Obamacare or divert attention from the Democrats' obsessive investigations into Russia-gate. The same may be said of an alternative reading of the missile attack: that it was intended as a message to visiting Chinese President Xi that should there be no joint action to restrain North Korea, the United States will act alone and with total disregard for international law.

Either logic in the end is a formula for global suicide.

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NYT Retreats on 2013 Syria-Sarin Claims

Exclusive: Even as The New York Times leads the charge against the Syrian government for this week's alleged chemical attack, it is quietly retreating on its earlier certainty about the 2013 Syria-sarin case, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The New York Times, which has never heard an allegation against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad that it hasn't immediately believed, has compiled [a list of his alleged atrocities](#) with a surprising omission: the Aug. 21, 2013 sarin gas attack outside Damascus.

Why this omission is so surprising is that the sarin incident was the moment

when the Western media and the Washington establishment piled on President Barack Obama for not enforcing his “red line” by launching military strikes against the Syrian government to retaliate for Assad “gassing his own people.”

The retaliation, which would have pummeled the Syrian military, was hotly desired by neoconservatives and liberal interventionists who were obsessed with achieving another Mideast “regime change” even if that risked turning Syria over to Al Qaeda and/or the Islamic State. The story of Obama’s supposed “red line” retreat has become a treasured groupthink of all the “important people” in D.C.

So, for the Times to compile a summary of alleged Assad atrocities, which included a separate section on “chemical attacks,” and to leave out the August 2013 case suggests that even The New York Times cannot sustain one of the most beloved myths of the Syrian war, that Assad was at fault for the sarin attack.

Previously, the Times backed away from one of its front-page reports – published about a month after the sarin attack – that used a “vector analysis” to place the site of the sarin missile launch at a Syrian military base about 9 kilometers from the two impact zones. That analysis was considered the slam-dunk proof of Assad’s guilt, but it collapsed when it turned out that one of the missiles contained no sarin and the other rocket, which did have sarin, had a range of only about 2 kilometers, placing the likely firing location in rebel-controlled territory.

Hersh’s Findings

Investigative journalist Seymour Hersh further demolished the Assad-sarin myth in an article that traced the chemicals back to Turkish intelligence, but the mainstream U.S. media was so hostile to any dissenting view on the Assad-did-it groupthink that Hersh had to publish his findings in the London Review of Books. Later, Turkish police and opposition officials corroborated much of Hersh’s findings – and I’ve been told that U.S. intelligence analysts now agree, at least generally, with Hersh’s conclusions.

But the Times never directly repudiated its earlier accusations against Assad’s military, thus allowing the groupthink to be sustained that Assad was responsible for the 2013 attack. That history became important again on Tuesday when another incident – also apparently involving sarin or a similar poison gas – claimed lives in an Al Qaeda-dominated area of northern Syria.

The U.S. mainstream media (along with President Trump and his top aides) immediately blamed Assad again, with Trump and his team threatening to launch a retaliatory military strike even without the approval of the United Nations Security Council. The 2013 case loomed large in the background with Trump

implicitly referencing Obama's presumed failure to enforce his "red line."

Prominent U.S. news personalities, such as MSNBC's Andrea Mitchell, also have cited the old Assad-was-guilty-in-2013 conventional wisdom to buttress their new rush to judgment over the Tuesday incident. Indeed, the 2013 sarin case has become a perfect example of how the major U.S. media often jumps to conclusions and then refuses to back down regardless of the ensuing evidence.

But now we have the Times' list of alleged Assad atrocities, compiled by Russell Goldman, a senior staff editor on the International Desk, that doesn't allege that Assad or his forces were responsible for the 2013 sarin attack.

Goldman reports: "In the latest attack on civilians, more than 100 people, including children, were believed to have been killed by chemical weapons in a rebel-held town in Idlib Province on Tuesday. A doctor there said the victims' pupils were reduced to pinhole-size dots, a characteristic of nerve agents and other banned toxic substances.

"The United States put the blame for the attack on the Syrian government and its patrons, Russia and Iran, and suggested that the salvo was a war crime. While the attack was among the deadliest uses of chemical weapons in Syria in years, it was far from an isolated case.

"During the war, the Assad government has been accused of regularly using chlorine gas, which is less deadly than the agent used on Tuesday and is legal in its commercial form. According to the Violations Documentation Center, an antigovernment watchdog, more than 1,100 Syrians have been killed in chemical weapons and gas attacks."

The reference to the anti-Assad group's claim about the 1,100 Syrians allegedly killed by chemical weapons would presumably include the 2013 sarin incident, although local medical personnel put the death toll much lower, at perhaps several hundred. But note how the Times used a passive tense in describing those deaths – "more than 1,100 Syrians have been killed" – without attribution of who did the killing.

And nothing specific at all about the 2013 sarin case and who was responsible.

The Chlorine Cases

The chlorine-gas cases have resulted in only a few fatalities, which also undercuts the claims that the Assad government was responsible for them. Why would Assad risk more outside military intervention against his government by using a chemical weapon that has almost no military value, at least as allegedly deployed in Syria?

U.N. investigators – under intense pressure from the West to find something that could be pinned on Assad – agreed to blame him for a couple of the chlorine allegations coming from rebel forces and their civilian allies. But the U.N. team did not inspect the sites directly, relying instead of the testimony of Assad’s enemies.

In one of the chlorine cases, however, Syrian eyewitnesses came forward to testify that the rebels had staged the alleged attack so it could be blamed on the government. In that incident, the U.N. team reached no conclusion as to what had really happened, but neither did the investigators – now alerted to the rebels’ tactic of staging chemical attacks – apply any additional skepticism to the other cases.

In one case, the rebels and their supporters also claimed to know that an alleged “barrel bomb” contained a canister of chlorine because of the sound that it made while descending. There was no explanation for how that sort of detection was even possible.

Yet, despite the flaws in the rebels’ chlorine claims – and the collapse of the 2013 sarin case – the Times and other mainstream U.S. news outlets report the chlorine allegations as flat-fact, without reference to sourcing from the U.N. investigators whose careers largely depended on them coming up with conclusions that pleased the majority of the five-member Security Council – the U.S., Great Britain and France.

If this fuller history were understood, much greater skepticism would be warranted by the new allegations about Assad ordering a new sarin attack. While it’s conceivable that Assad’s military is guilty – although why Assad would take this risk at this moment is hard to fathom – it’s also conceivable that Al Qaeda’s jihadists – finding themselves facing impending defeat – chose to stage a sarin attack even if that meant killing some innocent civilians.

Al Qaeda’s goal would be to draw in the U.S. or Israeli military against the Syrian government, creating space for a jihadist counteroffensive. And, as we should all recall, it’s not as if Al Qaeda hasn’t killed many innocent civilians before.

[For more on the mysterious 2013 sarin case, see a memo from U.S. intelligence veterans, “A Call for Proof on Syrian-Sarin Attack.”]

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Another Dangerous Rush to Judgment in Syria

Exclusive: The U.S. government and the mainstream media rushed to judgment again, blaming the Syrian government for a new poison-gas attack and ignoring other possibilities, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

With the latest hasty judgment about Tuesday's poison-gas deaths in a rebel-held area of northern Syria, the mainstream U.S. news media once more reveals itself to be a threat to responsible journalism and to the future of humanity. Again, we see the troubling pattern of verdict first, investigation later, even when that behavior can lead to a dangerous war escalation and many more deaths.

Before a careful evaluation of the evidence about Tuesday's tragedy was possible, The New York Times and other major U.S. news outlets had pinned the blame for the scores of dead on the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad. That revived demands that the U.S. and other nations establish a "no-fly zone" over Syria, which would amount to launching another "regime change" war and would put America into a likely hot war with nuclear-armed Russia.

Even as basic facts were still being assembled about Tuesday's incident, we, the public, were prepped to disbelieve the Syrian government's response that the poison gas may have come from rebel stockpiles that could have been released either accidentally or intentionally causing the civilian deaths in a town in Idlib Province.

One possible scenario was that Syrian warplanes bombed a rebel weapons depot where the poison gas was stored, causing the containers to rupture. Another possibility was a staged event by increasingly desperate Al Qaeda jihadists who are known for their disregard for innocent human life.

While it's hard to know at this early stage what's true and what's not, these alternative explanations, I'm told, are being seriously examined by U.S. intelligence. One source cited the possibility that Turkey had supplied the rebels with the poison gas (the exact type still not determined) for potential use against Kurdish forces operating in northern Syria near the Turkish border or for a terror attack in a government-controlled city like the capital of Damascus.

Reporting by investigative journalist Seymour Hersh and statements by some Turkish police and opposition politicians linked Turkish intelligence and Al Qaeda-affiliated jihadists to the Aug. 21, 2013 sarin gas attack outside Damascus that killed hundreds, although the Times and other major U.S. news outlets continue to blame that incident on Assad's regime.

Seasoned Propagandists

On Tuesday, the Times assigned two of its most committed anti-Syrian-government propagandists to cover the Syrian poison-gas story, Michael R. Gordon and Anne Barnard.

Gordon has been at the front lines of the neocon "regime change" strategies for years. He co-authored the Times' infamous aluminum tube story of Sept. 8, 2002, which relied on U.S. government sources and Iraqi defectors to frighten Americans with images of "mushroom clouds" if they didn't support President George W. Bush's upcoming invasion of Iraq. The timing played perfectly into the administration's advertising "rollout" for the Iraq War.

Of course, the story turned out to be false and to have unfairly downplayed skeptics of the claim that the aluminum tubes were for nuclear centrifuges, when the aluminum tubes actually were meant for artillery. But the article provided a great impetus toward the Iraq War, which ended up killing nearly 4,500 U.S. soldiers and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis.

Gordon's co-author, Judith Miller, became the only U.S. journalist known to have lost a job over the reckless and shoddy reporting that contributed to the Iraq disaster. For his part, Gordon continued serving as a respected Pentagon correspondent.

Gordon's name also showed up in a supporting role on the Times' botched "vector analysis," which supposedly proved that the Syrian military was responsible for the Aug. 21, 2013 sarin-gas attack. The "vector analysis" story of Sept. 17, 2013, traced the flight paths of two rockets, recovered in suburbs of Damascus back to a Syrian military base 9.5 kilometers away.

The article became the "slam-dunk" evidence that the Syrian government was lying when it denied launching the sarin attack. However, like the aluminum tube story, the Times' "vector analysis" ignored contrary evidence, such as the unreliability of one azimuth from a rocket that landed in Moadamiya because it had struck a building in its descent. That rocket also was found to contain no sarin, so it's inclusion in the vectoring of two sarin-laden rockets made no sense.

But the Times' story ultimately fell apart when rocket scientists analyzed the

one sarin-laden rocket that had landed in the Zamalka area and determined that it had a maximum range of about two kilometers, meaning that it could not have originated from the Syrian military base. C.J. Chivers, one of the co-authors of the article, waited until Dec. 28, 2013, to publish a halfhearted semi-retraction. [See Consortiumnews.com's "NYT Backs Off Its Syria-Sarin Analysis."]

Gordon was a co-author of another bogus Times' front-page story on April 21, 2014, when the State Department and the Ukrainian government fed the Times two photographs that supposedly proved that a group of Russian soldiers – first photographed in Russia – had entered Ukraine, where they were photographed again.

However, two days later, Gordon was forced to pen a retraction because it turned out that both photos had been shot inside Ukraine, destroying the story's premise. [See Consortiumnews.com's "NYT Retracts Russian-Photo Scoop."]

Gordon perhaps personifies better than anyone how mainstream journalism works. If you publish false stories that fit with the Establishment's narratives, your job is safe even if the stories blow up in your face. However, if you go against the grain – and if someone important raises a question about your story – you can easily find yourself out on the street even if your story is correct.

No Skepticism Allowed

Anne Barnard, Gordon's co-author on Tuesday's Syrian poison-gas story, has consistently reported on the Syrian conflict as if she were a press agent for the rebels, playing up their anti-government claims even when there's no evidence.

For instance, on June 2, 2015, Barnard, who is based in Beirut, Lebanon, authored a front-page story that pushed the rebels' propaganda theme that the Syrian government was somehow in cahoots with the Islamic State though even the U.S. State Department acknowledged that it had no confirmation of the rebels' claims.

When Gordon and Barnard teamed up to report on the latest Syrian tragedy, they again showed no skepticism about early U.S. government and Syrian rebel claims that the Syrian military was responsible for intentionally deploying poison gas.

Perhaps for the first time, The New York Times cited President Trump as a reliable source because he and his press secretary were saying what the Times wanted to hear – that Assad must be guilty.

Gordon and Barnard also cited the controversial White Helmets, the rebels' Western-financed civil defense group that has worked in close proximity with Al

Qaeda's Nusra Front and has come under suspicion of staging heroic "rescues" but is nevertheless treated as a fount of truth-telling by the mainstream U.S. news media.

In early online versions of the Times' story, a reaction from the Syrian military was buried deep in the article around the 27th paragraph, noting: "The government denies that it has used chemical weapons, arguing that insurgents and Islamic State fighters use toxins to frame the government or that the attacks are staged."

The following paragraph mentioned the possibility that a Syrian bombing raid had struck a rebel warehouse where poison-gas was stored, thus releasing it unintentionally.

But the placement of the response was a clear message that the Times disbelieved whatever the Assad government said. At least in the version of the story that appeared in the morning newspaper, a government statement was moved up to the sixth paragraph although still surrounded by comments meant to signal the Times' acceptance of the rebel version.

After noting the Assad government's denial, Gordon and Barnard added, "But only the Syrian military had the ability and the motive to carry out an aerial attack like the one that struck the rebel-held town of Khan Sheikoun."

But they again ignored the alternative possibilities. One was that a bombing raid ruptured containers for chemicals that the rebels were planning to use in some future attack, and the other was that Al Qaeda's jihadists staged the incident to elicit precisely the international outrage directed at Assad as has occurred.

Gordon and Barnard also could be wrong about Assad being the only one with a motive to deploy poison gas. Since Assad's forces have gained a decisive upper-hand over the rebels, why would he risk stirring up international outrage at this juncture? On the other hand, the desperate rebels might view the horrific scenes from the chemical-weapons deployment as a last-minute game-changer.

Pressure to Prejudge

None of this means that Assad's forces are innocent, but a serious investigation ascertains the facts and then reaches a conclusion, not the other way around.

However, to suggest these other possibilities will, I suppose, draw the usual accusations about "Assad apologist," but refusing to prejudge an investigation is what journalism is supposed to be about.

The Times, however, apparently has no concern anymore for letting the facts be assembled and then letting them speak for themselves. The Times weighed in on Wednesday with an editorial entitled "[A New Level of Depravity From Mr. Assad.](#)"

Another problem with the behavior of the Times and the mainstream media is that by jumping to a conclusion they pressure other important people to join in the condemnations and that, in turn, can prejudice the investigation while also generating a dangerous momentum toward war.

Once the political leadership pronounces judgment, it becomes career-threatening for lower-level officials to disagree with those conclusions. We've seen that already with how United Nations investigators accepted rebel claims about the Syrian government's use of chlorine gas, a set of accusations that the Times and other media now report simply as flat-fact.

Yet, the claims about the Syrian military mixing in canisters of chlorine in supposed "barrel bombs" make little sense because chlorine deployed in that fashion is ineffective as a lethal weapon but it has become an important element of the rebels' propaganda campaign.

U.N. investigators, who were under intense pressure from the United States and Western nations to give them something to use against Assad, did support rebel claims about the government using chlorine in a couple of cases, but the investigators also received testimony from residents in one area who described the staging of a chlorine attack for propaganda purposes.

One might have thought that the evidence of one staged attack would have increased skepticism about the other incidents, but the U.N. investigators apparently understood what was good for their careers, so they endorsed a couple of other alleged cases despite their inability to conduct a field investigation. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[UN Team Heard Claims of Staged Chemical Attacks.](#)"]

Now, that dubious U.N. report is being leveraged into this new incident, one opportunistic finding used to justify another. But the pressing question now is: Have the American people come to understand enough about "[psychological operations](#)" and "[strategic communications](#)" that they will finally show the skepticism that no longer exists in the major U.S. news media?

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's Foreign Policy Incoherence

Exclusive: Powerful forces are arrayed against any significant changes that President Trump may try to make in foreign policy, a dilemma made worse by his own ineptness and staffing troubles, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

President Trump's emerging foreign policy is one of contradictions and chaos, caught up in a combination of old establishment orthodoxies and some fresh recognition of reality but without any strong strategic thinker capable of separating one from the other and leading the administration in a thoughtful direction.

The examples of new thinking include abandoning President Obama's fitful – and bloody – campaign to force “regime change” in Syria; accepting a more realistic solution to the political mess in Libya; and trying to cooperate with Russia on combating terrorism, such as the fight against Islamic State and Al Qaeda, and reducing international tensions, such as the ongoing crisis in Ukraine.

But Team Trump also is hobbled by its inability to break free from many of the groupthinks that have dominated Official Washington for the past quarter century or so as the foreign policy establishment fell under the domination of the neoconservatives and their junior partners, the liberal interventionists, virtually banishing the formerly influential “realists” as well as the few peace advocates.

This enduring neocon/liberal-hawk strength – reflected in what all the “important people” know to be true – has left senior Trump officials still pandering to the Saudis and the Israelis; repeating the neocon mantra that “Iran is the principal source of terrorism” (though that is clearly not true given the support for Al Qaeda and other Sunni terror groups coming from U.S. “allies” such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar); and falling into line with NATO's hype of Russia as the new global villain.

Trapped in Old Thinking

What is increasingly clear is that Trump's inner circle lacks a comprehensive understanding about how these various foreign-policy forces fit together. Beyond Trump's transactional approach in demanding that “allies” – from Japan to Saudi Arabia to European nations in NATO – pay more for their costly U.S. security umbrella – Trump and his advisers lack a consistent foreign policy message.

Perhaps the most supple thinker is Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner, who started out with a traditional fondness toward Israel and Saudi Arabia but now seems to be at the forefront of the administration's pragmatists, looking at novel ways of resolving the crises in Iraq, Syria and Libya, even if that means dealing with the Iranians and the Russians. Kushner, however, lacks knowledge and experience in foreign affairs and is hamstrung by a lack of support staff as his portfolio of responsibilities keeps expanding.

Other senior foreign policy officials – the likes of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Defense Secretary James Mattis and United Nations Ambassador Nikki Haley – fit more into the traditionalist mold, touting the unquestioned value of the alliances with Israel, Saudi Arabia, NATO and the European Union – although even these more conventional voices have acquiesced on the recognition of reality in Syria, that Bashar al-Assad's government isn't likely to be overthrown soon and that the fight against Islamic State takes precedence.

Yet, regarding a more thorough overhaul of U.S. foreign policy – getting tough with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States for their clandestine support for Sunni militants, demanding that Israel get serious in working out a peace agreement with the Palestinians, and forging a détente with Russia – the Tillerson-Mattis-Haley triangle appears resistant to going outside the foreign policy frame that the neocons have built.

Haley, with her own political ambitions, appears to relish her role as a favorite of Israel and the neocons, getting a particularly warm welcome when she addressed the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) last week and vowed to shield Israel from U.N. criticism.

The Neocon Rise

Over the past 35 years, the neocons have managed to amass extraordinary power in Washington because – unlike most of their adversaries – they possess a purposeful vision of what they want to accomplish, principally protecting Israel's interests in the Middle East and lavishing money on the Military Industrial Complex. They also push a Western neoliberal economic model on the world that breaks down traditional social values and enriches a global financial elite.

This combination of goals ensures a steady flow of many millions of dollars into the neocons' coffers via think tanks, non-governmental organizations, consultancies and business interests. But the neocons have proven their worth. Generally speaking, they are bright, articulate and politically savvy.

The neocons made their first big move into the centers of power during the

Reagan administration, filling a void for skilled functionaries. After getting credentialed in the 1980s, the neocons expanded their reach into the major media and big-time think tanks in the 1990s during the Clinton administration and fully claimed the levers of power in the 2000s under George W. Bush.

By the Obama administration, the neocons had so ensconced themselves in the centers of Washington power that they continued to exert great influence even though President Obama was never exactly one of them, coming more from the “realist” camp although he surrounded himself with liberal interventionists.

The world views of these liberal hawks matched closely with the neocons’, differing mostly in the rationalizations used for sponsoring “regime changes.” The neocons typically cited “terrorism” and “democracy-promotion” while the liberal interventionists would rally around “humanitarian concerns.” But they usually ended up in the same place, such as supporting the Iraq invasion in 2003 and the proxy war in Syria from 2011-2016.

Lacking Control

Throughout his presidency, Obama never took firm control of his foreign policy. At the start, he enlisted a “team of rivals” – seasoned players who ran circles around him bureaucratically, such as Defense Secretary Robert Gates, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Gen. David Petraeus – and even in his second term, Obama let liberal hawks and neocons, such as Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power and Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland, respectively, box him in.

Obama would often resist the most extreme schemes that these hawks would hatch, but he rarely challenged them directly, behaving more like a foot-dragger-in-chief than a forceful President.

Obama also let the neocons and the liberal interventionists control the narratives, turning adversaries into “demons” and allies into “innocents.” Whether it was the Aug. 21, 2013 sarin attack outside Damascus (blamed on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad) or the July 17, 2014 shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over eastern Ukraine (blamed on Russian President Vladimir Putin), Obama didn’t let the dubious evidentiary cases interfere with the desired propaganda value of the incidents.

So, when Obama finally left office, he left behind not only a nettlesome batch of international crises – Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Yemen, Ukraine, South Sudan and a New Cold War with Russia – but also a series of exaggerated or false narratives that made resolving these trouble spots doubly difficult.

Trump’s Troubles

Under the best of circumstances, the Trump administration would have had a nearly impossible task unwinding the deceptive story lines and reaching out to foreign leaders who could actually help resolve these crises. But Donald Trump complicated the task with his own bizarre behavior, squandering his first days in office with silly complaints about whose Inauguration crowds were bigger and his absurd argument that he had really won the popular vote.

But the real challenge was how indoctrinated nearly all the “important people” in Washington had become after a quarter century or so of hearing almost exclusively the neocon point-of-view, which was built around the Israeli-Saudi viewpoint on the Middle East and on the need to demonize anyone who got in their way.

The cornerstone of Israel’s regional strategy derives from the fact that Lebanon’s Hezbollah militia bloodied the proud Israeli Defense Force when it was occupying southern Lebanon, forcing Israel to withdraw back to its borders and earning the Shiite militia the label of a “terrorist” organization. And, since Shiite-ruled Iran was helping Hezbollah, Iran soon became the chief sponsor of terrorism in Israeli eyes.

Because Israel insisted on that position, the U.S. government and the mainstream media fell in line. It didn’t matter that Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other Sunni regimes were financing and arming Al Qaeda and other terror groups that were attacking the West. Between Israel’s political clout in the United States and the Saudi financial power, Official Washington parroted what it was told. Even as Al Qaeda and later the Islamic State became the major terror groups attacking the West, all the “important people” in media and government still recited the mantra: “Iran is the principal sponsor of terrorism.”

Israel/Saudi Alliance

Israel’s obsession with Hezbollah and Saudi Arabia’s sectarian hatred of the Shiites led to other strategic decisions in the region. Since Syria was allied with Iran and Hezbollah – and was considered the centerpiece of the so-called “Shiite crescent” stretching from Tehran through Damascus to Beirut – “regime change” in Syria would deal a powerful blow to the regional enemies of both Israel and Saudi Arabia.

So, “regime change” in Syria became an important priority shared by the American neocons and – because Bashar al-Assad could be painted as a ruthless dictator – by the liberal interventionists as well. Half-heartedly, Obama went along with the call that “Assad must go,” but Obama still resisted pressure from Secretary of State Clinton and Ambassador Power to commit the U.S. military too deeply to what was becoming a messy sectarian war.

Despite this hesitancy, Obama joined with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, Israel and others in arming and/or supporting various rebel factions – some deemed “moderate” – that coalesced under Sunni extremists associated with Al Qaeda (Nusra Front), Nusra’s ally Ahrar al-Sham, and Al Qaeda’s spin-off (Islamic State).

Still, Assad and his government proved more resistant to “regime change” than had been expected. But the neocon/liberal-hawk hopes were raised in August 2013 when a mysterious sarin attack outside Damascus was blamed on Assad although the evidence seemed to point to a provocation by Al Qaeda-linked terrorists. Nevertheless, the mainstream U.S. media, key “human rights” groups, and much of the U.S. government pinned the blame on Assad amid expectations of a major U.S. bombing campaign to devastate his military.

But Western intelligence analysts shared with Obama their doubts about who was responsible and the President called off the bombing at the last minute to the fury of many in Official Washington who chastised Obama for not enforcing his “red line” against chemical weapons use.

The Putin Problem

Then, to make matters worse for the “regime change” advocates, Russian President Putin intervened with a face-saving plan in which Assad surrendered his chemical weapons while still denying responsibility for the attack. With that move, Putin – who was also assisting Obama on negotiations to constrain Iran’s nuclear program and thus heading off another neocon-desired “regime change” mission – jumped to the top of international targets.

The neocons recognized the need to punish Putin and drive a wedge between Putin and Obama before they might turn their joint attention to something as sensitive as an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal. Ukraine became the convenient wedge.

By late September 2013, neocon Carl Gershman, president of the U.S.-government-funded National Endowment for Democracy, had identified Ukraine as the “biggest prize” as well as an important step toward eventually removing Putin from power in Russia. Between Gershman’s NED lavishing money on activists and Assistant Secretary Nuland’s machinations supporting violent protests in Kiev, the stage was set for Ukraine’s “regime change,” ousting elected President Viktor Yanukovich and installing a fiercely anti-Russian regime.

After Yanukovich’s ouster – with neo-Nazi and ultranationalist street fighters leading the charge on Feb. 22, 2014 – Crimea, an ethnic Russian stronghold where Russia’s Black Sea naval fleet was based, reacted to the coup in Kiev by voting to secede from Ukraine and rejoin Russia. Putin committed some Russian troops

already stationed on the peninsula to protect Crimea's decision, a move that Western propaganda portrayed as a "Russian invasion."

Across Europe and the U.S., an anti-Russian hysteria took hold that entrenched the neocons/liberal hawks in even greater control of Western thinking. At this point, Obama essentially capitulated and joined in the Russia-bashing.

His expected successor, Hillary Clinton, was even more committed to the neocon/liberal-hawk narrative. But Clinton's inept campaign and the last-minute intervention by FBI Director James Comey (briefly reopening an investigation into her use of a private email server while Secretary of State) led to the surprise result of Donald Trump's victory.

Oddballs and Outsiders

Trump, however, was unprepared for victory. He had around him a motley crew of oddballs and outsiders. Many detested and distrusted the Washington foreign policy establishment, which was dominated by neocons and liberal hawks, but Team Trump had no sophisticated understanding of the complex global and political challenges that faced the new and inexperienced President.

Many of his advisers also had absorbed the dominant groupthinks, especially those pushed by Israel, such as the falsehood that Iran was the principal source of terrorism.

At first, Trump and son-in-law Jared Kushner seemed to think that they might be able to broker an Israeli-Palestinian peace by getting Saudi Arabia to strong-arm the Palestinians into accepting Israeli dictates for a solution, called the "outside-in" plan. So, initially, there was the usual cozying up to the Israeli and Saudi "allies."

Meanwhile, Official Washington was busy trying to repel the Trump presidency much as a body deploys white cells to kill an infection. The chief method of attack was the charge of "Russian meddling" in the election and suspicions that it was coordinated with the Trump campaign. To achieve the goal of Trump's ouster, the mainstream media and the political elite adopted a revisionist history of the campaign, ignoring Clinton's numerous missteps and the key role played by Comey when he revived the FBI investigation into Clinton's email server just days before the Nov. 8 election.

Instead, the new groupthink was that some leaked emails earlier in the campaign revealing how the Democratic National Committee had tilted the playing field against Sen. Bernie Sanders and how Clinton's campaign had been hiding details of her speeches to Wall Street had somehow decided the election – and that Russia had hacked into those email accounts and passed the information onto

WikiLeaks.

WikiLeaks denied getting the emails from Russia but that claim was brushed aside, along with memories of the earlier analysis of what had caused Clinton's surprising defeat: her own incompetent campaign and Comey's intervention.

The poisonous climate created by Russia-gate further constrained Trump's possible outreach to Moscow for cooperation on resolving a number of global hotspots.

Although the Russia-gate accusers lacked evidence of collaboration between Team Trump and the Kremlin, the endless repetition of the charges had a powerful effect. In effect, the neocons and the liberal hawks exploited the "scandal" to protect their core interests. It now will be difficult for Trump to resolve Ukraine or cooperate with Russia on Syria and Libya or to team up with Russia to finally compel Israel to accept a reasonable agreement with the Palestinians.

Saudi Arabia also came up a winner with the Trump administration extending its support for the Saudi war on impoverished Yemen and the lifting of human rights constraints on arming Bahrain. In both cases, Sunni rulers are repressing Shiite-related populations and the violence is rationalized by the old mantra: "Iran is the principal source of terrorism."

There's also the hope among many in Official Washington and inside the mainstream media that Russia-gate can be transformed into an impeachment proceeding to remove Trump and put neocon-friendly Vice President Mike Pence in charge. He, in turn, would likely turn control of U.S. foreign policy over to the likes of neocon Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham. The status quo ante would be restored.

That is why wielding the anti-Russia stick has been so tempting, offering a way to both bludgeon Trump and beat to death any nascent détente with Russia, which would give new hope for more "regime change" wars. For the neocons and their liberal-hawk sidekicks, that would be a win-win-win.

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Contrasting Tales of Two Besieged Cities

The U.S.-backed offensive to retake Iraq's Mosul from the Islamic State is inflicting hardships on civilians, but the Western media treats this humanitarian crisis differently than the recent one in Aleppo, Syria, notes Steven Chovanec.

By Steven Chovanec

During the Syrian army's offensive to retake the eastern part of Aleppo from the insurgent opposition, the Western media portrayed the assault as if Russia and Syria were carrying out a campaign primarily aimed at killing and harming civilians. The humanitarian crisis dominated headlines while key facts, such as Al Qaeda's domination of the opposition forces and the way in which the militants had brutally conquered the city's civilians, were marginalized or not reported at all.

A similar military offensive being carried out by the U.S. and its allies in the Iraqi city of Mosul reveals the hypocritical nature of Western news outlets, which portray their own countries' actions as targeting only Islamic State terrorists and scrupulously avoiding harm to civilians.

There is no doubt that the siege in eastern Aleppo resulted in a humanitarian crisis for the civilian population trapped within the warzone. As the Washington Institute's Fabrice Balanche described: "What the United Nations is describing [about] the humanitarian situation is correct: hospitals destroyed, people living in shelters, women and children trapped in the rubble, and so on."

Yet in reality the destruction waged upon Aleppo was hardly different from what is now being done in Mosul as the U.S.-led coalition carries out a similar campaign of counterinsurgency and siege warfare.

Currently the Iraqi army, backed by U.S. airstrikes, is conducting a violent and brutal assault on the western parts of Mosul city in order to drive out the Islamic State. A whole population of civilians is trapped within an ongoing warzone and cut off from food supplies and basic necessities as the military offensive hits heavily populated areas killing civilians while destroying important infrastructure in the process, including hospitals.

Yet, while Western officials and media pundits vehemently condemned the Syrian assault on Aleppo, they are largely silent – or congratulatory and supportive – as the U.S. and its partners lay waste to the more heavily populated city of Mosul.

A senior Iraqi politician told veteran journalist Patrick Cockburn that “the Iraqi armed forces will eventually capture west Mosul ... but the city itself will be destroyed in the fighting,” pointing to the massive destruction already inflicted upon eastern Mosul which was recently captured by the U.S.-backed forces.

So, even though the current U.S.-led siege has resulted in a larger humanitarian crisis in purely quantitative terms, the outcry over it is largely nonexistent. The trauma is reported on, but selectively, while the full extent of the civilian catastrophe is hidden from view.

For instance, The New York Times dedicated only two major stories to the offensive this month, yet flooded its pages with heartrending stories during the siege of Aleppo. In addition, coalition actions in Mosul that result in civilian casualties, like the destruction of hospital complexes, are depicted as justified or unintentional, compared to the portrayal of Syrian and Russian strikes in east Aleppo as intentional war crimes when similar complexes were hit or civilians killed.

Similarly, justifications for civilian suffering – scoffed at and ridiculed when made by Russia and Syria – are used without irony or shame to defend U.S. actions. Whereas the West’s media treated civilians in Aleppo as the targeted victims of the Russian-Syrian attacks, civilians in Mosul are described as “human shield” victims of Islamic State terrorists who also hoard food supplies and prevent civilians from escaping.

This is not to say that these accusations against the Islamic State are false, but similar Russian-Syrian claims against the Al Qaeda-dominated rebels in east Aleppo were brushed aside as lies and propaganda.

A Dire Situation

Without doubt, the conditions on the ground in ISIS-held western Mosul are dire. Aid groups warn that the situation has been deteriorating rapidly following a U.S.-backed coalition airstrike that destroyed the last remaining bridge leading out of the city, trapping the population and preventing supplies from entering. The coalition justified the attack as necessary to cut off ISIS from supply lines, but that also had drastic humanitarian implications.

“Humanitarian conditions in the west of the city are deteriorating after supply routes were cut off in November when the east of the city was recaptured,” Oxfam reported. “An estimated 750,000 people are trapped in western Mosul without any safe means of escape from the latest military offensive.”

The result is that “up to 750,000 people in western Mosul city are estimated to

remain largely inaccessible to humanitarians," the U.N. warned, while "serious concerns remain for the protection of civilians in the west of the city, where food, water, medicine and fuel are running low."

Patrick Cockburn, one of the few honest Western journalists reporting on the region, noted that "already shelling and airstrikes are causing heavy casualties among families sheltering in cellars or beneath the stairs in their houses."

Writing for Middle East Eye, Nafeez Ahmed quoted Ross Caputi, a Marine veteran of the Iraq War, describing "horror stories about civilian casualties coming out of Mosul. An aid worker friend of mine was trying to recruit volunteer doctors to work in a surgical unit in Erbil, where many of the more serious cases were being redirected. She told me that the situation is worse than it's being portrayed in the media."

Even more startling is evidence that the first week of March was characterized by a severe rise in civilian deaths as a result of U.S.-coalition actions, at the same time when major news outlets had drastically reduced coverage on the topic.

"The US-led coalition fighting the Islamic State may have killed hundreds of civilians" in the first week of March alone, according to open source data compiled by Airwars, which estimates that "between 250 and 370 civilians have been killed" since March 1. Nafeez Ahmed explained this is "exponentially higher than the US count of just 21 civilian deaths from bombing since November 2016."

Yet, instead of highlighting the humanitarian crisis and placing blame on U.S. and Iraqi forces for the misery, the Western media has portrayed the operation as assiduously avoiding harm to civilians. For example, the coalition strike severing the bridge was described as a victory against ISIS, while the humanitarian implications were downplayed or ignored.

One report described the destruction of the bridge as "a historic setback for the Islamic State as the terror group loses its grip on its Iraqi hub of Mosul," with no mention of the harm to civilians. Another stated "American-led airstrikes damaged all five bridges last year in a bid to isolate the militants in Mosul."

At least one of the ruined bridges was captured recently by Iraqi government forces. But U.S. Air Force Col. (and spokesman for the coalition) John Dorrian made it clear that bridges would be fully repaired "only after defeating ISIS," choosing to intensify the humanitarian crisis by continuing a debilitating siege on the almost one million residents who are trapped.

Perhaps the destruction of bridges and siege warfare are warranted to isolate

and defeat the Islamic State, yet when main news outlets deliberately hide the humanitarian implications of such actions and portray them merely as military victories without connection to the human suffering, they are engaged in manipulation of public perceptions which mobilizes support for state actions rather than objectively informing public opinion of the reality of the situation.

Stephen Gowanz summed up the nature of this media bias: “the United States and its allies have been practicing siege warfare in the Levant and beyond for years, and continue to do so. It’s just that US-led siege warfare has been concealed behind anodyne, even heroic, labels, while the siege warfare of countries Washington is hostile to, is abominated by Western state officials crying crocodile tears.”

Manufactured Consent

The reason for this hypocrisy is that the primary function of mass media in “free societies” is to serve as a system of propaganda. Under this “propaganda model” view of the media, one would expect Western coverage of the Mosul crisis to take for granted that the U.S. is carrying out its efforts in the service of benevolent ideals, with the goal of defending civilians from aggression and terrorism while making painstaking efforts to limit casualties.

On the other hand, in the Aleppo case, one would expect Western media to act in the opposite fashion, taking for granted that civilian lives are treated with contempt and that motives are inherently suspicious or malevolent, while context and rational understanding of actions are marginalized or disregarded altogether.

When comparing coverage of these two stories, we see that this is exactly what you find, namely indignation directed at “enemy” military operations over civilian suffering and sympathy for U.S. and allied military assaults with the civilian casualties downplayed or rationalized.

Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky explain in their extensive study on media propaganda, *Manufacturing Consent*, that “while this differential treatment occurs on a large scale, the media, intellectuals, and public are able to remain unconscious of the fact and maintain a high moral and self-righteous tone. This is evidence of an extremely effective propaganda system.”

The question is *how* does this occur when the news media is not openly controlled by a state bureaucracy as in a totalitarian system but nonetheless achieves similar outcomes. An institutional analysis reveals that there exist various factors inherent within the structure of the media which essentially serve as a

filter which sifts out inconvenient facts while propagating other information that is in accordance with the interests of the institution.

The basic structure of Western media is that the outlets themselves are powerful corporations with a profit-making goal. The product that they are selling are audiences, mostly wealthier and privileged people, as consumers of advertisements paid for by other major corporations. Given this reality, it's not surprising that the news product reflects a worldview that is in alignment with corporate interests and prejudices, such as the military defense contractors and the military itself whose ads line the pages of major Western journals and consume significant ad time on TV.

It is in the interests of these pro-military entities for audiences to get a positive image of the U.S. military while creating an adverse image for foreign villains who can be collectively despised. It's also understood that American audiences want to feel good about what the U.S. military is doing abroad, rather than being challenged with unpleasant truths.

Herman and Chomsky explain that this phenomenon of slanted reporting "is normally not accomplished by crude intervention, but by the selection of right-thinking personnel and by the editors' and working journalists' internalization of priorities and definitions of news-worthiness that conform to the institutions policy."

The result is an extremely skewed media picture, which is determined by which side of the geopolitical struggle certain actions occur. In the cases of Mosul and Aleppo, the similarities of the tragedies that have devastated the two cities serve to further highlight the very dissimilar way in which the two stories have been reported.

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The Kagans Are Back; Wars to Follow

Exclusive: The neocon royalty Kagans are counting on Democrats and liberals to be the foot soldiers in the new neocon campaign to push Republicans and President Trump into more "regime change" wars, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The Kagan family, America's neoconservative aristocracy, has reemerged having recovered from the letdown over not gaining its expected influence from the election of Hillary Clinton and from its loss of official power at the start of the Trump presidency.

Back pontificating on prominent op-ed pages, the Family Kagan now is pushing for an expanded U.S. military invasion of Syria and baiting Republicans for not joining more enthusiastically in the anti-Russian witch hunt over Moscow's alleged help in electing Donald Trump.

In a Washington Post op-ed on March 7, Robert Kagan, a co-founder of the Project for the New American Century and a key architect of the Iraq War, jabbed at Republicans for serving as "Russia's accomplices after the fact" by not investigating more aggressively.

Then, Frederick Kagan, director of the Critical Threats Project at the neocon American Enterprise Institute, and his wife, Kimberly Kagan, president of her own think tank, Institute for the Study of War, touted the idea of a bigger U.S. invasion of Syria in a Wall Street Journal op-ed on March 15.

Yet, as much standing as the Kagans retain in Official Washington's world of think tanks and op-ed placements, they remain mostly outside the new Trump-era power centers looking in, although they seem to have detected a door being forced open.

Still, a year ago, their prospects looked much brighter. They could pick from a large field of neocon-oriented Republican presidential contenders or – like Robert Kagan – they could support the establishment Democratic candidate, Hillary Clinton, whose "liberal interventionism" matched closely with neoconservatism, differing only slightly in the rationalizations used for justifying wars and more wars.

There was also hope that a President Hillary Clinton would recognize how sympatico the liberal hawks and the neocons were by promoting Robert Kagan's neocon wife, Victoria Nuland, from Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs to Secretary of State.

Then, there would have been a powerful momentum for both increasing the U.S. military intervention in Syria and escalating the New Cold War with Russia, putting "regime change" back on the agenda for those two countries. So, early last year, the possibilities seemed endless for the Family Kagan to flex their muscles and make lots of money.

A Family Business

As I noted two years ago in an article entitled "A Family Business of Perpetual War": "Neoconservative pundit Robert Kagan and his wife, Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland, run a remarkable family business: she has sparked a hot war in Ukraine and helped launch Cold War II with Russia and he steps in to demand that Congress jack up military spending so America can meet these new security threats.

"This extraordinary husband-and-wife duo makes quite a one-two punch for the Military-Industrial Complex, an inside-outside team that creates the need for more military spending, applies political pressure to ensure higher appropriations, and watches as thankful weapons manufacturers lavish grants on like-minded hawkish Washington think tanks.

"Not only does the broader community of neoconservatives stand to benefit but so do other members of the Kagan clan, including Robert's brother Frederick at the American Enterprise Institute and his wife Kimberly, who runs her own shop called the Institute for the Study of War."

But things didn't quite turn out as the Kagans had drawn them up. The neocon Republicans stumbled through the GOP primaries losing out to Donald Trump and then – after Hillary Clinton muscled aside Sen. Bernie Sanders to claim the Democratic nomination – she fumbled away the general election to Trump.

After his surprising victory, Trump – for all his many shortcomings – recognized that the neocons were not his friends and mostly left them out in the cold. Nuland not only lost her politically appointed job as Assistant Secretary but resigned from the Foreign Service, too.

With Trump in the White House, Official Washington's neocon-dominated foreign policy establishment was down but far from out. The neocons were tossed a lifeline by Democrats and liberals who detested Trump so much that they were happy to pick up Nuland's fallen banner of the New Cold War with Russia. As part of a dubious scheme to drive Trump from office, Democrats and liberals hyped evidence-free allegations that Russia had colluded with Trump's team to rig the U.S. election.

New York Times columnist Thomas L. Friedman spoke for many of this group when he compared Russia's alleged "meddling" to Japan's bombing of Pearl Harbor and Al Qaeda's 9/11 terror attacks.

On MSNBC's "Morning Joe" show, Friedman demanded that the Russia hacking allegations be treated as a casus belli: "That was a 9/11 scale event. They attacked the core of our democracy. That was a Pearl Harbor scale event." Both

Pearl Harbor and 9/11 led to wars.

So, with many liberals blinded by their hatred of Trump, the path was open for neocons to reassert themselves.

Baiting Republicans

Robert Kagan took to the high-profile op-ed page of The Washington Post to bait key Republicans, such as Rep. Devin Nunes, chairman of the House Intelligence Committee who was pictured above the Post article and its headline, "Running interference for Russia."

Kagan wrote: "It would have been impossible to imagine a year ago that the Republican Party's leaders would be effectively serving as enablers of Russian interference in this country's political system. Yet, astonishingly, that is the role the Republican Party is playing."

Kagan then reprised Official Washington's groupthink that accepted without skepticism the claims from President Obama's outgoing intelligence chiefs that Russia had "hacked" Democratic emails and released them via WikiLeaks to embarrass the Clinton campaign.

Though Obama's intelligence officials offered no verifiable evidence to support the claims – and WikiLeaks denied getting the two batches of emails from the Russians – the allegations were widely accepted across Official Washington as grounds for discrediting Trump and possibly seeking his removal from office.

Ignoring the political conflict of interest for Obama's appointees, Kagan judged that "given the significance of this particular finding [about Russian meddling], the evidence must be compelling" and justified "a serious, wide-ranging and open investigation."

But Kagan also must have recognized the potential for the neocons to claw their way back to power behind the smokescreen of a New Cold War with Russia.

He declared: "The most important question concerns Russia's ability to manipulate U.S. elections. That is not a political issue. It is a national security issue. If the Russian government did interfere in the United States' electoral processes last year, then it has the capacity to do so in every election going forward. This is a powerful and dangerous weapon, more than warships or tanks or bombers.

"Neither Russia nor any potential adversary has the power to damage the U.S. political system with weapons of war. But by creating doubts about the validity, integrity and reliability of U.S. elections, it can shake that system to its

foundations.”

A Different Reality

As alarmist as Kagan’s op-ed was, the reality was far different. Even if the Russians did hack the Democratic emails and somehow slipped the information to WikiLeaks – an unsubstantiated and disputed contention – those two rounds of email disclosures were not that significant to the election’s outcome.

Hillary Clinton blamed her surprise defeat on FBI Director James Comey briefly reopening the investigation into her use of a private email server while serving as Secretary of State.

Further, by all accounts, the WikiLeaks-released emails were real and revealed wrongdoing by leading Democrats, such as the Democratic National Committee’s tilting of the primaries against Sen. Bernie Sanders and in favor of Clinton. The emails of Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta disclosed the contents of Clinton’s paid speeches to Wall Street, which she was trying to hide from voters, as well as some pay-to-play features of the Clinton Foundation.

In other words, the WikiLeaks’ releases helped inform American voters about abuses to the U.S. democratic process. The emails were not “disinformation” or “fake news.” They were real news.

A similar disclosure occurred both before the election and this week when someone leaked details about Trump’s tax returns, which are protected by law. However, except for the Trump camp, almost no one thought that this illegal act of releasing a citizen’s tax returns was somehow a threat to American democracy.

The general feeling was that Americans have a right to know such details about someone seeking the White House. I agree, but doesn’t it equally follow that we had a right to know about the DNC abusing its power to grease the skids for Clinton’s nomination, about the contents of Clinton’s speeches to Wall Street bankers, and about foreign governments seeking pay-to-play influence by contributing to the Clinton Foundation?

Yet, because Obama’s political appointees in the U.S. intelligence community “assess” that Russia was the source of the WikiLeaks emails, the assault on U.S. democracy is a reason for World War III.

More Loose Talk

But Kagan was not satisfied with unsubstantiated accusations regarding Russia undermining U.S. democracy. He asserted as “fact” – although again without presenting evidence – that Russia is “interfering in the coming elections in

France and Germany, and it has already interfered in Italy's recent referendum and in numerous other elections across Europe. Russia is deploying this weapon against as many democracies as it can to sap public confidence in democratic institutions."

There's been a lot of handwringing in Official Washington and across the Mainstream Media about the "post-truth" era, but these supposed avatars for truth are as guilty as anyone, acting as if constantly repeating a fact-free claim is the same as proving it.

But it's clear what Kagan and other neocons have in mind, an escalation of hostilities with Russia and a substantial increase in spending on U.S. military hardware and on Western propaganda to "counter" what is deemed "Russian propaganda."

Kagan recognizes that he already has many key Democrats and liberals on his side. So he is taking aim at Republicans to force them to join in the full-throated Russia-bashing, writing:

"But it is the Republicans who are covering up. The party's current leader, the president, questions the intelligence community's findings, motives and integrity. Republican leaders in Congress have opposed the creation of any special investigating committee, either inside or outside Congress. They have insisted that inquiries be conducted by the two intelligence committees.

"Yet the Republican chairman of the committee in the House has indicated that he sees no great urgency to the investigation and has even questioned the seriousness and validity of the accusations. The Republican chairman of the committee in the Senate has approached the task grudgingly.

"The result is that the investigations seem destined to move slowly, produce little information and provide even less to the public. It is hard not to conclude that this is precisely the intent of the Republican Party's leadership, both in the White House and Congress. ...

"When Republicans stand in the way of thorough, open and immediate investigations, they become Russia's accomplices after the fact."

Lying with the Neocons

Many Democrats and liberals may find it encouraging that a leading neocon who helped pave the road to war in Iraq is now by their side in running down Republicans for not enthusiastically joining the latest Russian witch hunt. But they also might pause to ask themselves how they let their hatred of Trump get them into an alliance with the neocons.

On Wednesday in The Wall Street Journal, Robert Kagan's brother Frederick and his wife Kimberly dropped the other shoe, laying out the neocons' long-held dream of a full-scale U.S. invasion of Syria, a project that was put on hold in 2004 because of U.S. military reversals in Iraq.

But the neocons have long lusted for "regime change" in Syria and were not satisfied with Obama's arming of anti-government rebels and the limited infiltration of U.S. Special Forces into northern Syria to assist in the retaking of the Islamic State's "capital" of Raqqa.

In the Journal op-ed, Frederick and Kimberly Kagan call for opening a new military front in southeastern Syria:

"American military forces will be necessary. But the U.S. can recruit new Sunni Arab partners by fighting alongside them in their land. The goal in the beginning must be against ISIS because it controls the last areas in Syria where the U.S. can reasonably hope to find Sunni allies not yet under the influence of al Qaeda. But the aim after evicting ISIS must be to raise a Sunni Arab army that can ultimately defeat al Qaeda and help negotiate a settlement of the war.

"The U.S. will have to pressure the Assad regime, Iran and Russia to end the conflict on terms that the Sunni Arabs will accept. That will be easier to do with the independence and leverage of a secure base inside Syria. ... President Trump should break through the flawed logic and poor planning that he inherited from his predecessor. He can transform this struggle, but only by transforming America's approach to it."

A New Scheme on Syria

In other words, the neocons are back to their clever word games and their strategic maneuverings to entice the U.S. military into a "regime change" project in Syria.

The neocons thought they had almost pulled off that goal by pinning a mysterious sarin gas attack outside Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013, on the Syrian government and mousetrapping Obama into launching a major U.S. air assault on the Syrian military.

But Russian President Vladimir Putin stepped in to arrange for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to surrender all his chemical weapons even as Assad continued to deny any role in the sarin attack.

Putin's interference in thwarting the neocons' dream of a Syrian "regime change" war moved Putin to the top of their enemies' list. Soon key neocons, such as National Endowment for Democracy president Carl Gershman, were taking aim at

Ukraine, which Gershman deemed “the biggest prize” and a steppingstone toward eventually ousting Putin in Moscow.

It fell to Assistant Secretary Victoria “Toria” Nuland to oversee the “regime change” in Ukraine. She was caught on an unsecured phone line in late January or early February 2014 discussing with U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt how “to glue” or “to midwife” a change in Ukraine’s elected government of President Viktor Yanukovich.

Several weeks later, neo-Nazi and ultranationalist street fighters spearheaded a violent assault on government buildings forcing Yanukovich and other officials to flee for their lives, with the U.S. government quickly hailing the coup regime as “legitimate.”

But the Ukraine putsch led to the secession of Crimea and a bloody civil war in eastern Ukraine with ethnic Russians, events that the State Department and the mainstream Western media deemed “Russian aggression” or a “Russian invasion.”

So, by the last years of the Obama administration, the stage was set for the neocons and the Family Kagan to lead the next stage of the strategy of cornering Russia and instituting a “regime change” in Syria.

All that was needed was for Hillary Clinton to be elected president. But these best-laid plans surprisingly went astray. Despite his overall unfitness for the presidency, Trump defeated Clinton, a bitter disappointment for the neocons and their liberal interventionist sidekicks.

Yet, the so-called “#Resistance” to Trump’s presidency and President Obama’s unprecedented use of his intelligence agencies to paint Trump as a Russian “Manchurian candidate” gave new hope to the neocons and their agenda.

It has taken them a few months to reorganize and regroup but they now see hope in pressuring Trump so hard regarding Russia that he will have little choice but to buy into their belligerent schemes.

As often is the case, the Family Kagan has charted the course of action – batter Republicans into joining the all-out Russia-bashing and then persuade a softened Trump to launch a full-scale invasion of Syria. In this endeavor, the Kagans have Democrats and liberals as the foot soldiers.

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).

A Flawed UN Investigation on Syria

Exclusive: U.N. investigators increasingly make their conclusions fall in line with Western propaganda, especially on the war in Syria, as occurred in a distorted report about last year's attack on an aid convoy, explains Gareth Porter.

By Gareth Porter

The March 1 report by the United Nations' "Independent International Commission of Inquiry" asserted that the bloody attack on a humanitarian aid convoy west of Aleppo City on Sept. 19, 2016, was an airstrike by Syrian government planes. But an analysis of the U.N. panel's report shows that it was based on an account of the attack from the pro-rebel Syrian "White Helmets" civil defense organization that was full of internal contradictions.

The U.N. account also was not supported by either the photographic evidence that the White Helmets provided or by satellite imagery that was available to the commission, according to independent experts. Further undermining the U.N. report's credibility, the White Helmets now acknowledge that rockets they photographed were not fired from Russian or Syrian planes but from the ground.

Like last December's summary of the U.N.'s Headquarters Board of Inquiry report on the same incident, the Commission's report described the attack as having begun with "barrel bombs" dropped by Syrian helicopters, followed by further bombing by fixed-wing planes and, finally, strafing by machine guns from the air.

The March 1 report did not identify any specific source for its narrative, citing only "[c]ommunications from governments and non-government organizations." But in fact the U.N. investigators accepted the version of events provided by the White Helmets chief in Aleppo province as well as specific evidence that the White Helmets had made public.

The White Helmets, which are heavily funded by Western governments and operate only in rebel-controlled areas, are famous for using social media to upload videos purporting to show injured children and other civilian victims of the war.

Last year, a well-organized campaign pushed the group's nomination for a Nobel Peace Prize and a Netflix film about the group won an Oscar last month. The United Nations and the mainstream Western news media have frequently relied on White Helmets accounts from war zones that are not accessible to outsiders. But

the White Helmets' officials have pursued an obvious political agenda in support of opposition forces in Al Qaeda-dominated zones in Aleppo and Idlib where they have operated.

On Sept. 19, immediately after the attack on the aid convoy, the chief of the White Helmets organization in the Aleppo governorate, Ammar al-Selmo, presented a dramatic narrative of a Russian-Syrian air attack, but it was marked by obvious internal contradictions.

At first, Selmo claimed in an interview that he had been more than a kilometer away from the warehouses where the attack occurred and had seen Syrian helicopters dropping "barrel bombs" on the site. But his eyewitness account would have been impossible because it was already dark by the time he said the attack began at about 7:15 p.m. He changed his story in a later interview, claiming that he had been right across the street at the moment of the attack and had heard the "barrel bombs" being dropped rather than seeing them.

Selmo insisted in a video filmed that night that the attack began with Syrian helicopters dropping eight "barrel bombs," which are described as large, crudely constructed bombs weighing from 250 kg to 500 kg or even more. Citing a box-shaped indentation in the rubble, Selmo said the video is showing "the box of the barrel bomb," but the indentation is far too small to be a crater from such a bomb.

Selmo continued the account, "Then the regime also target this place with cluster bombs two times, and also the aircraft of the Russians target this place with C-5 and with bullets," apparently referring to Soviet-era S-5 rockets. The White Helmets photographed two such rockets and sent it to media outlets, including the Washington Post, which published the picture in the Post story with credit to the White Helmets.

Story Contradictions

But Hussein Badawi, apparently the White Helmet official in charge of the Urum al Kubrah area, contradicted Selmo's story. In a separate interview, Badawi said the attack had begun not with "barrel bombs" but with "four consecutive rockets" that he said had been launched by government forces from their defense plant in Aleppo province – meaning that it was a ground-launched attack rather than an air attack.

In an email response to a query from me, Selmo retracted his own original claim about the S-5 rockets. "[B]efore aircraft's attack on the area," he wrote, "many land to land missiles attacked the place coming from the defense factories which [are] located in eastern Aleppo [east of] the city, regime controlled area.

[T]hen aircraft came and attacked the place.”

But such a rocket attack from that “regime controlled area” would not have been technically possible. The Syrian government defense plant is located in Safira, 25 kilometers southeast of Aleppo City and even farther from Urum al-Kubrah, whereas the S-5 rockets that the White Helmets photographed have a range of only three or four kilometers.

Moreover, the Russians and Syrian government forces were not the only warring parties to have S-5s in their arsenal. According to a study of the S-5 rocket by Armament Research Services consultancy, Syrian armed opposition forces had been using S-5 rockets as well. They had gotten them from the CIA’s covert program of moving weapons from Libyan government stockpiles to be distributed to Syrian rebels beginning in late 2011 or early 2012. Syrian rebels had used improvised launch systems to fire them, as the ARS study documented with a picture.

Significantly, too, the explicit claim by Selmo that Russian planes were involved in the attack, which was immediately echoed by the Pentagon, was summarily dismissed by the U.N. panel report, which stated flatly, without further explanation, that “no Russian strike aircraft were nearby during the attack.”

Misplaced Evidence

Yet, despite the multiple discrepancies in the White Helmets’ story, the U.N. investigators said they corroborated the account of the air attack “by a site assessment, including analysis of remnants of aerial bombs and rockets documented at the site, as well as satellite imagery showing impact consistent with the use of air-delivered munitions.”

The U.N. Commission’s report cited a photograph of the crumpled tailfin of a Russian OFAB-250 bomb found under some boxes in a warehouse as evidence that it had been used in the attack. The White Helmets took the photograph and circulated it to the news media, including to the Washington Post and to the Bellingcat website, which specializes in countering Russia’s claims about its operations in Syria.

But that bomb could not have exploded in that spot because it would have made a crater many times larger than the small indentation in the floor in the White Helmet photo – as shown in this video of a man standing in the crater of a similar bomb in Palmyra.

Something other than an OFAB-250 bomb – such as an S-5 rocket – had caused the fine shrapnel tears in the boxes shown in the photo, as a detail from the larger scene reveals. So the OFAB bomb tailfin must have been placed at the scene after

the attack.

Both U.N. imagery analysts and independent experts who examined the satellite images found that the impact craters could not have come from the “aerial bombs” cited by the Commission.

The analysis of the satellite images by United Nations specialists at UNITAR-UNOSAT made public by the U.N. Office of Humanitarian Coordination on March 1 further contradicts the White Helmet account, reflecting the absence of any evidence of either “barrel bombs” or OFAB-250 bombs dropped on the site.

The U.N. analysts identified four spots in the images on pages five and six of their report as “possible impact craters.” But a U.N. source familiar with their analysis of the images told me that it had ruled out the possibility that those impact points could have been caused by either “barrel bombs” or Russian OFAB-250 bombs.

The reason, the U.N. source said, was that such bombs would have left much larger craters than those found in the images. Those possible impact points could have been either from much smaller air-launched munitions or from ground-based artillery or mortar fire, but not from either of those weapons, according to the U.N. source.

Expert Challenges

A former U.S. intelligence official with long experience in analysis of aerial photos and Pierre Sprey, a former Pentagon analyst, both of whom reviewed the satellite images, agreed that the spots identified by UNOSAT could not have been from either “barrel bombs” or OFAB-250 bombs.

The former intelligence official, who demanded anonymity because he still deals with government officials, said the small impact points identified by the U.N. team reminded him of impacts from “a multiple rocket launcher or possibly a mortar.”

Sprey agreed that all of those impact points could have been from artillery or mortar fire but also noted that photographs of the trucks and other damaged vehicles show no evidence that they were hit by an airstrike. The photos show only extensive fire damage and, in the case of one car, holes of irregular size and shape, he said, suggesting flying debris rather than bomb shrapnel.

Sprey further pointed to photographic evidence indicating that an explosion that the U.N. Commission blamed on a Syrian airstrike came from within the building itself, not from an external blast. The building across the street from some of the trucks destroyed by an explosion (in Figure 9 of a series of photos on the

Bellingcat website) clearly shows that the front wall of the building was blown outward toward the road, whereas the rear wall and the roof were still intact.

The photograph (in Figure 10) taken from inside the remains of that same building shows the debris from the blast was blown all the way across the street to the damaged truck. Sprey said those pictures strongly suggest that an IED (improvised explosive device) had been set in the house to explode toward the trucks.

In embracing the Syrian-air-strike narrative – although it falls apart on closer examination – the U.N. “Commission of Inquiry” thus fell into line with the dominant Western political bias in favor of the armed opposition to the Syrian government, a prejudice that has been applied to the Syrian conflict by U.N. organs since the beginning of the war in 2011.

But never has the evidence so clearly contradicted that line as it has in this case – even though you will not learn that by reading or watching the West’s commercial news media.

Gareth Porter is an independent investigative journalist and winner of the 2012 Gellhorn Prize for journalism. He is the author of the newly published *Manufactured Crisis: The Untold Story of the Iran Nuclear Scare*.

An Oscar for a Propaganda Flick

Hollywood activists prefer their human rights causes blessed by the U.S. government, which contributed to the dubious Oscar for “The White Helmets” propaganda flick, writes Patrick Hennigsen at 21st Century Wire.

By Patrick Hennigsen

In your average lifetime, everyone will get to see his or her share of war propaganda films. In America, it’s a kind of sacred tradition, where Hollywood does the job of revisionism, paving over an otherwise uncomfortable history with a new coat of stain. It’s necessary – not just to make us feel better about ourselves, but also to cover-up any inconvenient truths and high crimes of the

state.



To be honest, when I first heard about “The White Helmets” film being promoted by Netflix, I wasn’t surprised at all because ever since the Syria conflict began in 2011, the establishment media has gone out of its way to falsely promote it as a “civil war” and have used the NGO known as the White Helmets, which calls itself the “Syria Civil Defense,” as its primary media protagonist in furthering that narrative.

The fact that a documentary about *The White Helmets* received an Oscar simply confirms what a glorious bubble the entertainment industry resides in, and how easy it is these days for a documentary film to be used for the purposes of propaganda and made to reinforce a mainly U.S.-U.K. foreign policy project.

To Hollywood, it’s a feel-good documentary, designed to make us feel good about a dirty war in Syria. But this is a level of distortion that would make even Joseph Goebbels’s head spin.

In his essay published at Global Research, Dr. T.P. Wilkinson explains the liberal obsession with cosmetic revisionism: “The ‘wrong war’ thesis is elemental to what Carroll Quigley called ‘liberal imperialism’ in his history of the Anglo-American establishment. Liberal imperialists, to which the *faux gauche* (the descendants of Fabianism) also belong, do not oppose empire. They simply want it to be more aesthetically appealing, and lost wars are most un-aesthetic. So what is the liberal imperialist’s answer to unappetizing military defeats? It is cosmetic surgery.”

Expensive war propaganda in Hollywood is nothing new. High-profile films like “Zero Dark Thirty,” “American Sniper” and “Argo” were all released to much fanfare. Each of them fulfilled a role in forming a more perfect American narrative, and in some cases completely rewrote history altogether. But these were meant to be theatrical releases so naturally there’s a generous dose of artistic license taken by the director. Nothing unusual there. It’s what Hollywood does. These films also had some distance between the present day and wars which had already lapsed.

A veneer of integrity is always important. Hollywood still purports to put a lot of currency in the truth. During this year's Oscars, *The New York Times* ran a TV ad for the first time since 2010 entitled, "*The truth is. . .*" This campaign is meant to decry *fake news* and its ugly cousin "alternative facts" to show what high standards the mainstream media has – which demonstrates the delusional world the in which the establishment exists.

Earlier this month, I wrote an exposé showing exactly how the *New York Times* has been America's perennial leader in running fake news for the purposes of advancing a war agenda. It's ironic that this Times advertisement would run on a night when an Oscar would be given to one of the most egregious propaganda films of all time.

Happy Hollywood

Last Sunday night, "The White Helmets," directed by Orlando von Einsiedel and Joanna Natasegara, took home an Academy Award for best documentary short. But this was not a conventional documentary film. The footage was provided by a terrorist-affiliated NGO based in Turkey, operating in Syria, and which is primarily funded by the U.S. State Department, the British Foreign Office, the Netherlands, and other NATO members and Gulf states to the tune of over \$150 million and whose chief remit is producing U.S.-led "coalition" propaganda images for mass media consumption. The film, funded and distributed by Netflix, seems to be an extension of that remit. [Watch the film's trailer [here](#).]

Normally we think of documentaries as films that are supposed to speak *truth to power*, but this film does the opposite. It reinforces an Anglo-American establishment power structure responsible for one of the most violent, dirty wars in modern history. It reinforces a collection of lies placed on heavy rotation by the political and media establishments since the conflict began.

In every way, Syria is the *wrong* war. However, for the U.S. and the U.K., there's much at stake – the legacies of two paradigmatic political figures, Barack Obama and David Cameron, along with the reputations of other architects of the West's dirty war on Syria, like former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and British Foreign Minister William Hague.

Back when the war was getting started, both Clinton and Hague were busy front-running their "Friends of Syria" whistle-stop tour around the Middle East and Europe, securing Gulf cash commitments while grooming their hand-picked "opposition" government-in-exile, holding court in various five-star hotels in Paris, London and Istanbul.

The U.S. had tried this only a year earlier with Libya, and at the time in

2011-2012, they had every reason to believe that the Libyan formula could be repeated in Syria. Those hopes were dashed by early 2013, when it became apparent that Libya was officially a failed state.

Meanwhile, tens of thousands of extremist foreign fighters and jihadi soldiers of fortune began pouring into Syria. It was an invasion. This was the West's proxy army, ready to decapitate the government, dismember the state and destabilize the region – with the full blessing of Washington D.C. and its partners.

The Troika of Washington-London-Paris then doubled down by pouring billions of dollars in lethal weapons to various fighting groups laying in wait in Turkey and Jordan, as well as those already active in Syria. There were a number of well-documented arrangements, but one of the most successful working models was for the CIA and its European NATO partners illegally supplying the weapons funneled through Jordan and Turkey – and all paid for by Saudi, Qatari cash.

All the while, the public was told by the U.S.-led “Coalition” all of this was for the “moderate rebels” in Syria. These were meant to be the “freedom fighters” that Ronald Reagan referred to back in the 1980s. As it turned out, these “freedom fighters” in Syria were a chip off the old block from the violent, psychopathic U.S.-backed and CIA-trained paramilitary death squads, which would wreak havoc and terrorize El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras.

In Syria, they are much worse in fact, as they employed a potent brand of warped, radical Salafi and Wahabist religious fervor as the central axis of their self-styled, Medieval nihilistic raison d'être. Yes, these are the moderates, backed by the U.S., U.K., France, Turkey, Germany, Norway, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE, every other NATO member state, and of course, Israel, which has skillfully stayed out of the media firing line. It's a collective project. The mission: “regime change” in Syria – to overthrow by force – the government in Damascus.

As dirty wars go, none is filthier than this one. As the U.S. and the U.K. ran point on public relations for this criminal enterprise, their big challenge was selling it to their electorates. In order to justify the dirty war, a narrative had to be constructed and maintained. This required a relentless negative public relations campaign demonizing the Syrian government and all of its agencies. The following original talking points were therefore reinforced:

–Syria's peaceful “Arab Spring” uprising happened in 2011, and was violently squashed by the government.

–Assad is a brutal dictator, and is illegitimate.

–The Syrian government and its armed forces are deliberately killing their own people.

–The U.S.-NATO and Gulf-backed armed “rebel” opposition is legitimate.

–Syrian and Russian Airforce are only killing civilians, and not militant and terrorists.

–Terrorists do not exist in Syria or are only a tiny element opposed by the “moderate rebels” and other Syrians “fighting for freedom.”

–Therefore, Assad must be removed from power and replaced with a U.S.-approved government.

Add to this, the entrance of Russia in the fall of 2015 at the lawful invitation of Damascus, and Russia was added to the demonization campaign.

These talking points were then repeated and recycled, over and over, and held up as justification for U.S.-led, crippling economic and diplomatic sanction against the Syrian state and the destructive policy of flooding the region with arms.

In the summer of 2014, an added bonus for the U.S. was inserted into the mix – the emergence of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Sham). The appearance of ISIS allowed the U.S. to fly air sorties over Syria, allegedly to fight ISIS, although after two years the U.S. had produced little if any verifiable progress in “defeating” ISIS. In truth, the U.S. had hoped that ISIS, along with the other Al Qaeda affiliates, would somehow do the job of destabilizing Syria and overthrowing the government of President Bashar al-Assad in Damascus.

Meanwhile, on-script Western media operatives and politicians alike still referred to the jihadists as “rebels” and “armed opposition” – violent radical terrorist groups like Jabbat al Nusra (Nusra Front), Ahrar al Sham, Nour al-Din al-Zinki, Jaish al-Fatah (The Army of Conquest), along with some radical remnants of Sen. John McCain’s beloved “Free Syrian Army.” This was all part of the public relations con.

The ‘White Helmets’

But that wasn’t enough. Washington and London needed a face for the evening news. They needed to *personalize* the conflict in order to help maintain the illusion of a “civil war” in Syria. This is where the White Helmets come in. A merry band of men, comprised of “ordinary citizens, from bakers to teachers to painters,” all donning the White Helmets to save humanity in this moment of

turmoil.

Raed Saleh, the group's spokesman, says his organization is guided by a verse in the Qu'ran: "To save *one* life is to save all of humanity." No doubt a beautiful line, but like so many aspects of the White Helmets – it's been applied cosmetically.

Who would dare be so insensitive as to challenge such a perfect story? For war planners in Washington and London, the White Helmets provided the P.R. cushion they needed to help sell a filthy proxy war to Western audiences. By creating and managing their own "first responder" NGO, the U.S., U.K. and its other stakeholder partners have been able to leverage public sympathies – enough to keep the project going, until the war was either won or lost, or until someone caught on to the scam.

In 2014, a number of independent researchers in the West began to detect the White Helmets' unmistakable stench of dupery. Cory Morningstar's article, "SYRIA: AVAAZ, PURPOSE & THE ART OF SELLING HATE FOR EMPIRE" (April 2014). In an article in *Counterpunch* in April 2015, Rick Sterling summarized the White Helmet roll-out and basic agenda: "In reality the White Helmets is a project created by the UK and USA. Training of civilians in Turkey has been overseen by former British military officer and current contractor, James Le Mesurier. Promotion of the program is done by 'The Syria Campaign' supported by the foundation of billionaire Ayman Asfari. The White Helmets is clearly a public relations project which has received glowing publicity from HuffPo to Nicholas Kristof at the NYT. White Helmets have been heavily promoted by the U.S. Institute of Peace (U.S.I.P.) whose leader began the press conference by declaring 'U.S.I.P. has been working for the Syrian Revolution from the beginning.'"

There was also the work of researcher Petri Krohn's notable wiki site "A Closer Look at Syria," which cracked the facade. They were followed by extensive investigations by Vanessa Beeley who has since produced a formidable volume of research and analysis on the White Helmets and other similar NGO projects, all of which are readily available on *21st Century Wire*.

Any researcher working on a White Helmets documentary would have had access to all of this information, through a simple key word search.

Interestingly, mainstream media defenders of the White Helmets such as Michael Weiss, a senior fellow at NATO's own propaganda think tank the Atlantic Council, as well as editor at the dubious *Daily Beast*, claim that criticism of the White Helmets is a Russian plot organized by Putin himself. Weiss's conspiracy theory is expected considering his employer's affiliation, but such typical hyperbolic accusations belie the fact that the first individuals to expose this pseudo NGO

are not Russian, but rather independent writers and researchers from the U.S., Canada and Great Britain and why not – because it's *their* tax dollars that are funding the White Helmets.

It's also worth noting that in December 2016 when the Nusra terrorist hold over East Aleppo was collapsing, it was Michael Weiss who was responsible for circulating bogus reports, including that women in East Aleppo were committing "mass suicide" to avoid "mass rape" by Assad's soldiers.

"Seventy-nine of them were executed at the barricades. The rest – everyone under 40 – were taken to warehouses that look more like internment camps. They face an unknown fate," Weiss said. "This morning 20 women committed suicide in order not to be raped."

Weiss's source for these sensational reports: *terrorists* in East Aleppo. This was just one of many fake news stories disseminated in the mainstream media. Weiss then went on to repeat the fabricated story to a global mainstream audience on CNN's Don Lemon Show.

In reality, and according to countless first-hand on-the-ground eyewitness testimonies collected by 21WIRE and other media outlets, as the Syrian Army began liberating East Aleppo, the so-called "moderate rebels" promoted by Weiss and other Western media operatives were using residents as human shields, and in some cases shooting residents who attempted to flee terrorist enclaves prior to government forces liberating the eastern half of the city.

Dramatic Video

With direct funding to the White Helmets from U.S.-led Coalition countries already well in excess \$150 million – international stakeholders expect a return on their investment. That return comes in the form of dramatic "search and rescue" videos, some of which may have even been produced in Turkey and which were then sent in a highly coordinated fashion to the editorial desks of CNN, NBC, BBC, Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya, New York Times, Washington Post, The Guardian and others. At no time have any of these Western or GCC-based "journalists" ever queried the authenticity of the staged video and photographic productions supplied by the White Helmets.

Mainly, their videos have been produced to promote a "No Fly Zone" or "Safe Zones" in Syria by creating the false impression that somehow Syrian and Russian air forces are targeting civilians in a *Blitzkrieg* fashion, using crude "barrel bombs." Outside of the White Helmets propaganda, there is scant evidence of these "barrel bombs" – supposedly homemade explosive devices – allegedly dropped by the "Assad Regime" every day, according to the White Helmets. (No mainstream

journalist ever seems to wonder why – with a source of modern munitions supplied by Russia – the Syrian military would have to resort to building homemade improvised bombs.)

In the run-up to the White Helmets' failed Nobel Peace Prize bid in October, CNN even went so far as to plant a fake story about a "barrel bomb" hitting a "White Helmets Center" in Damascus.

But the media hype has had a downside. Increasing attention has also meant that some people are beginning to question the group's incredible claim that it had somehow saved 60,000 lives since it started in late 2013. In one letter first published at Canadian Dimension, retired academic John Ryan, PhD, a retired professor of geography and senior scholar at the University of Winnipeg, challenged this narrative, saying:

"It is the White Helmets themselves who have claimed that they have rescued 60,000 civilians; this has not been verified by any other source. Despite such a classic conflict of interest, searching for independent evidence and disqualifying self-serving claims from belligerent parties in Syria has been ignored in much of the western media. As such, this claim by the White Helmets without any verification is next to meaningless."

Despite the questions, the group continued to raise this figure by about 10,000 every two months. They now claim to have "Saved over 82,000 lives" since they were formed in 2013. Where are the list of names, dates, times, locations and medical reports – so as to corroborate and cross-reference the casualties with the alleged Syrian and Russian airstrikes? What's the problem – can't \$150 million buy a little bit of administration for the White Helmets?

At no point have they ever been able to produce any data to back up their outlandish numbers claims – so we can only conclude that this claim, like so many other claims by the group, are fraudulent. But when has Hollywood ever let facts and data get in the way of a good war propaganda story?

In addition, the White Helmets claim that they have trained some 3,000 "volunteers" throughout Syria, and yet their training facility is actually located in neighboring NATO member state Turkey, on the outskirts of the city of Gaziantep. This is the same Gaziantep that's been described in reports as "the home to ISIS killers, sex traders..."

'Civil Defense' Fraud

Vanessa Beeley's investigation eventually took her to Syria, where she was able to track down the REAL Syria Civil Defense organization. The U.S. and U.K. creation of the "White Helmets" required that they steal the name "Syria

Civil Defense” from a real existing civil defense group based in Syria. Unlike the fraudulent Western construct, the real Syria Civil Defense was founded 63 years ago and is a registered member of the International Civil Defense Organization (ICDO) based in Geneva.

For the real Syria Civil Defense you dial “113” inside Syria. The White Helmets have no such number because they are not a real “search and rescue” organization. Their whole existence is a fraudulent construct.

Beeley spoke at length to the real Syria Civil Defense and what the crew told her was shocking. During the “rebel” (terrorist) invasion in 2012 of East Aleppo, future members of the White Helmets arrived accompanied by armed terrorists to attack the real Syria Civil Defense headquarters. They stole equipment, killed and kidnapped real civil defense volunteers as part of their operation to loot and destroy the existing institution.

Real civil defense workers also detailed how terrorist “Hell Cannon” attacks had besieged the Old City of Aleppo, which lies right on the border with the Al Nusra front lines and was a regular target for the rebels’ continuous indiscriminate attacks against residents. Resident testimonies have echoed the same story: while Hell Cannons terrorized the civilians of Aleppo, the White Helmets did nothing – probably because they were with the terrorists who were launching these attacks.

Terrorist Hell Cannons use an assortment of containers – gas canisters, water heater tanks packed full of explosives, glass, metal and any other limb-shredding materials – these were fired indiscriminately into civilian neighborhoods throughout Aleppo. These crude artillery guns also just happen to have the exact destructive footprint as the alleged “barrel bombs” which the White Helmets and Western media are repeatedly saying are being fired by the “The Regime” (Assad) against civilians.

If the White Helmets are to be believed, Assad’s “barrel bombs” have an impact the equivalent of 7.6 on the Richter scale. This outrageous claim was actually made by White Helmets founder James Le Mesurier on CNN. In fact, 7.6 on the Richter scale is the equivalent of a hydrogen bomb, we begin to get a picture of the scale of the lies which the Western narrative has been spinning to justify this dirty war.

Preserving this and other key pieces of fiction is central to the U.S., U.K. and George Soros-funded public relations management of the White Helmets – and essential to their entire Syria narrative which has been described by American writer Rick Sterling as something akin to a “Feel Good Hoax.”

Forget about actual “search and rescue.” That’s not the primary function of this “NGO.” If you need to know one priority for the White Helmets, it’s this: marketing. A central part of the marketing campaign is images of men with beards looking up at the sky – presumably waiting for the next “barrel bomb,” or the media’s favorite term, the “double tap” (apparently, this is when a sinister Assad or Putin pilot returns immediately after an airstrike just to have another crack at the White Helmets).

In most of their videos, you will also see a large number of bearded men in jeans and T-shirts just standing around on the sidelines, always watching the camera, or looking busy – as if they are cognizant that filming is taking place. When we showed some of these videos to *real* first responders we were normally met with shoulder shrugs and cynical laughs.

People who actually work in this trade will tell you that filming on a first responder call is a luxury no worker really has – aside from maybe a GoPro helmet cam. It’s just not something anyone in their right mind would think about very much if there were really people in need of assistance – and yet, this is all the White Helmets seem to do, all day, every day. They film and produce well-edited emotive videos.

Another aspect real first responders will point out to us is that most of the time, the White Helmets often look like they don’t know what they are doing – indicating either a lack of training or experience – which seems to at least contradict their lofty claims of rescuing 82,000 people in 3½ years – certainly that would provide more experience for 2,900 “volunteers” than any other search and rescue worker on the planet.

The White Helmets claim they were only operational in early 2014, so that’s an average of 75 persons per day, everyday. Considering the amount of people they claim to have trained, spread out over Syria, and where actual air sorties have been flown – it seems like a near mathematical impossibility.

As the White Helmets provide no incident data for the alleged 82,000 persons saved, there is no way to validate their sensational narrative. In other words, the White Helmets mythology and pantomime is not very credible to any serious observer. But it seems to be good enough for a Netflix audience, and sadly, good enough for the Academy, too.

The other mandatory feature in the White Helmets marketing imagery where men with beards are running to or from a scene, they’re always carrying children over their shoulder. Again, when we showed many of these images to actual rescue workers, we were met with puzzled looks.

Firstly, why does 99 percent of the White Helmets marketing imagery only feature small children? Are there not any adults out of the “82,000 saved” to be rescued from the rubble?

Also, you will rarely, if ever see the \$150 million British-trained rescue crew ever use a spinal injury backboard – opting instead to just yank the children by the arm and throw them over the shoulder. When we showed these images to real first-responder workers, they were deemed not credible.

So it's safe to conclude that the White Helmets only care about one thing: *pictures and videos* – wired via satellite to CNN, the New York Times, or the BBC's news desk.

'Smart Power' and the NGO Complex

Still, despite the group's obvious links to the U.S. and U.K. governments, and to known extremists and terrorists – the Western media continues to accept this NGO as if it were a legitimate 'Civil Defense' organization. The pseudo NGO strategy is part of an over-arching Western strategy which is related to the term **“Smart Power”** (following on from *Soft Power*) where Western governments create shadow state organizations designed to co-opt and ultimately usurp actual state agencies – in effect weakening the real civil body by replacing it with a fake version of the original.

In the calculus of war planners in the U.S., U.K. and France, even if they were unsuccessful in toppling the Assad government in Damascus, these fake NGOs would still be operational in “rebel” areas in the hopes that they might be viewed as legitimate civil organizations and would then replace the real ones.

After five years, the U.S. or European authorities could then cite these organizations as legitimate deliverers of public service, thus giving Western governments a much-needed foothold in governance inside the target nation, in this case, Syria.

Similar projects have been undertaken to replace municipal police forces with the **“Free Syrian Police,”** as well as Western and GCC-sponsored projects in terrorist-held Idlib to create uniformed civil cleaning staff, and so on. Why doesn't Netflix make a documentary exposing that? If they did, that would be real filmmaking; instead what we get is more public relations promotion for a failed Western foreign policy.

By now, it should be obvious how this propaganda cycle has been functioning, although apparently, not obvious enough for Netflix's award-winning filmmakers Joanna Natasegara and Orlando Von Einsiedel. The fact that their beloved White Helmets stole their “Syria Civil Defense” name from an

existing, legitimate and internationally recognized first-responder agency should be cause for alarm.

For any journalist researching the White Helmets, you would think the first port of call would be to speak to the official certified civil defense body. This is what 21WIRE and Beeley did. Why didn't Natasegara and Von Einsiedel bother to check this obvious line of inquiry? The fact they didn't might be proof that the intention on their film was not to make a legitimate documentary, but rather to glorify to U.S.-led narrative of the "moderate opposition."

By definition, Natasegara and Von Einsiedel's work cannot rightly be called journalistic but *propagandistic*. By promoting a pseudo "NGO" funded by Western governments and by giving succor to extremists, their film is directed *against* the Syrian people – which exactly characterizes the U.S. and U.K. foreign policy in Syria since 2011.

If Natasegara and Von Einsiedel deserve any reward today it should really be the *Leni Riefenstahl Award* for Best Propaganda Film.

But even Nazi war propaganda filmmaker Riefenstahl could hardly imagine propaganda on this scale – a third-sector NGO and integrated media arm attached to dozens of governments, paramilitary military units, intelligence agencies, hundreds of corporate media outlets, and with a multi-million dollar crowd-funding facility.

If nothing else, the White Helmets operation is impressive in its scope. It's the West's template for building a Shadow State in target nations. If it's successful in Syria, this formula will be recreated in other marginal hot zones around the globe. That's why the White Helmets are being guarded so closely by the Western establishment.

Doubts over Authenticity

Boston Globe columnist Stephen Kizner was one of a number of serious journalists who expressed disappointment over the Academy's selection, writing on Twitter: "Congratulations to al-Qaeda and Syrian jihadists for the #Oscar given to a film about their PR outfit, the White Helmets.

There is also the problem of the obvious staging in many of the White Helmets' supposed video rescues accompanied by highly misleading editing. In the so-called "Rag Doll" clip, we first see two separate views of the three men working on the rescue site – and then the edit suddenly cuts to the miraculous rescue of charming little 4-year-old girl – supposedly emerging from under tons of concrete and rubble from a collapsed building. Miraculously, she is not crying and looks immaculate, while holding an equally clean rag doll.

Then the edit cut jumps, and a little 3-year-old boy suddenly appears from the exact same spot. Both children appear to have sustained no injuries, nor any visible cuts or bruises, and no *dust*. Not bad for being buried under tons of concrete, gravel and dust. Incredible, but par for the course in the completely improbable “first-responder” reality show that is the White Helmets.

After reviewing this video, it’s difficult to deny that it has all the hallmarks of a staged production piece, designed to tug at the hearts of a Western public – conditioned to accept this “first responder” narrative as *sacrosanct*, for fear of appearing callous in the face of this media-driven, multi-million dollar **“No Fly Zone”** public relations campaign. This is not the only fraudulent video released by the White Helmets, but even the existence of one fraudulent rescue video should be grounds to question all the group’s material.

Again, the whole purpose of these video and photos is to influence public opinion against the Syrian and Russian governments. Therefore, the core mission of the White Helmets media campaign is influence Western and Gulf audiences.

Syrian Curveballs

Back in 2003, one man became emblematic of the campaign of WMD lies that helped fabricate the U.S. and U.K. case for invading Iraq. He became known as “Curveball.”

In Syria, the West has been developing a new generation of “curveballs” – on call and ready to deliver whatever the U.S. State Department or the British Foreign Office need in order to grandstand in front of the U.N. Security Council or on the floor of Parliament.

The New York Times reported that during March and April of 2015, the White Helmets claimed that at least 20 “barrel bombs” containing chlorine were dropped in six towns in northwestern Syria. It almost sounded as if the U.S. and U.K. were so desperate to establish Assad as crossing the “red line” against chemical weapons use that they would go so far as to fabricate a case that chlorine bombs were used by “the regime.”

As the Times reported: “Frustrated with the Security Council’s impasse over the issue, rescue workers and doctors are now working to bring evidence of chlorine gas attacks directly to the French, British and American governments for testing. The aim is to give states a solid basis for action against the attacks, in the Security Council or through quieter diplomatic pressure, said James Le Mesurier, the British director of a nonprofit group, Mayday Rescue, that trains and equips the White Helmets, Syrian volunteers supported by the British, Danish

and Dutch governments.”

At the time, White Helmet founder Le Mesurier was heavily involved in trying to fashion together a chemical weapons case against the Syrian government.

In 2015, the Times wrote: “Going directly to governments that have pushed for Mr. Assad’s ouster creates its own challenges. His allies may dismiss their evidence as politically tainted and can point to recent chlorine attacks in Iraq for which the government there blamed insurgents, not to mention the discredited American claims of an Iraqi chemical weapons program that were used to justify invading Iraq. To deter allegations of tampering or falsification, Mr. Le Mesurier and three Syrian doctors involved said they systematically documented the chain of custody from collection to handover. They have plenty of cases to work with. Since March 16, in Idlib alone, the White Helmets have documented 14 attacks with 26 suspected chlorine barrels that sickened scores of people.”

(Although U.N. investigators spoke to several eyewitnesses who denounced one of the “chlorine attack” stories as “staged,” the White Helmets’ campaign of overwhelming U.N. investigators with “evidence” that was hard to verify – and with Western powers pushing for U.N. confirmation – succeeded in getting the U.N. to blame the Syrian government for at least a couple of these cases, which enabled the Western mainstream media to resume its “war crimes” drumbeat against the Assad government.)

Similarly, in September 2016, the White Helmets were instrumental in trying to assign blame for an incident where a U.N. aid convoy was attacked outside of the town of Urm al-Kubra, west of Aleppo. As if by magic, the White Helmets were the first on the scene recording among the flames. 21WIRE later reported that the White Helmets had helped to stage the said ‘Russian bombing’ scene.

The Western mainstream media, Secretary of State John Kerry, U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Samantha Power and others cited the case as “proof” of Russian and Syrian guilt. (The U.N. also accepted the video “evidence” presented by the White Helmets in blaming the Syrian government for the attack.)

Hollywood ‘Change Agents’

One of the White Helmets documentary’s biggest advocates was Hollywood actor George Clooney. In the run-up to the Oscars, Clooney, along with his wife – celebrity human rights lawyer, Amal Clooney – personally campaigns on behalf of the film. Clooney’s interest was more than just that of a liberal activist. AP reported that Clooney is in the process of producing a feature-film version of the “White Helmets.”

He said: “The White Helmets are the heroes. So if I can help them out at all,

and people can know about it, in any way possible, that's a good use of celebrity, I think."

As a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, Clooney seems to relish his role of celebrity humanitarian. Unfortunately, fellow members of the Council include an impressive line-up of war criminals and other dignitaries, like former Vice President Dick Cheney and former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, as well as a chief architect of the collapse of Libya and the dirty war in Syria, Hillary Rodham Clinton.

However, judging by Clooney's devotion to the White Helmets, it's pretty clear that he is either ignorant of what he is supporting or worse – he is using his public profile to push a Deep State agenda.

In September 2016, Clooney managed to get an audience with John Kerry and the U.S. State Department to promote his new "anti-corruption" NGO called, The Sentry. Not surprisingly, the establishment's globalist information outlet the *Daily Beast* was on hand (along with a prime segment which aired on CNN) to get the word out.

Daily Beast editor John Avlon wrote: "Getting Americans to care about human-rights atrocities half-a-world away is hard. Getting them fired up about confronting the corruption that fuels those slaughters is an order of magnitude harder. But that's what actor George Clooney and human-rights activist John Prendergast are aiming to do with their new project, The Sentry."

The Sentry, is supposed to help the poor people of South Sudan by "taking aim at government corruption." Clooney goes on to demonize the South Sudanese government as utterly corrupt and deserving of prosecution before the International Criminal Court in the Hague.

What Clooney will not tell his fawning public is the CIA's role in fomenting unrest in Sudan prior to its rather convenient partition in 2010. We say *convenient* because splitting the country effectively cut-off port access and therefore oil pipeline access for South Sudan of which China has been a major partner on the exploration of energy. This was followed by a dirty war in South Sudan with much of the evidence pointing to the CIA.

TeleSur English reports: "The CIA is using a mercenary warlord named Riek Machar, who has a long history of ethnic massacres and mass murder to his credit, to try and overthrow the internationally recognized government of President Salva Kiir for the crime of doing business with rivals of Pax Americana, the Chinese."

Again, we hear the familiar tropes about “child soldiers” and “mass rape,” and how, “we must act now” – all part and parcel of the neocolonial “helpless Africa” narrative.

Clooney’s partner John Prendergast delivers the emotive plea: “The war erupted, it was a fire that just raged across the land...They’ll use attack helicopters. They’ll use rape as a tool of war. They’ll recruit child soldiers and go in and send them as cannon fodder into villages to kill people. The worst human-rights abuses being committed in the world. And this is what South Sudan has dealt with because of this fallout between these thieves over the last 2½ years.”

(Clooney also played a key role in splitting Sudan into two parts through his earlier demonization of Sudan’s government over the conflict in Darfur. Well-organized Western protests against alleged “genocide” in Darfur set the stage for the U.S.-led effort to carve oil-rich South Sudan away from Sudan although by doing so the U.S. made it impossible for South Sudan to get its oil to market, thus creating the hardship that then contributed to the new conflict in South Sudan, a good example of how human-rights “do-gooders” can cause more harm than good.)

Interestingly, Clooney’s Sentry Project is nested under the globalist think tank, the Center for Advanced Defense Studies and bankrolled by John Podesta’s Center for American Progress, a Washington D.C.-based think tank with ties to the military-industrial complex. (The Podesta Group lobbying firm was famous for its pay-to-play tactics, getting governments to pony up millions of dollars in exchange for access to the Clintons, an example of the kind of corruption common in Washington.)

Peace activist and author David Swanson outlined Sentry’s precarious connections to America’s defense industry here. We also can point out that the policy of “evicting Chinese influence” from Africa was included in the military directives outlined in US AFRICOM immediately after its official launch in 2007-2008. Similarly, billions of dollars in direct Chinese investment in Libya was thwarted by NATO’s illegal abuse of U.N. Resolution 1973 which led to the complete collapse of the Libyan state.

We can see that Clooney’s celebrated “crusade against corruption” is very likely part of a public relations smokescreen to conceal U.S. clandestine efforts to isolate Chinese interests in the now divided territory of Sudan, while nudging forward U.S. and transnational corporate policy in South Sudan, with the ultimate goal of “regime change” in that country, too.

You can’t help but be reminded here of another similar Deep State public relations ploy centered around the exact same location back in 2012. There’s

no better example of how Hollywood's do-gooder wars are waged than "Kony 2012," described in *Atlantic Magazine* as a viral video campaign, which "reinforces a dangerous, centuries-old idea that Africans are helpless and that idealistic Westerners must save them."

Like with Clooney's Sentry Project, "Kony 2012" leveraged the power of media and celebrity to manufacture public consent through an emotive public appeal and collected millions in public donations in the process. In this case, the antagonist was the illusive warlord Joseph Kony, leader of the Lords Resistance Army. The only problem was, at the time in 2012, no one had actually seen Kony in six years.

Still, the campaign lobbied President Obama to deploy U.S. forces to Uganda to "find Kony" under the justification of "saving the children." Despite the collapse of the project following a very public meltdown by the charity's founder, Jason Russell, the U.S. still went and deployed U.S. military assets to Uganda under an expansion of US AFRICOM operations in Africa. Mission accomplished.

The genius of this was that it concealed the genocide and crimes against humanity carried out by President Obama's good friend and Uganda's "President for Life" Yoweri Museveni, whose crimes have since been well-documented in powerful independent non-CIA film production called a "Brilliant Genocide." It turns out that Museveni is guilty of all the things and more – which the West had laid on the ghost of Kony.

Of course, the irony of this is mostly lost on Hollywood's humanitarian jet-set, all of whom thought "Kony 2012" was such a great idea when it was first launched. What "Kony 2012" achieved on an "activist" and public relations level is exactly what "The White Helmets" documentary is doing now – an expensive smokescreen to hide the real horrors of a conflict, namely, the destructive policies of Western governments and their local "partners" fomenting trouble and strife.

In the case of Syria, it's the U.S., U.K., Turkey, France and GCC support of violent, armed extremists – who the White Helmets are exclusively embedded with.

The cynical use of the classic American gospel hymn, "When the Saints Go Marching In" as the documentary's theme song by filmmakers Natasegara and Von Einsiedel speaks to level of manipulation of the narrative.

Regarding the White Helmets project, Clooney revealed something else in his rhetoric when he remarked that as a celebrity, "I can't change policy ... but I can make things louder." This is an example of the *power-*

activist political set in Hollywood.

We find similar language in an interview with White Helmets director Joanna Natasegara in 2016, at the International Anti-Corruption Conference (IACC) in Malaysia while promoting her Oscar nominated film "Virunga" and its new foundation. Natasegara refers to herself as an "Impact Producer" (aka "Change Agent") using documentaries to make a big impact by reinforcing or pushing a narrative.

In many ways, this is antithetical to the whole process of filmmaking, especially in the research and discovery stages, and in the investigative aspects of historical documentary filmmaking – which is about documenting events but also about looking below popular political narratives to gain deeper insights, and not pushing political or policy outcomes.

Power-activism is personified by numerous online marketing campaigns calling for a No Fly Zone in Syria. At the Oscar ceremony, both Natasegara and Von Einsiedel called for "an end to the war in Syria" – a sentiment that everyone can agree on – but it rings hollow given their P.R. support for a direct Western military intervention under the guise of a "No Fly Zone."

Compare that to the words of U.S. Rep. Tulsi Gabbard, D-Hawaii, and Tima Kurdi, the aunt of three-year-old Alan Kurdi who washed-up on a beach to become the face of the tragic face of the migrant crisis. Both Gabbard and Kurdi appeared on global media calling for the U.S. and its Coalition allies to STOP sending arms, cash and support to extremists and terrorist "rebels" in Syria. Only this can bring an end to the war and allow refugees to return to Syria, said both Gabbard and Kurdi.

This plea is *real* and reflects the facts on the ground, as opposed to the fake narrative constructed by Natasegara and Von Einsiedel, which carefully whitewashes all clandestine involvement by U.S., U.K. and its partners which have aided in the systematic destruction of Syria over the last six years, not to mention the needless deaths of hundreds of thousands.

It is no coincidence that many members of the White Helmets have extremist ties and that this fact is being covered-up by Natasegara and Von Einsiedel who are literally portraying the group as "saints" – revealing the level of deception involved in this story.

More Propaganda

We can see Natasegara's modus operandi with making the White Helmets film; it's not so much about documenting history in the conventional sense, so much as it is about "making an impact" politically – on behalf of the governments who

created the White Helmets, which veers into the area of propaganda again.

On the surface, Natasegara appears to be waging the classic international liberal crusade by fighting against mining, oil and poaching in the poor, permanently “developing” countries like the Congo. No one will argue that the level of corruption in African countries can be extreme in some cases, but what are the real causes of institutional corruption in those lands?

Little attention is paid to stopping corrupt officials at the corporate level in London, Belgium, New York or Washington. In fact, many of the biggest corporate donors to these “good causes” projects are connected to the very same corporate behemoth that activists purport to be fighting against.

This cycle of power-activism feeds into the cycle of neocolonialism – in what researcher Cory Morningstar so rightly refers to as “the wrong kind of green.”

As it turns out, the International Anti-Corruption Conference is funded by Transparency International (T.I.), one of the main players in the globalist “anti-corruption” syndicate, which is very much linked to the work of Hollywood activists like Clooney. In the past, T.I. has been accused of cooking its own books in its anti-corruption investigations, including an incident in 2008 where the organization used falsified data to try and frame the Chavez government in Venezuela during one of T.I.’s anti-corruption investigations. This is a good example of NGO *smart power* being used to undermine a target nation. Clooney and Natasegara are just two of the many public faces who represent this network.

Back in 2016, when the “Panama Papers” story broke, based on purloined documents from a law firm, the mainstream media utterly failed in analyzing what they were really looking at. Yes, there’s plenty of corruption and shady shell companies in Panama (but no word of the giant offshore corporate maze located in Delaware), but was the endgame of that supposedly independent “investigation”?

Amid all the mainstream media hype and “anti-corruption” grandstanding, researcher James Corbett was one of the few people who asked the *right* question: “So why does this new mega-leak seemingly only expose those in the State Department crosshairs or expendable others and not a single prominent American politician or businessman?” (LISTEN to my full interview last year with James Corbett here)

‘Citizen Journalists’

Natasegara also goes on about using “activists” and “citizen journalists” to achieve the desired “impact.” Here she is alluding to the scores of Syrian “activists” and the White Helmets who have supplied Western media outlets with the images our governments want in order to reinforce the official narrative.

Natasegara is promoting the exact tool she utilized in the deceptive Netflix project in which all of the alleged stock “rescue” footage was supplied by the White Helmets themselves.

Natasegara claims to have trained 21-year-old White Helmet “activist” Khaled Khatib in Turkey before sending him into Syria to shoot much of the footage. NPR claims that he “risked his life” to shoot the film for Netflix. Khatib was later blocked from entering the U.S. to attend the Oscar ceremony in Los Angeles. So the Netflix producers had no way of independently verifying what they’ve been given – effectively relying on Al Qaeda-affiliated individuals to supply them with made-to-order “rescue” footage. How can they call this a documentary?

In this case, it didn’t seem to matter to Joanna Natasegara and her co-producer Orlando Von Einsiedel whether it’s real or staged, so long as the White Helmets narrative was achieved.

Despite the claims by Netflix producers, Natasegara and Von Einsiedel, the purpose was to reinforce the U.S.-led Coalition’s fake Syrian narrative, which has never resembled the facts on the ground. The U.S.-U.K. establishment could not have hand-picked better tools for this job than Natasegara and Von Einsiedel.

If they were real filmmakers interested in the truth, they would have paused to question why this group was founded by a senior British Military intelligence officer, James Le Mesurier; why it is based in Turkey and not Syria; and why the group only operated exclusively in Al Nusra (Al Qaeda in Syria), Ahrar al Sham (another Al Qaeda affiliate) and ISIS-held areas in Syria; why are White Helmets members routinely pictured with weapons and with terrorists. The answer is simple to anyone with half a brain and who is being honest: the White Helmets are composed mainly of partisan extremists.

Still, all of this is noticeably missing from Natasegara and Von Einsiedel’s storybook version of the White Helmets, which is inexcusable considering how there’s no shortage of readily available evidence pointing directly to White Helmets’ ties to terrorists.

One has to assume that the filmmakers knew about the extremist links and the U.S.-NATO funding of the group but chose to ignore this in favor of producing their expensive piece of propaganda. And as we saw this week, both were all too happy to lap up their Academy Award – even though the fiction they created has aided further *legitimizing* U.S.-led Coalition-backed terrorism in Syria.

One of the saddest parts of this whole story is that the power of marketing and propaganda means that tens of thousands of unwitting members of the public have

been duped into donating their hard-earned money for this dubious NGO. If the wider public knew what Aleppo residents already know – that the White Helmets function as a support group alongside known terrorists groups like Al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, Nour al-Din al-Zinki, ISIS and others (all known extremist groups operating inside of Syria), the White Helmets would not be celebrated as humanitarian but rather condemned as a multimillion-dollar fraud, customized by the West to give cover to the illicit practice of arming and supporting “rebel” terrorists by the US, UK, France, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and others.

By all accounts, White Helmets video-and-photo propaganda has been instrumental in aiding in the recruitment of new terrorists – new fighters from the West, Middle East and Asia – who see the contrived news reports and believe the false narrative being portrayed by mainstream media news agencies.

In this way, you could say that because the mainstream Western media is not vetting any of this material and has defaulted into a Western foreign policy bias, these major media outlets are complicit in helping recruit more terrorists internationally. In other words, they are providing material support and comfort to known violent, religious extremists terrorists.

Lastly, to see the White Helmets’ fundamental terrorist connection, one need look no further than to its ‘President’ Raed Saleh. Last month, 21WIRE investigative journalist Vanessa Beeley reported on White Helmet leader Raed Saleh’s close partner, Mustafa al-Haj Yusef, leader of the White Helmets center in the Al Nusra-occupied city of Khan Shaykhun, Idlib. The photographic evidence clearly demonstrates the close relationship that Saleh shares with his friend and colleague Yusef, and apparently with the armed militant seen standing behind the two White Helmet leaders.

On June 1, 2014, White Helmet deputy Yusef called for the shelling of civilians during elections in Damascus. He declares that this murderous act would be the “greatest declaration of revolution.” Are these the words of a “neutral, impartial, humanitarian”? Here we can see the White Helmets calling for direct violence against civilians who are doing nothing more than exercising their right to vote – in their own country. [See the full story here.]

So to even suggest that the White Helmets are “*unarmed and neutral civilian volunteers*” is tantamount to fraud. The fact that filmmakers Natasegara, Von Einsiedel and Netflix are using this false statement in their film and public relations material demonstrates outright deception on their part.

If Netflix were to take this issue seriously, after reviewing readily available evidence they would remove this film from their distribution chain,

and Natasegara and Von Einsiedel should return their award to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

[For more on this topic and photos showing White Helmet connections to terror groups, go to <http://21stcenturywire.com/2017/03/02/forget-oscar-give-the-white-helmets-the-leni-riefenstahl-award-for-best-war-propaganda-film/>]

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