

# VIPS: Extradition of Julian Assange Threatens Us All

Retaliation against Julian Assange over the past decade plus replicates a pattern of ruthless political retaliation against whistleblowers, in particular those who reveal truths hidden by illegal secrecy, VIPS says.

**DATE:** April 30, 2019

**MEMORANDUM FOR:** The governments and people of the United Kingdom and the United States

**FROM:** Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS)

**SUBJECT:** Extradition of Julian Assange Threatens Us All

On April 11, London police forcibly removed *WikiLeaks* co-founder Julian Assange from the embassy of Ecuador after that country's president, Lenin Moreno, abruptly revoked his predecessor's grant of asylum. The United States government immediately requested Assange's extradition for prosecution under a charge of "conspiracy to commit computer intrusion" under the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act (CFAA).

Former U.S. Government officials promptly appeared in popular media offering soothing assurances that Assange's arrest threatens neither constitutional rights nor the practice of journalism, and major newspapers like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* fell into line.

## Not So Fast

Others found reason for concern in the details of the indictment. Carie DeCel, a staff attorney for the Knight First Amendment Institute, noted that the indictment goes

beyond simply stating the computer intrusion charge and “includes many more allegations that reach more broadly into typical journalistic practices, including communication with a source, encouraging a source to share information, and protecting a source.”

In an analysis of the indictment’s implications, the Project on Government Oversight (POGO) observed that it includes an allegation that “Assange and Manning took measures to conceal Manning as the source of the disclosure...including by removing usernames from the disclosed information and deleting chat logs between Assange and Manning,” and that they “used a special folder on a cloud drop box of *WikiLeaks* to transmit classified records.”

“These are not only legitimate but professionally advised journalistic practices for source protection,” notes POGO. It is worth noting that Manning had Top Secret clearance and did not need Assange’s assistance to gain access to databases, but only to hide her identity.

The indictment’s implied threat thus reaches beyond Assange and even beyond journalists. The threat to journalists and others does not vanish if they subsequently avoid practices identified in the government’s indictment. The NSA’s big bag of past communications offers abundant material from which to spin an indictment years later, and even circumstantial evidence can produce a conviction. Moreover, the secret landscape—a recent and arbitrary development—continually expands, making ever more of government off limits to public view.

When politician and U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo

labeled *WikiLeaks* a “non-state hostile intelligence service,” he was describing the oft-stated duty of newspapers, “to comfort the afflicted, and to afflict the comfortable.”

## **The Devil in the Big Picture**

One can look so closely at the indictment details that one misses the big picture and with it vital truths. Standing back for a broader view, a long-running campaign of harassment by U.S. authorities and former officials focused on *WikiLeaks*' publication of embarrassing secrets becomes visible. The Project on Government Oversight observes:

“Even if the motives for Assange’s indictment are entirely legitimate, the litany of high-ranking government officials who called for Assange to be prosecuted for publishing classified documents have likely already irreparably harmed the freedom of the press. It will be virtually impossible to fully disentangle the government’s desire to prosecute Assange for his publishing activities from the government’s current prosecution of him, and as a result there will to some degree be an unavoidable chilling effect stemming from his prosecution.”

Standing back still further, a crowd of similar cases comes into view: other truth tellers subjected to similar persecution. These are not journalists but another species of truth teller – national security whistleblowers– who have warned for years that this day would come.

## **A Pattern of Reprisal**

Opinions of Julian Assange’s character and methods vary

wildly but what is relevant to First Amendment freedoms is how the U.S. government perceives him. The big picture reveals that Assange, a publisher of whistleblower disclosures, is viewed the same way as whistleblowers: unwelcome lights shining on official wrongdoing who must be dimmed, deflected and shut off. What government bodies are doing to Assange they routinely have done to whistleblowers—Thomas Drake, Jeffrey Sterling, John Kiriakou, Thomas Tamm, William Binney, Daniel Ellsberg, Chelsea Manning and others—who disclosed for public benefit information the government finds politically troublesome.

Once the government develops animus toward a truth teller, it fishes indefinitely until it finds some means to retaliate—some pretext to punish that individual. A pattern of retaliation against high-profile national security whistleblowers includes the following tactics:

1. relentless campaigns of character assassination and misinformation about facts of the case;
2. hostile, lengthy government investigations, often for minor, never proven or circumstantial offenses;
3. terrorization of the whistleblower and associates with threats (see here and here), solitary confinement and armed home invasions for non-violent, alleged offenses;
4. pre-trial declarations of guilt from influential officials, such as Barack Obama's declaration (as the military's Commander-in-Chief) that Army Private Bradley (now Chelsea) Manning "broke the law" – potentially influencing the Army court that heard her case.
5. a Balkanized judicial process that restricts most such

cases to onejudicial venue cherry-picked by prosecutors for speedy deference to government, a venue sealed off from public scrutiny and, some say, justice;

6. prosecution under the Espionage Act, a “vague” and “draconian” law, similar in those respects to the CFAA;
7. continuing persecution–isolation, marginalization, blacklisting, and more–after time has been served (see here and here) or after charges are dropped.

Reportedly, British and U.S. intelligence are interrogating Assange, possibly employing torture tactics, without access to legal counsel at a prison reserved for terrorists. U.S. officials apparently charged Assange as “a terrorist” in order to dodge the problem of the statute of limitations for conspiracy or computer intrusion by extending (via the Patriot Act and/or other terrorism laws) the normal statute of limitations from 5 to 8 years.

### **Not for Insiders**

Even if charges against a whistleblower are later dropped, governments still win because the tactics used damage the truth teller professionally, financially, socially and psychologically, and foreseeably chill other whistleblowers.

Importantly, virtually all of the retaliatory actions described above are carried out or instigated by the elite political establishment–current and former political appointees and elected officials. Equally important is the fact that tactics used against whistleblowers are rarely if ever applied to political insiders who fail to protect classified information. Even actual spies who give or sell secrets directly to foreign governments have fared better

than some well-meaning whistleblowers. In contrast to whistleblowers, political insiders who mistreat government secrets are publicly praised by the establishment, face lesser charges (if any), are treated with dignity by investigators, receive presidential pardons and move on to prestigious and lucrative positions.

## **The Takeaway**

Retaliation against Julian Assange over the past decade plus replicates a pattern of ruthless political retaliation against whistleblowers, in particular those who reveal truths hidden by illegal secrecy. U.S. law prohibits classifying information “in order to conceal inefficiency, violations of law, or administrative error; to prevent embarrassment to a person, organization, or agency.”

Whether U.S. authorities successfully prosecute Assange, accept a desperate plea deal or keep him tied up with endless litigation, they will succeed in sending the same chilling message to all journalists that they send to potential whistleblowers: Do not embarrass us or we’ll punish you—somehow, someday, however long it takes. In that respect, one could say damage to journalism already has been done but the battle is not over.

This extension of a whistleblower reprisal regime onto a publisher of disclosures poses an existential threat to all journalists and to the right of all people to speak and hear important truths. The U.S. indictment of Julian Assange tests our ability to perceive a direct threat to free speech, and tests our will to oppose that threat. Without freedom of press and the right and willingness to publish,

whistleblowers even disclosing issues of grave, life and death public safety, will be like a tree falling in the forest with no one to hear.

The great American writer Henry David Thoreau wrote, "It takes two to speak the truth—one to speak and one to hear." Today, it takes three to speak the truth—one to speak, one to hear, and one to defend the first two in court. If the U.S. Government has its way, there will be no defense, no truth.

*For the Steering Groups of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity and Sam Adams Associates for Integrity in Intelligence:*

**William Binney**, former Technical Director, World Geopolitical & Military Analysis, NSA; co-founder, SIGINT Automation Research Center (ret.)

**Richard H. Black**, Senator of Virginia, 13th District; Colonel US Army (ret.); Former Chief, Criminal Law Division, Office of the Judge Advocate General, the Pentagon (associate VIPS)

**Marshall Carter-Tripp**, Foreign Service Officer & former Division Director in the State Department Bureau of Intelligence and Research (ret.)

**Thomas Drake**, former Defense Intelligence Senior Executive Service and NSA whistleblower

**Bogdan Dzakovic**, former Team Leader of Federal Air Marshals and Red Team, FAA Security (ret.) (associate VIPS)

**Philip Giraldi**, CIA, Operations Officer (ret.)

**Mike Gravel**, former Adjutant, top secret control officer, Communications Intelligence Service; special agent of the Counter Intelligence Corps and former United States Senator

**Katherine Gun**, former linguist and Iraq War whistleblower in UK's GCHQ (affiliate VIPS)

**Matthew Hoh**, former Capt., USMC, Iraq; former Foreign Service Officer, Afghanistan (associate VIPS)

**James George Jatras**, former U.S. diplomat and former foreign policy adviser to Senate leadership (Associate VIPS)

**Michael S. Kearns**, Captain, USAF (ret.); ex-Master SERE Instructor for Strategic Reconnaissance Operations (NSA/DIA) and Special Mission Units (JSOC)

**John Kiriakou**, former CIA Counterterrorism Officer and former Senior Investigator, Senate Foreign Relations Committee

**Karen Kwiatkowski**, former Lt. Col., US Air Force (ret.), at Office of Secretary of Defense watching the manufacture of lies on Iraq, 2001-2003

**Clement J. Laniewski**, LTC, U.S. Army (ret.) (associate VIPS)

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**Elizabeth Murray**, former Deputy National Intelligence Officer for the Near East & CIA political analyst (ret.)

**Todd E. Pierce**, MAJ, US Army Judge Advocate (ret.)

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**Sarah Wilton**, Commander, U.S. Naval Reserve (ret.) and Defense Intelligence Agency (ret.)

**Robert Wing**, former U.S. Department of State Foreign Service Officer (Associate VIPS)

**Ann Wright**, U.S. Army Reserve Colonel (ret) and former U.S. Diplomat who resigned in 2003 in opposition to the Iraq War

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VIPS Fault Mueller Probe, Criticize  
Refusal to Interview Assange

The bug in Mueller's report released on Thursday is that he accepts that the Russian government interfered in the election. Trump should challenge that, says VIPS.



**MEMORANDUM FOR:** The President

**FROM:** Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS)

**SUBJECT:** The Fly in the Mueller Ointment

April 16, 2019

Mr. President:

The song has ended but the melody lingers on. The release Thursday of the redacted text of Special Counsel Robert Mueller's "Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election" nudged the American people a tad closer to the truth on so-called "Russiagate."

But the Mueller report left unscathed the central-but-

unproven allegation that the Russian government hacked into the DNC and Podesta emails, gave them to *WikiLeaks* to publish, and helped you win the election. The thrust will be the same; namely, even if there is a lack of evidence that you colluded with Russian President Vladimir Putin, you have him to thank for becoming president. And that melody will linger on for the rest of your presidency, unless you seize the moment.

Mueller has accepted that central-but-unproven allegation as gospel truth, apparently in the lack of any disinterested, independent forensic work. Following the odd example of his erstwhile colleague, former FBI Director James Comey, Mueller apparently has relied for forensics on a discredited, DNC-hired firm named CrowdStrike, whose credibility is on a par with “pee-tape dossier” compiler Christopher Steele. Like Steele, CrowdStrike was hired and paid by the DNC (through a cutout).

We brought the lack of independent forensics to the attention of Attorney General William Barr on March 13 in a [Memorandum](#) entitled “Mueller’s Forensic-Free Findings”, but received no reply or acknowledgement. In that Memorandum we described the results of our own independent, agenda-free forensic investigation led by two former Technical Directors of the NSA, who avoid squishy “assessments,” preferring to base their findings on fundamental principles of science and the scientific method. Our findings remain unchallenged; they reveal gaping holes in CrowdStrike’s conclusions.

We do not know if Barr shared our March 13 Memorandum with you. As for taking a public position on the forensics issue, we suspect he is being circumspect in choosing his battles

carefully, perhaps deferring until later a rigorous examination of the dubious technical work upon which Mueller seems to have relied.

### **Barr's Notification to Congress**

As you know, the big attention-getter came on March 24 when Attorney General William Barr included in his four-page summary a quote from Mueller's report: "The investigation did not establish that members of the Trump campaign conspired or coordinated with the Russian government in its election interference activities." Understandably, that grabbed headlines – the more so, since most Americans had been convinced earlier by the media that the opposite was true.

There remains, however, a huge fly in the ointment. The Mueller report makes it clear that Mueller accepts as a given – an evidence-impooverished given – that the Russian government interfered in the election on two tracks:

**Track 1** involves what Barr, echoing Mueller, claims "a Russian organization, the Internet Research Agency (IRA)" did in using social media "to sow social discord, eventually with the aim of interfering with the election." A careful look at this allegation shows it to be without merit, despite Herculean efforts by *The New York Times*, for example, to put lipstick on this particular pig. After some rudimentary research, award winning investigative reporter Gareth Porter promptly put that pig out of its misery and [brought home](#) the bacon. We do not believe "Track 1" merits further commentary.

**Track 2** does need informed commentary, since it is more

technical and – to most Americans – arcane. In Barr’s words: “The Special Counsel found that Russian government actors successfully hacked into computers and obtained emails from persons affiliated with the Clinton campaign and Democratic Party organizations, and publicly disseminated those materials through various intermediaries, including *WikiLeaks*. Based on these activities, the Special Counsel brought criminal charges against a number of Russian military officers for conspiring to hack into computers in the United States for purposes of influencing the election.”

We are eager to see if Mueller’s report contains more persuasive forensic evidence than that which VIPS has already debunked. In Barr’s summary, the only mention of forensics refers to “forensic accountants” – a far cry from the kind of forensic investigators needed to provide convincing proof of “hacking” by the Russian government.

### **But They Were Indicted!**

Circular reasoning is not likely to work for very long, even with a U.S. populace used to being brainwashed by the media. Many Americans had mistakenly assumed that Mueller’s indictment of Russians – whether they be posting on FaceBook or acting like intelligence officers – was proof of guilt. But, as lawyers regularly point out, “one can easily indict a ham sandwich” – easier still these days, if it comes with Russian dressing.

Chances have now increased that the gullible folks who had been assured that Mueller would find collusion between you and Putin may now be a bit more circumspect – skeptical even – regarding the rest of the story-line of the “Russian

hack,” and that will be even more likely among those with some technical background. Such specialists will have a field day, IF – and it is a capital “IF” – by some miracle, word of VIPS’ forensic findings gets into the media this time around.

The evidence-impooverished, misleadingly labeled “Intelligence Community Assessment” of January 6, 2017 had one saving grace. The authors noted: “The nature of cyberspace makes attribution of cyber operations difficult but not impossible. Every kind of cyber operation – malicious or not – leaves a trail.” Forensic investigators can follow a trail of metadata and other technical properties. VIPS has done that.

### **A “High-Class Entity?”**

If, as we strongly suspect, Mueller is relying for forensics solely on CrowdStrike, the discredited firm hired by the DNC in the spring of 2016, he is acting more in the mold of Inspector Clouseau than the crackerjack investigator he is reputed to be. It simply does not suffice for Mueller’s former colleague James Comey to tell Congress that CrowdStrike is a “high-class entity.” It is nothing of the sort and, in addition to its documented incompetence, it is riddled with conflicts of interest. Comey needs to explain why he kept the FBI away from the DNC computers after they were said to have been “hacked.”

And former National Intelligence Director James Clapper needs to explain his [claim](#) last November that “the forensic evidence was overwhelming about what the Russians had done.” What forensic evidence? From CrowdStrike? We at VIPS, in

contrast, are finding more and more forensic evidence that the DNC emails were leaked, not hacked by the Russians or anyone else – and that “Guccifer 2.0” is an out-and-out fraud. Yes, we can prove that from forensics too.

### **But the Talking Heads Say ...**

Again, if Mueller’s incomplete investigation is allowed to assume the status of Holy Writ, most Americans will continue to believe that – whether you colluded the Russians or not – Putin came through for you big time. In short, absent President Putin’s help, you would not be president.

Far too many Americans will still believe this because of the mainstream-media fodder – half-cooked by intelligence leaks – that they have been fed for two and a half years. The media have been playing *the* central role in the effort of the MICIMATT (the Military-Industrial-Congressional-Intelligence-Media-Academia-Think-Tank) complex to stymie any improvement in relations with Russia. We in VIPS have repeatedly demonstrated that the core charges of Russian interference in the 2016 election are built on a house of cards. But, despite our record of accuracy on this issue – not to mention our pre-Iraq-war warnings about the fraudulent intelligence served up by our former colleagues – we have gotten no play in mainstream media.

Most of us have chalked up decades in the intelligence business and many have extensive academic and government experience focusing on Russia. We consider the issue of “Russian interference” of overriding significance not only because the allegation is mischievously bogus and easily disproven. More important, it has brought tension with

nuclear-armed Russia to the kind of dangerous fever pitch not seen since the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, when the Russian provocation was real – authentic, not synthetic.

Sober minds resolved that crisis more than a half-century ago, and we all got to live another day. These days sober minds seem few and far between and a great deal is at stake. On the intelligence/forensics side, we have proved that the evidence adduced to “prove” that the Russians hacked into the DNC and Podesta emails and gave them to *WikiLeaks* is spurious. For example, we have examined metadata from one key document attributed to Russian hacking and shown that it was synthetically tainted with “Russian fingerprints.”

### **Who Left the Bread Crumbs?**

So, if it wasn't the Russians, who left the “Russian” breadcrumb “fingerprints?” We do not know for sure; on this question we cannot draw a conclusion based on the principles of science – at least not yet. We suspect, however, that cyber warriors closer to home were responsible for inserting the “tell-tale signs” necessary to attribute “hacks” to Russia. We tacked on our more speculative views regarding this intriguing issue onto the end of our July 24, 2017 [Memorandum](#) to you entitled “Intelligence Veterans Challenge Russia Hack Evidence.”

We recall that you were apprised of that Memorandum's key findings because you ordered then-CIA Director Mike Pompeo to talk to William Binney, one of our two former NSA Technical Directors and one of the principal authors of that Memorandum. On October 24, 2017, Pompeo began an hour-long meeting with Binney by explaining the genesis of the odd

invitation to CIA Headquarters: "You are here because the president told me that if I really wanted to know about Russian hacking I needed to talk to you."

On the chance Pompeo has given you no report on his meeting with Binney, we can tell you that Binney, a plain-spoken, widely respected scientist, began by telling Pompeo that his (CIA) people were lying to him about Russian hacking and that he (Binney) could prove it. Pompeo reacted with disbelief, but then talked of following up with the FBI and NSA. We have no sign, though, that he followed through. And there is good reason to believe that Pompeo himself may have been reluctant to follow up with his subordinates in the Directorate of Digital Innovation created by CIA Director John Brennan in 2015. CIA malware and hacking tools are built by the Engineering Development Group, part of that relatively new Directorate.

### **'Obfuscation'**

A leak from within the CIA, published on March 31, 2017 by *WikiLeaks* as part of the so-called "Vault 7" disclosures, exposed a cyber tool called "Marble," which was used during 2016 for "obfuscation" (CIA's word). This tool can be used to conduct a forensic attribution double game (aka a false-flag operation); it included test samples in Arabic, Chinese, Farsi, Korean, and Russian. *Washington Post* reporter Ellen Nakashima, to her credit, immediately penned an informative article on the Marble cyber-tool, under the catching (and accurate) headline "WikiLeaks' latest release of CIA cyber-tools could blow the cover on agency hacking operations." That was apparently before Nakashima "got the memo." Mainstream media have otherwise avoided like the

plague any mention of Marble.

Mr. President, we do not know if CIA's Marble, or tools like it, played some kind of role in the campaign to blame Russia for hacking the DNC. Nor do we know how candid the denizens of CIA's Directorate of Digital Innovation have been with the White House – or with former Director Pompeo – on this touchy issue. Since it is still quite relevant, we will repeat below a paragraph included in our July 2017 Memorandum to you under the sub-heading "Putin and the Technology:"

*"We also do not know if you have discussed cyber issues in any detail with President Putin. In his interview with NBC's Megyn Kelly, he seemed quite willing – perhaps even eager – to address issues related to the kind of cyber tools revealed in the Vault 7 disclosures, if only to indicate he has been briefed on them. Putin pointed out that today's technology enables hacking to be "masked and camouflaged to an extent that no one can understand the origin" [of the hack] ... And, vice versa, it is possible to set up any entity or any individual that everyone will think that they are the exact source of that attack. Hackers may be anywhere," he said. "There may be hackers, by the way, in the United States who very craftily and professionally passed the buck to Russia. Can't you imagine such a scenario? ... I can."*

As we told Attorney General Barr five weeks ago, we consider Mueller's findings fundamentally flawed on the forensics side and *ipso facto* incomplete. We also criticized Mueller for failing to interview willing witnesses with direct

knowledge, like *WikiLeaks*' Julian Assange.

## **Political Enemies & Mainstream Media (Forgive the Redundancy)**

You may be unaware that in March 2017 lawyers for Assange and the Justice Department (acting on behalf of the CIA) reportedly were very close to an agreement under which Assange would agree to discuss “technical evidence ruling out certain parties” in the leak of the DNC emails and agree to redact some classified CIA information, in exchange for limited immunity. According to the investigative reporter John Solomon of *The Hill*, Sen. Mark Warner, (D-VA) vice chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee, learned of the incipient deal and told then-FBI Director Comey, who ordered an abrupt “stand down” and an end to the discussions with Assange.

Why did Comey and Warner put the kibosh on receiving “technical evidence ruling out certain parties” [read Russia]? We won't insult you with the obvious answer. Assange is now in prison, to the delight of so many – including Mrs. Clinton who has said Assange must now “answer for what he has done.”

But is it too late to follow up somehow on Assange's offer? Might he or his associates be still willing to provide “technical evidence” showing, at least, who was *not* the culprit?

You, Mr. President, could cause that to happen. You would have to buck strong resistance at every turn, and there all manner of ways that those with vested interests and a lot of practice in sabotage can try to thwart you – with the full

cooperation of most media pundits. By now, you know all too well how that works.

But you are the president. And there may be no better time than now to face them down, show the spurious nature of the concocted “evidence” attempting to put you in “Putin’s pocket,” and – not least – lift the cloud that has prevented you from pursuing a more decent relationship with Russia.

*For the Steering Group, Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity*

**William Binney**, former Technical Director, World Geopolitical & Military Analysis, NSA; co-founder, SIGINT Automation Research Center (ret.)

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**Clement J. Laniewski**, LTC, U.S. Army (ret.)

**Linda Lewis**, WMD preparedness policy analyst, USDA (ret.)

**Edward Loomis**, NSA Cryptologic Computer Scientist (ret.)

**David MacMichael**, former Senior Estimates Officer, National Intelligence Council (ret.)

**Ray McGovern**, former US Army infantry/intelligence officer & CIA presidential briefer (ret.)

**Elizabeth Murray**, former Deputy National Intelligence Officer for the Near East & CIA political analyst (ret.)

**Todd E. Pierce**, MAJ, US Army Judge Advocate (ret.)

**Peter Van Buren**, U.S. Department of State, Foreign Service Officer (ret.) (associate VIPS)

**Robert Wing**, U.S. Department of State, Foreign Service Officer (former) (associate VIPS)

**Ann Wright**, U.S. Army Reserve Colonel (ret) and former U.S. Diplomat who resigned in 2003 in opposition to the Iraq War

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VIPS Urge Trump to Avoid War in

# Venezuela

VIPS warn that Trump's policies regarding Venezuela appear to be on a slippery slope that could take us toward war in Venezuela and military confrontation with Russia.

**MEMORANDUM FOR:** The President

**FROM:** Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS)

**SUBJECT:** Avoiding War with Russia over Venezuela

Mr. President:

Your Administration's policies regarding Venezuela appear to be on a slippery slope that could take us toward war in Venezuela and military confrontation with Russia. As former intelligence officers and other national security practitioners with many decades of experience, we urge you not to let yourself be egged on into taking potentially catastrophic military action in response to civil unrest in Venezuela or Russian activities in the Western Hemisphere. With the recent arrival of two transport aircraft and enduring political support for the government of Venezuela, the Russians are far from crossing any "red line" emanating from the 1823 Monroe Doctrine.

## **Unfulfilled Objectives in Venezuela**

Inside Venezuela, U.S. actions have failed to do more than plunge the country into deeper crisis, cause greater human suffering, and increase the prospects of violence on a national scale. President Maduro's mishandling of the economy and authoritarian reactions to provocations are impossible to defend, but they result in part from the fact

that he has been under siege since he was first elected in 2013 and has faced sanctions aimed ultimately at removing him from office. In our view, the advice you've received from your top advisors – Florida Senator Marco Rubio, National Security Advisor John Bolton, Special Representative Elliott Abrams, and Secretary of State Michael Pompeo – was and apparently continues to be wrong.

- Recognition of Venezuelan National Assembly President Juan Guaidó as “interim president” did not prompt the military to rise up against President Maduro. Neither did attacking the officer corps as merely corrupt opportunists and drug-traffickers enriched through loyalty to former President Chávez and Maduro, nor did repeatedly threatening them with harsher sanctions. Those actions reflected a fundamental misunderstanding about the Venezuelan military, which has never been free of corruption and political compromise but has also never been so totally isolated from the Venezuelan people that it hasn't felt their suffering. U.S. policies incorrectly assumed that the officers – while probably fed up with Maduro's shortcomings – would support Guaidó despite his faction's commitment to dismantle *Chavismo*, which most officers believe brought historically necessary changes to the country, including enfranchisement of the poor.

Similarly, your Administration's repeated hints at military intervention have been counterproductive to your regime-change objectives. Your policy and intelligence advisors were correct in interpreting the disparate polling data showing popular support for Guaidó as actually being support

for the U.S. to extricate the country from its crisis – the National Assembly President was a political unknown until the United States and others recognized his claim to the Presidency – but your team showed a lack of understanding of Venezuelan nationalism. Venezuelans do not welcome the destruction that would be caused by U.S. military attack; they recall the death toll of Operation Just Cause, when the United States killed more than 3,000 Panamanians (by its own count) to remove one corrupt authoritarian, Manuel Noriega. Threats of invasion have pushed people to circle around Maduro, however reluctantly, not reject him.

- Your Administration's strategy of punishing the Venezuelan people, including apparently knocking out their electricity, seems based on the false assumption that humanitarian crisis will prompt a coup to remove Maduro. In fact, the U.S. sanctions have allowed Maduro to shift blame from his own failings to U.S. malice – and it has left Guaidó, whom your advisors portray as the moral equivalent of our Founders, looking like a sell-out to Yankee imperialists at the cost of the Venezuelan people's health and welfare and magnified civil disorder.

### **Lost Opportunity for Diplomacy**

Senator Rubio, Mr. Bolton, Mr. Abrams, and Mr. Pompeo have also squandered a formidable moment to build on common values with allies in Latin America and Europe. Even though most Latin Americans find your aides' public assertion that the Monroe Doctrine is alive and well to be insulting, the right-leaning Presidents of most of South and Central America rallied with you to support Guaidó's self-

proclamation. But Guaidó's lack of leadership – he appears totally scripted by U.S. Government agencies – his inflexibility on negotiations, his open call for U.S. military intervention, and your own Administration's dangling threat of war are rapidly alienating all but the most subservient to U.S. policy dictates. Negotiation proposals, such as those being developed by the International Contact Group, are gaining momentum.

### **Internationalizing the Conflict**

National Security Advisor Bolton and others have sought to internationalize the Venezuela issue since before Guaidó's proclamation. Bolton's reference to a "Troika of Tyranny" in November – which he called "a triangle of terror stretching from Havana to Caracas to Managua" and "sordid cradle of communism in the Western Hemisphere" – was a veiled Cold War-era swipe at Russia and China. Mr. Bolton, Senator Rubio, and other advisors have made clear on numerous occasions that the overthrow of President Maduro would be just the first stage in efforts to eliminate the current governments of the "Troika" and "Communist influence" in the Western Hemisphere.

- They have repeatedly asserted that Cuban advisors have been crucial to the Maduro government's survival without providing evidence. Indeed, the reportedly "hundreds" of Venezuelan military defectors, including many managed by U.S. agencies, have not provided even credible hearsay evidence that Cubans are doing more than providing routine assistance. In addition, the threats coming out of Washington have preempted any willingness that Cuba might have had to contribute to a regional solution to

the Venezuelan crisis as it has in similar situations, such as Colombia's recent peace process, the Angola peace process in 1989-90, and the Central American negotiations in the early 1990s.

### **Provocative Rhetoric about Russia**

Most dangerous, however, are aggressive statements about Russia's engagement with Venezuela. Russian oil companies, particular Rosneft, have long been in Venezuela – bailing out the Venezuelan petroleum company (PDVSA) as its mismanagement and falling oil prices have caused production and revenues to plummet. Most long-term observers believe Rosneft's decisions, including throwing good money after bad, have been motivated by business calculations, without a particularly ideological objective.

- Your advisors' rhetoric imposing an East-West spin on the issue presented President Putin and his advisors an opportunity to try to poke the United States in the eye – especially as Administration efforts to remove Maduro foundered and diplomatic support for Guaidó cracked. Maduro and Putin have not enjoyed particularly close personal relations in the past, and their shared strategic interests are few, but U.S. rhetoric and threats have given them common cause in tweaking us. A meeting in Rome between your special envoy, Elliot Abrams, and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov achieved nothing amid further U.S. sanctions against Venezuela and continued threats that “all options” were on the table.

Publicly available information is insufficient for us to

know exactly what was aboard the two Russian aircraft that landed at Maiquetía last week – two months after your Administration publicly proclaimed its intention to remove Maduro – but precedent suggests Moscow had two main objectives.

- One, and probably primary, is to embarrass your Administration by defying your rhetoric, just to rub your nose in Moscow's sovereign right to have the relations, including military liaison, with whomever it pleases. In this sense, Russian behavior resembles its intervention, at Bashar al-Assad's request, in Syria. And it is not a far cry from Moscow's reaction to the Western-supported coup in Kiev.
- Another objective, if press speculation about the Russian advisors and equipment aboard the aircraft is correct, would be to shore up Venezuela's ability to warn of and respond to a U.S. military strike. Your Administration has publicly asserted that the Russians are helping repair S-300 surface-to-air missile systems, which have a *purely defensive* purpose. There is no evidence, not even circumstantial, that Russia has any offensive objectives in this relationship.

The U.S. reaction has suggested a much greater chance of military confrontation. Mr. Bolton "strongly caution[ed] actors external to the Western Hemisphere against deploying military assets to Venezuela, or elsewhere in the Hemisphere, with the intent of establishing or expanding military operations." Without defining what activities he would object to, Mr. Bolton said, "We will consider such provocative actions as a direct threat to international

peace and security in the region.” Your Special Representative said the “Russian presence” is “extremely pernicious.” Your Secretary of State said, “Russia’s got to leave Venezuela.” You said, “Russia has to get out” and reiterated that “all options are open” – including presumably forcing the Russians out militarily. And we note that Russia has not closed its embassy in Caracas as your Administration has.

### **Avoiding the Slippery Slope**

As intelligence officers and security experts, we have given many years to protecting our nation from a host of threats, including from the Soviet Union. We also believe, however, that picking fights, including ousting governments, blocking negotiated settlements, and threatening other countries’ sovereign decision to pursue activities that do not threaten our national security – is rarely the wise way to go.

We repeat that we are not defending Maduro and his record, while at the same time pointing out that many of his troubles have been exacerbated by U.S. policies and efforts to oust him. We believe that due process and practical, realistic policies better protect our national interests than threats and confrontational rhetoric. It strains credulity to believe that your advisors picked this fight with President Maduro without realizing that Venezuela would seek help fixing its defensive capabilities.

Moreover and very seriously, rhetoric challenging Russia could all too easily lead to a much more consequential confrontation.

- Invoking the 1823 Monroe Doctrine is unhelpful. For

Russia to provide assistance for purely defensive purposes to a country in which we seek to create regime change and threaten military attack would not be widely seen as violating the Monroe Doctrine or crossing a “red line.”

- We realize that some in the media are trying to egg you on into taking forceful action, perhaps even of a military nature, to punish Russia in any case. We urge you not to fall into this trap. This is not 19th century Latin America, and it is a far cry from the Cuba missile crisis of 1962.
- The best way to prevent dangerous miscalculation would be for you to speak directly with President Putin. Washington’s energies would be better spent clearing up differences, adjusting failed policies, and promoting a peaceful resolution in Venezuela.

***For the Steering Group, Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity***

**Fulton Armstrong**, former National Intelligence Officer for Latin America & former National Security Council Director for Inter-American Affairs (ret.)

**William Binney**, former Technical Director, World Geopolitical & Military Analysis, NSA; co-founder, SIGINT Automation Research Center (ret.)

**Richard H. Black**, Senator of Virginia, 13th District; Colonel US Army (ret.); Former Chief, Criminal Law Division, Office of the Judge Advocate General, the Pentagon (associate VIPS)

**Marshall Carter-Tripp**, Foreign Service Officer & former

Division Director in the State Department Bureau of Intelligence and Research (ret.)

**Bogdan Dzakovic**, Former Team Leader of Federal Air Marshals and Red Team, FAA Security, (ret.) (associate VIPS)

**Philip Giraldi**, CIA, Operations Officer (ret.)

**Mike Gravel**, former Adjutant, top secret control officer, Communications Intelligence Service; special agent of the Counter Intelligence Corps and former United States Senator

**Matthew Hoh**, former Capt., USMC, Iraq; former Foreign Service Officer, Afghanistan (associate VIPS)

**Larry Johnson**, former CIA Intelligence Officer & former State Department Counter-Terrorism Official, (ret.)

**Michael S. Kearns**, Captain, USAF (ret.); ex-Master SERE Instructor for Strategic Reconnaissance Operations (NSA/DIA) and Special Mission Units (JSOC)

**John Kiriakou**, former CIA Counterterrorism Officer and former Senior Investigator, Senate Foreign Relations Committee

**Karen Kwiatkowski**, former Lt. Col., US Air Force (ret.), at Office of Secretary of Defense watching the manufacture of lies on Iraq, 2001-2003

**Clement J. Laniewski**, LTC, U.S. Army (ret.)

**Linda Lewis**, WMD preparedness policy analyst, USDA (ret.)

**Edward Loomis**, NSA Cryptologic Computer Scientist (ret.)

**David MacMichael**, former Senior Estimates Officer, National Intelligence Council (ret.)

**Ray McGovern**, former US Army infantry/intelligence officer & CIA presidential briefer (ret.)

**Elizabeth Murray**, former Deputy National Intelligence Officer for the Near East & CIA political analyst (ret.)

**Todd E. Pierce**, MAJ, US Army Judge Advocate (ret.)

**Coleen Rowley**, FBI Special Agent and former Minneapolis Division Legal Counsel (ret.)

**Peter Van Buren**, U.S. Department of State, Foreign Service Officer (ret.) (associate VIPS)

**Larry Wilkerson**, Colonel, U.S. Army (ret.), former Chief of Staff for Secretary of State; Distinguished Visiting Professor, College of William and Mary

**Sarah Wilton**, Commander, U.S. Naval Reserve (ret.) and Defense Intelligence Agency (ret.)

**Ann Wright**, U.S. Army Reserve Colonel (ret) and former U.S. Diplomat who resigned in 2003 in opposition to the Iraq War

**Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS)** is made up of former intelligence officers, diplomats, military officers and congressional staffers. The organization, founded in 2002, was among the first critics of Washington's justifications for launching a war against Iraq. VIPS advocates a US foreign and national security policy based on genuine national interests rather than contrived threats promoted for largely political reasons. An archive of VIPS memoranda is available at [Consortiumnews.com](http://Consortiumnews.com).

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