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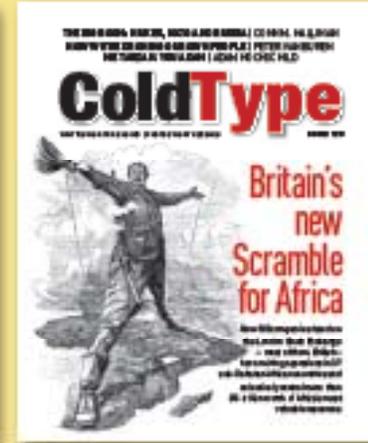
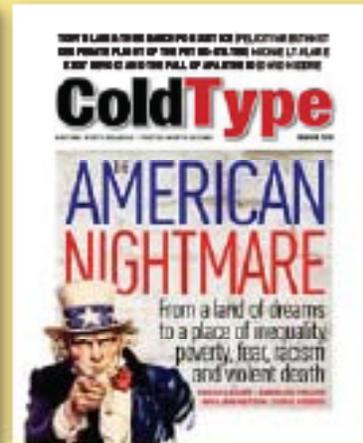
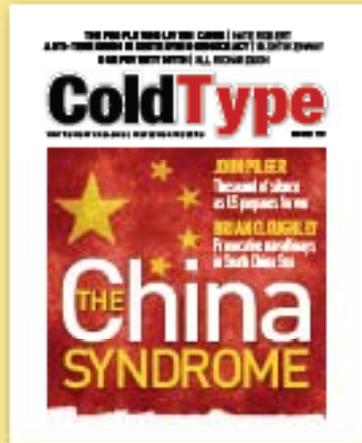
ISSUE 134

COLD WAR COLD STORE



Danila Tkachenko discovers the secret burial grounds of weapons from a 45-year political conflict that might have wiped out civilisation

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Homage to Havana – Pages 18-23

Photo: Thomas S. Harrington

Big Reads

4. **Corporate dark money is taking power**
By George Monbiot
8. **Sign language**
Photographing the Trump protests
10. **Investing in the military and little else**
By William Hartung
14. **Coca Cola fights plans to tackle plastic waste**
By Maeve McClenaghan
18. **Homage to Havana**
By Thomas S. Harrington
24. **Blundering into war on China**
By Conn M. Hallinan
28. **How media bias undermines democracy**
By David Edwards
33. **Cold War cold store**
By Danila Tkachenko / Tony Sutton
37. **Billionaires, not 'fake news,' are the problem,**
By Justin Schlosberg and Des Freedman

Insights (Pages 41-47)

41. **Judy Molland** on voter fraud; 42. **Kit Knightly** on hype, hysteria and the Muslim ban;
43. **Mark Hurwitt** on Trump's immigration bomb; 44. **Ian Dunt** on a bad week for
Theresa May; 46 **William Blum** on fake news, walls, murders and weapons shortages.



Cover

Abandoned Russian diesel submarine. From Restricted Areas, by Danila Tkachenko (published by Dewi Lewis). See pages 33-33.

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Corporate dark money is taking power

A web of lobbyists has long held sway in US politics. Now their allies in the UK government are planning a Brexit that plays into their hands, writes **George Monbiot**

Few people would see a tobacco company as a credible source on public health, or a coal company as a neutral commentator on climate change

It took corporate America a while to warm to Donald Trump. Some of his positions, especially on trade, horrified business leaders. Many of them favoured Ted Cruz or Scott Walker. But once Trump had secured the nomination, the big money began to recognise an unprecedented opportunity.

Trump was prepared not only to promote the cause of corporations in government, but also to turn government into a kind of corporation, staffed and run by executives and lobbyists. His incoherence was not a liability, but an opening: his agenda could be shaped. And the dark money network already developed by some American corporations was perfectly positioned to shape it.

Dark money is the term used in the US for the funding of organisations involved in political advocacy that are not obliged to disclose where the money comes from. Few people would see a tobacco company as a credible source on public health, or a coal company as a neutral commentator on climate change. In order to advance their political interests, such companies must pay others to speak on their behalf.

Soon after the second world war, some of America's richest people began setting up a network of thinktanks to promote their interests. These purport to offer dispassionate opinions on public affairs. But they are more like corporate lobbyists, working on behalf

of those who fund them.

We have no hope of understanding what is coming until we understand how the dark money network operates. The remarkable story of a British member of parliament provides a unique insight into this network, on both sides of the Atlantic. His name is Liam Fox. Six years ago, his political career seemed to be over when he resigned as defence secretary after being caught mixing his private and official interests. But today he is back on the government front bench, and with a crucial portfolio: secretary of state for international trade.

Thatcher was organisation's patron

In 1997, the year the Conservatives lost office to Tony Blair, Fox, who is on the hard right of the Conservative party, founded an organisation called the Atlantic Bridge. Its patron was Margaret Thatcher. On its advisory council sat future cabinet ministers Michael Gove, George Osborne, William Hague and Chris Grayling. Fox, a leading campaigner for Brexit, described the mission of Atlantic Bridge as "to bring people together who have common interests." It would defend these interests from "European integrationists who would like to pull Britain away from its relationship with the United States."

The diplomatic mission Liam Fox developed through Atlantic Bridge plugs him

straight into the Trump administration

Atlantic Bridge was later registered as a charity. In fact it was part of the UK's own dark money network: only after it collapsed did we discover the full story of who had funded it. Its main sponsor was the immensely rich Michael Hintze, who worked at Goldman Sachs before setting up the hedge fund CQS. Hintze is one of the Conservative party's biggest donors. In 2012 he was revealed as a funder of the Global Warming Policy Foundation, which casts doubt on the science of climate change. As well as making cash grants and loans to Atlantic Bridge, he lent Fox his private jet to fly to and from Washington.

Another funder was the pharmaceutical company Pfizer. It paid for a researcher at Atlantic Bridge called Gabby Bertin. She went on to become David Cameron's press secretary, and now sits in the House of Lords: Cameron gave her a life peerage in his resignation honours list.

In 2007, a group called the American Legislative Exchange Council (Alec) set up a sister organisation, the Atlantic Bridge Project. Alec is perhaps the most controversial corporate-funded thinktank in the US. It specialises in bringing together corporate lobbyists with state and federal legislators to develop "model bills." The legislators and their families enjoy lavish hospitality from the group, then take the model bills home with them, to promote as if they were their own initiatives.

Alec has claimed that more than 1,000 of its bills are introduced by legislators every year, and one in five of them becomes law.

It has been heavily funded by tobacco companies, the oil company Exxon, drug companies and Charles and David Koch – the billionaires who founded the first Tea Party organisations. Pfizer, which funded Bertin's post at Atlantic Bridge, sits on Alec's corporate board. Some of the most contentious legislation in recent years, such as state bills lowering the minimum wage, bills granting corporations immunity from prosecution and the "ag-gag" laws – forbidding people to investigate factory farming practices – were developed by Alec.

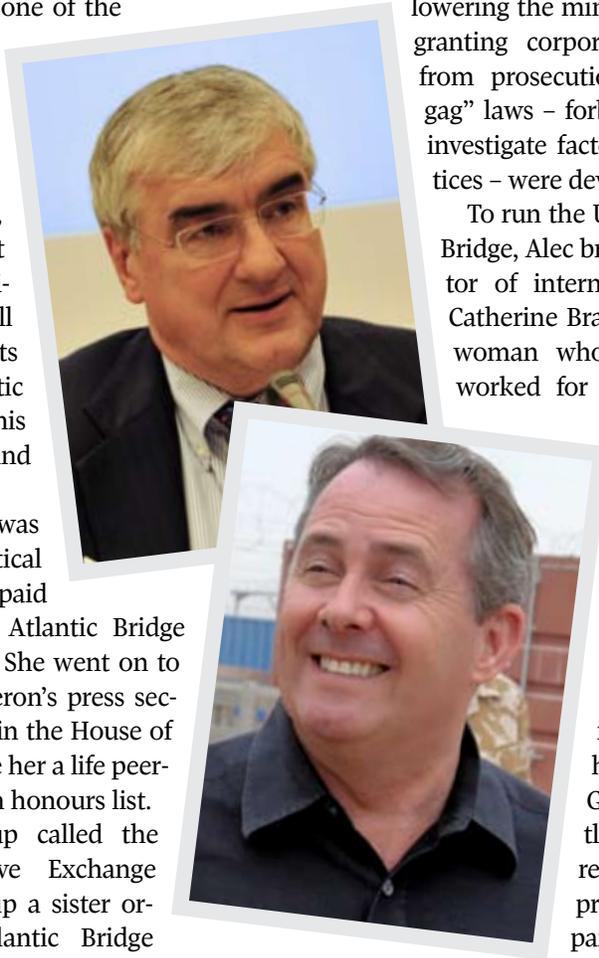
To run the US arm of Atlantic Bridge, Alec brought in its director of international relations, Catherine Bray. She is a British woman who had previously worked for the Conservative

MEP Richard Ashworth and the Ukip MEP Roger Helmer. Bray has subsequently worked for Conservative MEP and Brexit campaigner Daniel Hannan. Her husband is Wells Griffith, the battleground states director for Trump's presidential campaign.

Among the members of Atlantic Bridge's US advisory council were the ultra-conservative senators James Inhofe, Jon Kyl and Jim DeMint. Inhofe is reported to have received more than \$2-million in campaign finance from coal and oil companies. Both Koch Industries and ExxonMobil have been major donors.

Kyl, now retired, is currently acting as the "sherpa" guiding Jeff Sessions's nomination as Trump's attorney general through the Senate. Jim DeMint resigned his seat in

As well as making cash grants and loans to Atlantic Bridge, Hintze lent Fox his private jet to fly to and from Washington



Above, left:
Liam Fox, founder of Atlantic Bridge.
Left:
Michael Hintze, the organisation's main sponsor

Behind The Web

Trump's extraordinary plan to cut federal spending by \$10.5-trillion was drafted by the Heritage Foundation, which called it a "blueprint for a new administration"

the Senate to become president of the Heritage Foundation – the thinktank founded with a grant from Joseph Coors of the Coors brewing empire, and built up with money from the banking and oil billionaire Richard Mellon Scaife. Like Alec, it has been richly funded by the Koch brothers. Heritage, under DeMint's presidency, drove the attempt to ensure that Congress blocked the federal budget, temporarily shutting down the government in 2013. Fox's former special adviser at the Ministry of Defence, an American called Luke Coffey, now works for the foundation.

At heart of Trump administration

The Heritage Foundation is now at the heart of Trump's administration. Its board members, fellows and staff comprise a large part of his transition team. Among them are Rebekah Mercer, who sits on Trump's executive committee; Steven Groves and Jim Carafano (State Department); Curtis Dubay (Treasury); and Ed Meese, Paul Winfree, Russ Vought and John Gray (management and budget). CNN reports that "no other Washington institution has that kind of footprint in the transition."

Trump's extraordinary plan to cut federal spending by \$10.5-trillion was drafted by the Heritage Foundation, which called it a "blueprint for a new administration." Vought and Gray, who moved on to Trump's team from Heritage, are now turning this blueprint into his first budget.

This will, if passed, inflict devastating cuts on healthcare, social security, legal aid, financial regulation and environmental protections; eliminate programmes to prevent violence against women, defend civil rights and fund the arts; and will privatise the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Trump, as you follow this story, begins to look less like a president and more like an intermediary, implementing an agenda that has been handed down to him.

In July last year, soon after he became trade secretary, Liam Fox flew to Washing-

ton. One of his first stops was a place he has visited often over the past 15 years: the office of the Heritage Foundation, where he spoke to, among others, Jim DeMint. A freedom of information request reveals that one of the topics raised at the meeting was the European ban on American chicken washed in chlorine: a ban that producers hope the UK will lift under a new trade agreement. Afterwards, Fox wrote to DeMint, looking forward to "working with you as the new UK government develops its trade policy priorities, including in high value areas that we discussed such as defence."

How did Fox get to be in this position, after the scandal that brought him down in 2011? The scandal itself provides a clue: it involved a crossing of the boundaries between public and private interests. The man who ran the UK branch of Atlantic Bridge was his friend Adam Werritty, who operated out of Michael Hintze's office building. Werritty's work became entangled with Fox's official business as defence secretary. Werritty, who carried a business card naming him as Fox's adviser, but was never employed by the Ministry of Defence, joined the secretary of state on numerous ministerial visits overseas, and made frequent visits to Fox's office.

By the time details of this relationship began to leak, the charity commission had investigated Atlantic Bridge and determined that its work didn't look very charitable. It had to pay back the tax from which it had been exempted (Hintze picked up the bill). In response, the trustees shut the organisation down. As the story about Werritty's unauthorised involvement in government business began to grow, Fox made a number of misleading statements. He was left with no choice but to resign.

When Theresa May brought Fox back into government, it was as strong a signal as we might receive about the intentions of her government. The trade treaties that Fox is charged with developing set the limits of sovereignty. US food and environmental standards tend to be lower than Britain's,

and will become lower still if Trump gets his way. Any trade treaty we strike will create a common set of standards for products and services. Trump's administration will demand that ours are adjusted downwards, so that US corporations can penetrate our markets without having to modify their practices. All the cards, post-Brexit vote, are in US hands: if the UK doesn't cooperate, there will be no trade deal.

May needed someone who is unlikely to resist. She chose Fox, who has become an indispensable member of her team. The shadow diplomatic mission he developed through Atlantic Bridge plugs him straight into the Trump administration.

Corrupt political system

Long before Trump won, campaign funding in the US had systematically corrupted the political system. A new analysis by US political scientists finds an almost perfect linear relationship, across 32 years, between the money gathered by the two parties for congressional elections and their share of the vote. But there has also been a shift over these years: corporate donors have come to

dominate this funding.

By tying our fortunes to those of the United States, the UK government binds us into this system. This is part of what Brexit was about: European laws protecting the public interest were portrayed by Conservative Eurosceptics as intolerable intrusions on corporate freedom. Taking back control from Europe means closer integration with the US. The transatlantic special relationship is a special relationship between political and corporate power. That power is cemented by the networks Liam Fox helped to develop.

In April 1938, President Franklin Roosevelt sent the US Congress the following warning: "The liberty of a democracy is not safe if the people tolerate the growth of private power to a point where it becomes stronger than their democratic state itself. That, in its essence, is fascism." It is a warning we would do well to remember. **CT**

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George Monbiot's latest book, How Did We Get Into This Mess?, is published by Verso. This article was first published in the Guardian newspaper. Monbiot's web site is www.monbiot.com

A new analysis by US political scientists finds an almost perfect linear relationship, across 32 years, between the money gathered by the two parties for congressional elections and their share of the vote

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In The Picture



Sign language

At the end of Donald Trump's first week as US president, he issued an order preventing residents of seven mainly-Muslim countries from entering the USA. His ban – now suspended – led to massive protests on both sides of the Atlantic. Here are a few of our favourite signs from those protests – *Editor*



Above: Paul Weaver, Williamsport, PA.

Above, left: Neeta Lind, Washington, DC.

Left: Steve Eason, London, England.

Right: Quinn Norton, San Francisco, CA.

Far Right: Terry Holt, Boston, MA.





Investing in the military and little else

William Hartung wonders what will happen when all America has left to solve its problems are the Pentagon and a clumsy set of magical military solutions

This drastic tilt toward yet more Pentagon spending and away from investment in diplomacy abroad and civilian needs at home will only further militarise American society, accelerate inequality, and distort the country's already highly questionable foreign policy

At over \$600-billion a year and counting, the Pentagon already receives significantly more than its fair share of federal funds. If President Donald Trump has his way, though, that will prove a sum for pikers and misers. He and his team are now promising that spending on defence and homeland security will increase dramatically in the years to come, even as domestic programs are slashed and entire civilian agencies shuttered.

The new administration is reportedly considering a plan – modelled on proposals from the military-industrial-complex-backed Heritage Foundation – that would cut a staggering \$10.5-trillion in federal spending over the next decade. The Departments of Energy, Commerce, Transportation, and State might see their budgets slashed to the bone; the Corporation for Public Broadcasting would be privatised; and (though the money involved would amount to chicken feed) the National Endowments for the Arts and for the Humanities would be eliminated altogether. In the meantime, the ranks of the Army and Marines would be expanded, a huge naval buildup would be launched, and a new Star Wars-style missile defence system would be developed – all at a combined cost of up to \$1-trillion beyond the already munificent current Pentagon plans for that same decade.

The specifics won't be known until Trump's first budget becomes public in perhaps April

or May, but as we wait for it, Republican Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman John McCain has just taken the unusual step of releasing his own spending blueprint for the military. It suggests that a key senator and the president and his team are on the same page when it comes to military funding. At an extra \$430-billion over the next five years, the numbers in McCain's plan are similar to the potential Trump buildup.

One thing is already clear: this drastic tilt toward yet more Pentagon spending and away from investment in diplomacy abroad and civilian needs at home will only further militarise American society, accelerate inequality, and distort the country's already highly questionable foreign policy. After all, if your military is the only well-funded, well-stocked arm of the government, it's obvious whom you're going to turn to in any crisis.

This process was already visibly under way even before Donald Trump took the oath of office. His gut decision to entrust national security policymaking only to military figures was particularly troubling. From National Security Adviser Michael Flynn to Secretary of Defense James Mattis to head of the Department of Homeland Security John Kelly, retired generals and other ex-military types now abound in his administration. Defence analyst and former White House budget official Gordon Adams summed up the risks of this approach recently in this way:

“Putting military officers in charge of the entire architecture of national security reinforces the trend toward militarising policy and risks cementing in place ‘the military-industrial complex’ that President Dwight D. Eisenhower warned of. To borrow the psychologist Abraham H. Maslow’s words, if all the men around President Trump are hammers, the temptation will be ‘to treat everything as if it were a nail.’”

How the military dominates foreign policy

President Trump won’t, of course, be starting from scratch in his urge to further elevate the military in foreign and domestic affairs. He’s building on a process that’s already well under way. In the Obama years, for instance, there were a record number of drone strikes, especially outside official US war zones – ten times the number launched by the Bush administration. Similarly, the Obama administration paved the way for various Trumpian urges by waging wars on multiple fronts and instituting a historic crackdown on whistleblowers in the military and the intelligence communities. It also approved record levels of US arms sales abroad, \$278-billion worth of them, or more than double those of the Bush years. (In Trumpian terms: jobs!)

In addition, as part of his pledge to avoid large, “boots-on-the-ground” conflicts like the Bush administration’s 2003 invasion of Iraq, President Obama oversaw a sharp increase in the size of the US Special Operations forces, sending them abroad to arm, train, and fight alongside militaries in 138 countries in 2016. Think of this approach – having a “lighter footprint” while expanding the number of conflicts the United States is involved in – as a case of what I’ve called “politically sustainable warfare.” It seems cheaper, is far less visible, and involves fewer US casualties than full-scale invasions and occupations.

In these years, the Pentagon has also continued to encroach on turf previously occupied by the State Department and the Agency for International Development, in-

cluding funding its own arms and training programs and engaging in economic development projects. Under the euphemistic term “building partner capacity,” the Pentagon now has the authority to arm and train foreign military forces through no less than 70 separate programs.

To be fair, the drift toward military dominance of foreign policy began well before Barack Obama took office. In her 2003 book *The Mission*, Dana Priest of the Washington Post described the increasing role of regional combatant commanders in shaping policy-making in Washington. They could leverage their greater resources and close connections to foreign leaders to outstrip US ambassadors in power and influence. And their growing role was just a symptom of a larger problem that Priest described at the time and that has only become more obvious in the years since: the urge of American leaders to turn to the military for solutions to problems “that are often, at their root, political and economic.” As retired General Anthony Zinni, former head of the US Central Command, noted for instance, “There is no military solution to terrorism.” That’s a conclusion shared by other American military leaders, but one that has had little effect on US efforts to use force as the primary tool for combatting terrorism in countries like Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Yemen, a process that has only led to more failed and failing states and the further spread of terror groups.

Donald Trump may indeed gut the diplomatic corps, but don’t forget that State Department funding was long ago overwhelmed by the largesse available to what the new president regularly refers to as our “depleted” military. The Pentagon’s budget is today more than twelve times as large as the State Department’s, a disparity sure to grow in the years to come. As former Defense Secretary Robert Gates noted some years ago, there are more military personnel stationed on one aircraft carrier task force than trained diplomats in the US Foreign Service. And keep in mind that the United States currently has ten

The Obama administration paved the way for various Trumpian urges by waging wars on multiple fronts and instituting a historic crackdown on whistleblowers in the military and the intelligence communities

Arms Bonanza

Expect the Cheney model of intelligence manufacturing to be replicated, especially by Flynn, whose extreme views include a belief that Islam is not a real religion, and that Iran is the “linchpin” of a global anti-American coalition of enemies extending from Cuba and Venezuela to North Korea, China, and Russia

active aircraft carriers, which themselves will be just a small part of the Trump administration’s proposed 350-ship Navy.

Even the intelligence community is likely to be further militarised in the Trump years. While he was head of the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), National Security Advisor Michael Flynn tried to increase its influence at the expense of the CIA. Expect him to attempt to seize control of the nation’s intelligence apparatus and put it in service to his own distorted view of the world. From failing to predict the collapse of the Soviet Union to allowing itself to be used to put forward misleading information about Saddam Hussein’s alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction, the US Intelligence Community has hardly covered itself in glory. Still, it does contain a cadre of professional analysts who can provide sitting presidents with actual information contradicting prevailing prejudices. This was even true in the case of Iraq, where a number of analysts dissented from the claim that Iraq had nuclear weapons, while others only acquiesced after being browbeaten by Vice President Dick Cheney and the band of neo-conservatives in his office.

In the years to come, expect the Cheney model of intelligence manufacturing to be replicated, especially by Flynn, whose extreme views include a belief that Islam is not a real religion, that Iran is the “linchpin” of a global anti-American coalition of enemies extending from Cuba and Venezuela to North Korea, China, and Russia, and that Islamic “Sharia law” is actually being imposed in parts of our country. Flynn’s views on Islam would have been beyond the pale for a top adviser in any prior administration. Now, however, he’s positioned to regularly press his views on Donald Trump, who doesn’t read and seems inclined to believe the last person he talks to.

To imagine how Flynn might wield his new power, consider his attempt, while still at the DIA, to get subordinates to prove that Iran was the “hidden hand” behind the 2012 attacks on the US compound in Benghazi, Libya, that resulted in the death of Ambas-

sador J. Christopher Stephens. As the New York Times reported, “Like many other investigations into Benghazi, theirs found no evidence of any links, and the general’s stubborn insistence reminded some officials at the agency of how the Bush administration had once relentlessly sought to connect Saddam Hussein and Iraq to the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.”

Poised to purge the CIA of differing opinions

Trump and his men now seem poised to purge the CIA and other intelligence agencies of analysts who might have opinions contrary to their own fantasy view of the world. Expect Flynn, in particular, to try to shape the intelligence community’s products towards his ends while serving as interpreter of last resort for the president. Getting Trump to swallow intelligence assessments skewed toward his particular set of prejudices and inclinations should be an easy feat, given that he can’t even acknowledge the size of the crowd at his own inauguration or let go of the demonstrably false claim that millions of undocumented immigrants voted illegally in the 2016 election.

The only likely obstacle to Flynn’s ambitions to impose his twisted view of the world on Trump is the other “big league” Islamophobe in the administration, White House counsellor Steve Bannon. As a recent New York Times account noted, Bannon has already attempted to outmanoeuvre Flynn in the battle for access to the president on foreign policy issues and his elevation to the National Security Council at the expense of the head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the director of national intelligence is just the latest indication of how influential he’s likely to be in shaping Trump’s foreign policy agenda. This is hardly good news, as on certain issues he may be even more extreme than Flynn, if that’s possible.

Trump’s predictably militarised approach to policymaking could have serious impacts on the domestic front as well. On his fifth day in office, for example, he threatened by

tweet to “send in the Feds” to Chicago if the city government didn’t take steps to “end the carnage” there. It was unclear whether he meant federal law enforcement personnel or federal troops, a vagueness troubling in its own right. And don’t forget that his pledge to “build a wall” ensures a significant jump in funding for the further militarisation of the US-Mexico border, already being patrolled by unarmed drones and growing numbers of armed federal agents. After all, it took him just days after his inauguration to announce a plan to add 5,000 personnel to the Border Patrol and 10,000 agents to the Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency.

Undermining democracy

As in all matters Trumpian, some will say we shouldn’t take him at his word, or that we should wait for his first budget proposal and other such documents to see what he’s really going to do. But the evidence is already abundant that the Trump administration is on a path toward undermining our democracy by pouring taxpayer dollars galore into the US military. This will happen despite the fact that, 15 years after 9/11, that military has won nothing and settled no conflicts to Washington’s advantage, even as terror groups have spread across the Greater Middle East and Africa. It’s a decade-and-a-half-long record that should lead to almost any other set of plans than the ones the Trump administration clearly has in mind. But don’t tell them. They could care less.

Frightening as it may be, it’s important to recognise that Trump’s impulse to further militarise American society is by no means a done deal. Democrats in the Senate are in a position to stop him by voting as a bloc against any proposal to dramatically ratchet up spending on the Pentagon, which would deprive Republicans of the 60 votes they need to move forward on a spending proposal. In addition, the new president’s plans to pump up the Pentagon, dramatically slash taxes, invest in expensive new programmes

such as the border wall, and create a trillion-dollar infrastructure plan could set the stage for massive deficits that will undoubtedly unnerve constituencies ranging from fiscal conservatives to important sectors of the business community.

And keep in mind that significant numbers of military and intelligence professionals truly believe in civilian control of the military and don’t want to take on tasks unrelated to traditional military missions. In addition, Trump has already pledged to target overpriced weapons systems like the F-35 and force the Pentagon to get its books in order so it can at last pass an audit. Whether or not he follows through on these promises, he will have put them on the public agenda, reinforcing one reality: the way so much of the money currently going to the Pentagon has more to do with lining the pockets of contractors than with defending the United States and its allies.

The military-first direction in which Trump is going to take his administration will predictably lead to yet more militarised policies in the world. It’s that hammer and nail again. He should take a lesson from history by listening to the speeches of the former Supreme Allied Commander in World War II, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, a military man who also rose to the pinnacle of power in Washington. As president, Eisenhower not only spoke out against the dangers of the military-industrial complex but also stressed that America’s power is ultimately rooted in the strength of its economy and the health of its citizens, not in seeking magical military solutions or in overspending on the Pentagon. Unfortunately, Donald Trump is no Dwight D. Eisenhower. **CT**

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*William D. Hartung is the director of the Arms and Security Project at the US Center for International Policy. He is the author of *Prophets of War: Lockheed Martin and the Making of the Military-Industrial Complex*. This essay was first published at www.tomdispatch.com*

The Trump administration is on a path toward undermining our democracy by pouring taxpayer dollars galore into the US military. This will happen despite the fact that, 15 years after 9/11, that military has won nothing and settled no conflicts to Washington’s advantage

Coca Cola fights plans to tackle plastic waste

Leaked documents show how a giant multinational corporation is fighting legislation to reduce plastic waste in Scotland, writes **Maeve McClenaghan**

Major drinks companies, including Coca Cola, are pushing back against Scotland's plan for introducing deposits on soft drinks bottles, arguing it could negatively impact their business

Coca Cola has been lobbying against plans for a new bottle collection scheme in Scotland designed to reduce plastic waste, according to an Energydesk investigation. A leaked internal document from the firm reveals the company prioritised a “fight back” against EU moves to introduce deposit return schemes (DRS).

The schemes are designed to encourage consumers to return their drinks bottles by adding a small refundable charge at sale.

The DRS system has been shown to raise collection rates in Germany, Sweden and Denmark and is now being considered by other countries, including Scotland.

But major drinks companies, including Coca Cola, are pushing back against the plans, arguing it could negatively impact their business. Beyond the leaked plans, Greenpeace's Energydesk has found evidence that Coca Cola has been lobbying Scottish politicians against DRS for years.

The company also spent close to a million euros lobbying the EU commission, and met several times with politicians in Westminster.

Richard Lochhead was the Scottish Minister responsible for exploring DRS until May 2016. He confirmed that he had been approached by Coca Cola and other industry representatives several times.

Lochhead noted that the same companies were working with DRS schemes in

other countries, saying: “I am puzzled as to why drinks companies that participate in successful deposit and return schemes in many markets around the world continue to resist new schemes being introduced in Scotland and elsewhere.

“If we don't introduce a deposit and return scheme in Scotland in the coming years and attach a value to items that are too often just thrown away, we'll be missing out on all the benefits and too many valuable cans and bottles will continue to be a blight on our environment both on land and on our shores and in our waters,” he added.

A Coca-Cola spokesperson said: “Our packaging is not only valuable, but is also essential for our business and vital for people to be able to enjoy our drinks. Any changes to policy around it are therefore important to us and so no one should be surprised that we closely follow these discussions.

“We meet with a wide range of organisations and individuals with an interest in a given topic, including politicians, Government officials, charities and campaign groups, to understand their latest thinking on policy issues. In Scotland, along with other drinks manufacturers, we have had several constructive meetings with the Government, policy makers, industry groups and NGOs to discuss plans to reduce littering and increase recycling.”

As many as 16-million plastic bottles go



Energydesk discovered a leaked document from Coca Cola showing that it wanted to “fight back” against EU moves to introduce plastic bottle deposit return schemes.

Photo: FromSandToGlass/Flickr.com

unrecycled in the UK every day. The average household recycles just 270 of the 480 plastic bottles they use a year, according to campaign group Recycle Now. Many of those bottles that are not recycled can end up littering beaches and polluting the seas.

DRS involves adding a small deposit to plastic bottles at sale, which is returned once the bottles are returned to collection points. In Germany, the introduction of a DRS led to 98.5 percent of refillable bottles being returned by consumers, according to Zero Waste Europe.

The scheme has been likened to the plastic bag charge which reportedly caused bag usage to drop dramatically across the UK.

Drinks companies fight back

However, drinks companies have been less than enthusiastic about the prospect of a DRS in Scotland. The leaked internal report from Coca Cola Europe includes a risk

matrix which outlines possible EU policies that could impact the company’s business. Circled by the label “Fight back” is a point marked “EU scheme for deposit system.”

The same document, and others leaked at the same time, also revealed the company’s intention to push back against a proposed sugar tax.

The Energydesk investigation reveals that Coca-Cola’s “fight back” has, in fact, been going on for years. Documents released to Energydesk under Freedom of Information requests, show that representatives from Coca Cola have been lobbying Scottish ministers to drop the DRS scheme for at least the past two years

Coca Cola is part of industry group Packaging Recycling Group Scotland (PRGS). In January 2014 that group met with then-Secretary of Rural Affairs Richard Lochhead to discuss the DRS plans. In that meeting was Simon Baldry, managing director of Coca-

The deposit return scheme involves adding a small deposit to plastic bottles at sale, which is returned once the bottles are returned to collection points

No To Cashback

Coca Cola has also been talking to ministers in Westminster. Records show that in January 2016 they met with Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs representative George Eustice to discuss “the food and drink sector”

Cola Enterprises. Almost exactly a year later Coke’s VP of Public Affairs met again with Lochhead, accompanied by representatives from PRGS.

Lochhead’s briefing notes from that meeting, supplied through FOI, note: “PRGS will be seeking to force our hand on deposit return – and will be looking to leave the meeting with a commitment that it will be taken off the table as an option for consideration for the foreseeable future.”

A PRGS spokesperson said: “PRGS represents a broad range of businesses whose customers could be impacted by the introduction of a deposit return scheme. The formulation of good policy requires government to hear the views of all parties and assess those views in relation to its policy objectives. The government has consulted charities, NGOs and business while considering the potential of a deposit return scheme. In common with others, PRGS has been happy to set out the issues and consequences we believe would arise.”

The lobby group tried setting up meetings with other politicians, including John Swinney Fergus Ewing and Marco Biagi. But in each case they were told it was only appropriate to meet with Lochhead.

Changing target

However, Lochhead held strong. Coca Cola then changed their target. A visit by SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon to a Coca Cola bottling plant in East Kilbride in July 2015, provided another opportunity for lobbying.

In a follow-up letter from PRGS to Sturgeon’s office, uncovered by the Ferret website – www.theferret.scot – the lobbying group notes that the issue of DRS was brought up during Sturgeon’s visit to the Coca Cola factory.

The letter goes on to argue that a DRS scheme would “cause expense and inconvenience to consumers, particularly vulnerable people; damage business and existing recycling and anti-littering initiatives. . . . And increase carbon emissions and envi-

ronmental impact.”

While DRS has been discussed for years in Scotland, it has not yet been seriously considered in England and Wales. However, last month, environment minister Therese Coffey responded to a question about DRS saying the government is “developing a new litter strategy which may well address this issue.”

Coca Cola has also been talking to ministers in Westminster. Records show that in January 2016 they met with Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs representative George Eustice to discuss “the food and drink sector.”

Then, in March 2016, Coca Cola and many other companies met with Rory Stewart, who was then DEFRA’s Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, to talk about the “circular economy” which involves companies taking responsibility for waste products. Minutes for these meetings were not made available.

A Coca Cola spokesperson said: “We hold regular meetings with NGOs to update them on our progress towards delivering our current ambitions to boost the sustainability of our packaging and seek their advice on where we could improve things in future. Only last week, we organised a round table with 15 expert organisations and campaign groups, including Greenpeace, to ask them what more they thought we should be doing to help improve packaging recovery and recycling in the UK.

“We support recovery and recycling of our packaging and we want to help find ways to ensure that less of it is littered and ends up in the sea. Whilst we support and participate in deposit schemes in some countries, in some cases we have believed a different approach could be more effective and more sustainable than DRS – and in the UK we have raised some concerns about the impact of a DRS scheme on household recycling rates. However, we are open to engaging in constructive dialogue and working with others to create effective, long-term

solutions.”

Clarissa Morawski, managing director of Reloop, said: “The tactics used around the world by big business opponents of deposit systems are very familiar by now. They are always determined not to take responsibility for the litter the current approach generates, but they cloak this in concern for small businesses and local taxpayers, despite the evidence that both do very well out of such systems.

“Industry would much rather put a token sum into anti-litter media campaigns, as if that can solve the problem, than sit down and work with business supporters and other stakeholders to design systems that can work well for them.”

Reasons for the fight back

In an published consultation on the Scottish deposit return scheme, Coca Cola argued against the idea of DRS. They warned that “no cost-benefit analysis has been undertaken” and that “Consumers don’t want it.” They also note: “Scottish businesses, such as ours, will be negatively impacted.”

In fact the concept of a deposit return scheme appears to be popular in Scotland. A Greenpeace survey, under taken by Survation, of a sample group of more than 1,000 people found that more than three quarters said they would support a deposit return system in Scotland. A different survey by Sky News found that across the UK, 60 percent of respondents support DRS.

Instead the company’s financial reports reveal that it was seriously concerned that DRS could impact its profits.

In Coca Cola’s 2015 Annual Report to the Securities and Exchange Commission, the company notes: “Changes in laws and regulations relating to beverage containers and packaging could increase our costs and reduce demand for our products.”

The report notes an increased interest in recycling and “beverage container deposits” and goes on to say: “If these types of requirements are adopted and implemented

on a large scale in any of the major markets in which we operate, they could affect our costs or require changes in our distribution model, which could reduce our net operating revenues and profitability.”

The latest EU commission transparency register shows Coca Cola spent more than €900,000 lobbying the commissioner in 2015. That work involved at least 11 Coca Cola employees.

But the company also pushed for change through other groups. Nikolaus Tacke, Coca Cola EU’s public affairs director, was appointed to the board of American Chamber of Commerce to the EU in March 2015.

Energydesk has learned that as recently as December 2016, Coca Cola representatives were still meeting with European Commission ministers, to push for change on recycling issues and to discuss deposit return schemes.

Environmental campaigners argue, however, that the lobbying is unlikely to prove successful. Samantha Harding, litter programme director at the Campaign to Protect Rural England said: “The plastic lobbyists are frantically trying to shore up a sinking ship. People have woken up to the ridiculousness of using an indestructible product for single-use packaging. They see through the traditional status quo that allows producers to make what they like and to hell with the consequences.”

While Reloop’s Morawski noted that Coca Cola and other companies had put up similar resistance in other countries only to change message when schemes were implemented. “[After implementation] Coca Cola and others often magically find it’s not a problem for them, or even that this approach helps them meet their environmental targets. I sense we might not be far off that moment across the UK,” she said. **CT**

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Maeve McClenaghan wrote this article for Energydesk, Greenpeace’s independent global climate news site – www.energydesk.greenpeace.org

A Greenpeace survey, under taken by Survation, of a sample group of more than 1,000 people found that more than three quarters said they would support a deposit return system in Scotland



Homage to Havana

After a 17-year absence,
an American rekindles
his love affair with Cuba.
Words and photos by
Thomas S. Harrington

There is no such thing as a virgin gaze. The act of seeing is always mediated by the many narratives we have consumed and assimilated during the course of our lives. This is even more the case, it would seem, when we come face to face with a culture, such as that of Cuba, that has been the object of a half-century-long US programme of shunning and distortion, and before that, a campaign of lustful fetishisation on the part of Spain during the 19th-century.

As someone born in the US who makes his living researching Spain's cultures and their imprint on the Atlantic world, I undertook my second trip to Cuba painfully aware of the risk of merely finding what I already "knew" to be there, of applying what Mary



Above:
**Resting on the
urban sofa**



Left:
Minding the store

Louise Pratt calls the “appropriating gaze” of the imperial visitor to the complex realities before him.

Then, as occurred on my last trip 17 years ago, Havana happened in fabulously entropic real time, mocking me and the full set of suppositions I carried with me. There are few places left in the Euro-American circuit of destinations with the ability to do this. One is Rome, which ridicules the visitor’s pretensions of getting to know it with the sheer depth of its cultural legacy. There, you are made aware again and again of your own insignificance, of the fact that you are but another passer-by in a millenarian epic of nameless passers-by.

Havana, in turn, slays us and our precon-



The Struggle of Senescence

ceptions not with its intimidating heft, but rather its frenetically schizoid bearing. It is both the most false and sincere of cities, and from moment to moment you never truly know which of its spirits will engage you in conversation, or will capture your eye.

Of all the many ill effects of imperialism and slavery, perhaps none is more pernicious than the culture of cupidity they both engender. The omnipresence of “the man” and his ability to upset life with his violence-enforced mandates, or more likely today, his wallet, has deep roots in the consciousness of most Cubans, as it does in the in the lives of – to name just one other example – the Mayans who service US fun-seekers on the Yucatan coast.

But there’s an important difference between the Cuban hustle and all the others I’ve been party to in my travels to the so-called underdeveloped world, one that I think has a lot to do with the legacy of the



The Maiden of the Malecón



Green Car and a Slice of Al-Andalus



After the Syrian Wedding

Revolution. If it is done and when it is done, it is usually carried out with the full understanding on the part of the hustler that it is a necessary evil, a piece of theatre deployed not so much to mimic sincerity, but rather to protect it. Should the outsider recognise this game and frankly acknowledge its existence, things quickly change. What was baroque quickly becomes plain, what was opaque becomes surprisingly and alluringly diaphanous.

*You arrive Havana,
Dropping into its February,
And old symmetries and rhythms
No longer have meaning
Here in Havana, wintered
Sun of a wintered sun
You've got to recalculate
And unlearn your intuitions
You've got to rise above
The pomp and the prejudice
And begin narrating from the very beginning
Narrating from love.*

– From “Habanera” by Mario Benedetti **CT**



Holding court.



Cuba's Version of the TSA (Homage to Korda)



Expectation.

.....
Thomas S. Harrington is a professor of Hispanic Studies at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, and the author of *Public Intellectuals and Nation Building in the Iberian Peninsula, 1900–1925: The Alchemy of Identity*, (Bucknell University Press).

Blundering into war with China

Conn M. Hallinan warns of the dangers of 'aircraft carrier diplomacy'

The US is in the middle of a major military buildup, the Obama administration's "Asia Pivot" in the Pacific. American bases in Okinawa, Japan, and Guam have been beefed up, and for the first time since World War II, US Marines have been deployed in Australia

In his Jan. 13 testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Secretary of State nominee Rex Tillerson made an extraordinary comment concerning China's activities in the South China Sea. The US, he said, must "send a clear signal that, first, the island-building stops," adding that Beijing's "access to the those islands is not going to be allowed."

President Trump's Press Secretary, Sean Spicer, repeated the threat on Jan. 24.

Sometimes it is hard to sift the real from the magical in the Trump administration, and bombast appears to be the default strategy of the day. But people should be clear about what would happen if the US actually tries to blockade China from supplying its forces constructing airfields and radar facilities on the Spratly and Paracel islands.

It would be an act of war.

While Beijing's Foreign Ministry initially reacted cautiously to the comment, Chinese newspapers have been far less diplomatic. The nationalist Global Times warned of a "large-scale war" if the US followed through on its threat, and the China Daily cautioned that a blockade could lead to a "devastating confrontation between China and the US."

Independent observers agree. "It is very difficult to imagine the means by which the United States could prevent China from accessing these artificial islands without provoking some kind of confrontation," says

Rory Medcalf, head of Australia's National Security College. And such a confrontation, says Carlyle Thayer of the University of New South Wales, "could quickly develop into an armed conflict."

Last summer, China's commander of the People's Liberation Army Navy, Wu Shengli, told US Admiral John Richardson that "we will never stop our construction on the Nansha Islands halfway." Nansha is China's name for the Spratlys. Two weeks later, Chang Wanquan, China's defence minister, said Beijing is preparing for a "people's war at sea."

A certain amount of this is posturing by two powerful countries in competition for markets and influence, but Tillerson's statement did not come out of the blue. In fact, the US is in the middle of a major military buildup, the Obama administration's "Asia Pivot" in the Pacific. American bases in Okinawa, Japan, and Guam have been beefed up, and for the first time since World War II, US Marines have been deployed in Australia. Last March, the US sent B-2 nuclear-capable strategic stealth bombers to join them.

There is no question that China has been aggressive about claiming sovereignty over small islands and reefs in the South China Sea, even after the Permanent Court of Arbitration at the Hague rejected Beijing's claims. But if a military confrontation is to

be avoided, it is important to try to understand what is behind China's behaviour.

The current crisis has its roots in a tense standoff between Beijing and Taiwan in late 1996. The People's Republic of China (PRC) was angered that Washington had granted a visa to Taiwan's president, Lee Teng-hui, calling it a violation of the 1979 US "one-China" policy that recognised the PRC and downgraded relations with Taiwan to "unofficial."

Beijing responded to the visa uproar by firing missiles near a small Taiwan-controlled island and moving some military forces up to the mainland coast facing the island. However, there was never any danger that China would actually attack Taiwan. Even if it wanted to, it didn't have the means to do so. Instead of letting things cool off, the Clinton administration escalated the conflict and sent two aircraft carrier battle groups to the region, the USS Nimitz and USS Independence. The Nimitz and its escorts sailed through the Taiwan Straits between the island and the mainland, and there was nothing China could do about it.

The carriers deeply alarmed Beijing, because the regions just north of Taiwan in the East China Sea and the Yellow Sea were the jumping off points for 19th- and 20th-century invasions by western colonialists and the Japanese.

The Straits crisis led to a radical remaking of China's military, which had long relied on massive land forces. Instead, China adopted a strategy called "Area Denial" that would allow Beijing to control the waters surrounding its coast, in particular the East and South China seas. That not only required retooling of its armed forces – from land armies to naval and air power – but it also required a ring of bases that would keep potential enemies at arm's length and also allow Chinese submarines to enter the Pacific and Indian oceans undetected.

Reaching from Russia's Kamchatka Peninsula in the north to the Malay Peninsula in the south, this so-called "first island

chain" is Beijing's primary defense line.

China is particularly vulnerable to a naval blockade. Some 80 percent of its energy supplies traverse the Indian Ocean and South China Sea, moving through narrow choke points like the Malacca Straits between Indonesia and Malaysia, the Bab al Mandab Straits controlling the Red Sea, and the Straits of Hormuz into the Persian Gulf. All of those passages are controlled by the US or countries such as India and Indonesia with close ties to Washington.

In 2013, China claimed it had historic rights to the region and issued its now famous "nine-dash line" map that embraced the Paracels and Spratly island chains and 85 percent of the South China Sea. It was this nine-dash line that the Hague tribunal rejected, because it found no historical basis for China's claim, and because there were overlapping assertions by Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, and the Philippines.

There are, of course, economic considerations. The region is rich in oil, gas and fish, but the primary concern for China is security. The Chinese have not interfered with commercial ship traffic, although they have applied on-again, off-again restrictions on fishing and energy explorations. China initially prevented Filipino fishermen from exploiting some reefs, and then allowed it. It has been more aggressive with Vietnam in the Paracels.

Rather than trying to assuage China's paranoia, the US made things worse by adopting a military strategy to checkmate "Area Denial." Called "Air/Sea Battle" (renamed "Joint Concept for Access and Manoeuvre in the Global Commons"), Air/Sea Battle envisions attacking China's navy, air force, radar facilities and command centres with air and naval power. Missiles would be used to take out targets deep into Chinese territory.

The recent seizure of a US underwater drone off the Philippines is part of an on-going chess game in the region. The drone was almost certainly mapping sea floor bottoms and collecting data that would allow

Instead of letting things cool off, the Clinton administration sent two aircraft carrier battle groups to the region. The USS Nimitz and its escorts sailed through the Taiwan Straits between the island and the mainland, and there was nothing China could do about it

Header Header

When President Trump says he wants to make America great again, what he really means is that he wants to go back to that post-World War II period when the US dominated much of the globe with a combination of economic strength and military power

the US to track Chinese submarines, including those armed with nuclear missiles. While the heist was a provocative thing to do – it was seized right under the nose of an unarmed US Navy ship – it is a reflection of how nervous the Chinese are about their vulnerability to Air/Sea Battle.

China's leaders "have good reason to worry about this emerging US naval strategy [use of undersea drones] against China in East Asia," Li Mingjiang, a China expert at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore, told the Financial Times. "If this strategy becomes reality, it could be quite detrimental to China's national security."

Washington charges that the Chinese are playing the bully with small countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines, and there is some truth to that charge. China has been throwing its weight around with several nations in Southeast Asia. But it also true that the Chinese have a lot of evidence that the Americans are gunning for them.

The US has 400 military bases surrounding China and is deploying anti-ballistic missiles in South Korea and Japan, ostensibly to guard against North Korean nuclear weapons. But the interceptors could also down Chinese missiles, posing a threat to Beijing's nuclear deterrence.

While Air/Sea Battle does not envision using nuclear weapons, it could still lead to a nuclear war. It would be very difficult to figure out whether missiles were targeting command centres or China's nukes. Under the stricture "use them, or lose them" the Chinese might fear their missiles were endangered and launch them.

The last thing one wants to do with a nuclear-armed power is make it guess.

The Trump administration has opened a broad front on China, questioning the "one China" policy, accusing Beijing of being in cahoots with Islamic terrorists, and threatening a trade war. The first would upend more than 30 years of diplomacy, the second is bizarre – if anything, China is overly

aggressive in suppressing terrorism in its western Xinjiang Province – and the third makes no sense.

China is the US's major trading partner and holds \$1.24-trillion in US Treasury Bonds. While Trump charges that the Chinese have hollowed out the American economy by undermining its industrial base with cheap labour and goods, China did not force Apple or General Motors to pull up stakes and decamp elsewhere. Capital goes where wages are low and unions are weak.

A trade war would hurt China, but it would also hurt the US and the global economy as well.

When President Trump says he wants to make America great again, what he really means is that he wants to go back to that post-World War II period when the US dominated much of the globe with a combination of economic strength and military power. But that era is gone, and dreams of a unipolar world run by Washington are a hallucination.

According to the CIA, "by 2030 Asia will have surpassed North America and Europe combined in terms of global power based on GDP, population size, military spending and technological investments." By 2025, two-thirds of the world will live in Asia, seven percent in Europe and five percent in the US. Those are the demographics of eclipse.

If Trump starts a trade war, he will find little support among America's allies. China is the number one trading partner for Japan, Australia, South Korea, Vietnam and India, and the third largest for Indonesia and the Philippines. Over the past year, a number of countries such as Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines have also distanced themselves from Washington and moved closer to China. When President Obama tried to get US allies not to sign on to China's new Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, they ignored him.

But the decline of US influence has a dangerous side. Washington may not be able to dictate the world's economy, but it

has immense military power. Chinese military expert Yang Chengjun says “China does not stir up troubles, but we are not afraid of them when they come.” They should be. For all its modernisation, China is no match for the US. However, defeating China is far beyond Washington’s capacity. The only wars the US has “won” since 1945 are Grenada and Panama. Nonetheless, such a clash would be catastrophic. It would torpedo global trade, inflict trillions of dollars damage on each side, and the odds are distressingly high that the war could go nuclear.

US allies in the region should demand that the Trump administration back off any consideration of a blockade. Australia has already told Washington it will not take part in any such action. The US should also do more than rename Air/Sea Battle, it should

junk the entire strategy. The East and South China seas are not national security issues for the US, but they are for China.

And China should realise that, while it has the right to security, trotting out ancient dynastic maps to lay claim to vast areas bordering scores of countries does nothing but alienate its neighbours and give the US an excuse to interfere in affairs thousands of miles from its own territory. **CT**

For all its modernisation, China is no match for the US

Conn M. Hallinan is a columnist for Foreign Policy In Focus. He has a PhD in Anthropology from the University of California, Berkeley and oversaw the journalism program at the University of California at Santa Cruz for 23 years. He is a winner of a Project Censored “Real News Award,” and lives in Berkeley, California.

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How media bias undermines democracy

David Edwards contrasts the way London newspapers report on events involving UK foreign secretary Boris Johnson and opposition leader Jeremy Corbyn

Assad has been UK journalism's number one hate figure for years, on a par with earlier enemies like Slobodan Milosevic, Osama bin Laden, Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi

Are we able to prove the existence of a corporate media campaign to undermine British democracy? Media analysis is not hard science, but in this essay I will provide compelling evidence that such a campaign does indeed exist.

Compare coverage of comments made on Syria by a spokesman for Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn in October 2016 and by UK foreign secretary Boris Johnson in January 2017.

Boris Johnson's 'triple flip' on Assad

There is little need for us to remind readers just how often Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad has been described as 'a monster' and 'a dictator' in the UK press. Assad has of course routinely been reviled as a tyrant and genocidal killer, compared with Hitler and held responsible, with Putin, for the mass killing and devastation in Syria. The role of the US, UK, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and others has often been ignored altogether.

Assad has been UK journalism's number one hate figure for years, on a par with earlier enemies like Slobodan Milosevic, Osama bin Laden, Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi (arguably, Assad is essentially the same archetypal 'Enemy' in the minds of many corporate journalists).

In December 2015, the Daily Telegraph reported that Boris Johnson accepted Assad was a monster, but that he had made a fur-

ther remarkable comment: "Let's deal with the Devil: we should work with Vladimir Putin and Bashar al-Assad in Syria."

Johnson wrote that "we cannot afford to be picky about our allies." And so: "Am I backing the Assad regime, and the Russians, in their joint enterprise to recapture that amazing site [Palmyra from occupation by Isis]? You bet I am."

Seven months later, after he had been made UK foreign secretary, Johnson exactly reversed this position: "I will be making clear my view that the suffering of the Syrian people will not end while Assad remains in power. The international community, including Russia, must be united on this."

Six months further forward in time, in January 2017, Johnson's position flipped once again. The Independent reported: "President Bashar al-Assad should be allowed to stand for election to remain in power in Syria, Boris Johnson has said in a significant shift of the Government's position."

Johnson was not coy about admitting the reason for this further flip: "I see downsides and I see risks in us going in, doing a complete flip flop, supporting the Russians, Assad. But I must also be realistic about the way the landscape has changed and it may be that we will have to think afresh about how to handle this."

The changed landscape, of course, is a

Making Comparisons



Other commentators have suffered abuse for merely pointing out, as Patrick Cockburn recently noted in the *London Review of Books*, that “fabricated news and one-sided reporting have taken over the news agenda [on Syria] to a degree probably not seen since the First World War”

When Boris Johnson (left), now Britain’s Foreign Secretary, changed his mind three times about the situation in Syria, he was hailed by the media. Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the opposition Labour Party, however, was slammed over comments made by his spokesman.

Photos: Wikimedia

new Trump presidency that is famously opposed to Obama’s war for regime change in Syria. The Mail reported how Johnson had recalled a trip to Baghdad after the Iraq war when a local Christian had told him: ‘It is better sometimes to have a tyrant than not to have a ruler at all.’

Johnson’s observation on this comment: “There was wisdom . . . in what he said and that I’m afraid is the dilemma. . . .”

When we at Media Lens have even highlighted the US-UK role in arming, funding and fighting the Syrian war, and have discussed the extent of US-UK media propaganda – while holding not even the tiniest candle for Assad – we have been crudely denounced as “pro-Assad useful idiots,” as “just another leftist groupuscule shilling for tyrants” that “defends repression by President Assad.”

Other commentators have suffered similar abuse for merely pointing out, as Patrick Cockburn recently noted in the *London Review of Books*, that “fabricated news and

one-sided reporting have taken over the news agenda [on Syria] to a degree probably not seen since the First World War.”

Nothing could be easier, then, than to imagine the corporate media lining up to roast Boris Johnson for what simply had to be, from their perspective, the ultimate example of someone who ‘defends repression by President Assad’: actually suggesting that the media’s great hate figure might contest elections and even remain in power.

We can imagine any number of spokespeople for Syrian “rebel” groups, human rights organisations and others, enthusiastically supplying damning quotes for news and comment pieces. We can imagine the headlines:

“Anger at Johnson’s ‘shameful apologetics’ for Syria regime”

“Boris slammed for monstrous U-Turn On Assad”

“Johnson’s sympathy for Assad the devil shames us all”

And so on . . .

Making Comparisons

None of these news reports contained a single word of criticism of Johnson. They included not one comment from any critical source attacking Johnson for siding with the press's great bête noire of the last several years, Assad, in bowing to their great bête orange, Trump

A second critical theme cries out for inclusion. Donald Trump has been relentlessly lambasted as racist, sexist, fascist, and in fact as a more exotically coiffured version of Hitler. Given that Johnson openly admits the UK government has reversed policy on hate figure Assad to appease hate figure Trump, the headlines are again easy to imagine:

“UK Government slammed for ‘selling out ethics and the Syrian people’ to appease Trump regime”

“Britons never, never will be slaves? Boris Johnson’s bended knee before Trump shames us all”

And so on . . .

Instead, these were the actual headlines reporting Johnson’s policy shift:

The Telegraph (January 27): “Armed Forces could have peace role in Syria, suggests Boris:

The Guardian (January 26): “Boris Johnson signals shift in UK policy on Syria’s Assad”

A comment piece in the Guardian was titled: “Theresa May looks for new friends among the world’s strongmen; Saturday’s meeting with Erdogan in Turkey shows how Britain is re-ordering its international priorities after the Brexit vote”

No talk of apologetics, shame, or supping with the devil; just Britain “re-ordering its international priorities.”

The i-Independent (January 27): “Johnson signals shift in policy over Assad’s future”

The Times (January 27): “Johnson: Britain may accept Assad staying in power”

The headline above an opinion piece in the same paper (February 1) merely counselled caution: “May will have to take a stand over Russia. In this new age of realpolitik, Britain must beware bending to Trump’s shifting foreign policy”

The article was careful not to criticise Johnson: “It would be wrong to pin his Syrian “triple flip” on “Borisian dilettantism. We have entered an era of intensified

realpolitik. . . . That means rethinking everything. . . .”

The Sun (January 27), having raged apoplectically at Assad for years, would have been expected to rage now at Johnson. The headline: “UK TROOPS FOR SYRIA”

The only comment: “In a break with UK policy [Johnson] also said a political solution might see tyrant Bashar al-Assad allowed to stand in UN-supervised elections.”

The Daily Mail (January 26): “Assad could run in a future Syrian presidential election, Boris Johnson says in shift of UK foreign policy”

Clearly, then, there was nothing the least bit excitable or outraged in any of these headlines – the news was presented as undramatic and uncontroversial.

But the point I want to emphasise is that, in fact, none of these news reports contained a single word of criticism of Johnson. They included not one comment from any critical source attacking Johnson for siding with the press’s great bête noire of the last several years, Assad, in bowing to their great bête orange, Trump.

Jeremy Corbyn’s spokesman ‘shames his party and his country’

Consider, by contrast, coverage of comments made on Syria by Corbyn’s press spokesman, former Guardian journalist Seumas Milne, in a weekly meeting with journalists last October. This is what Milne said:

“The focus on Russian atrocities or Syrian army atrocities sometimes diverts attention from other atrocities that are taking place.

“Independent assessments are that there have been very large-scale civilian casualties as a result of the US-led coalition bombing.

“There are several cases of large numbers of civilian deaths in single attacks and there hasn’t been so much attention on those atrocities or those casualties.

“Both the US and British governments



Seumas Milne, Corbyn's press spokesman, was attacked over comments he made about Russian actions in the war in Syria. Photo: Wikimedia

have been reluctant to accept any independent assessment of what's taking place as a result of those campaigns.”

These were rational, reasonable comments. Milne recognised that there had indeed been Russian and Syrian government atrocities. As one would expect of the political opposition, he also pressed for greater attention to US-UK atrocities – horrors for which we are accountable as democratic citizens and potentially able to influence through democratic pressures.

The difference in press coverage from that afforded to Boris Johnson's comment on Syria is immediately obvious in many of the headlines:

The Independent (October 12): “Jeremy Corbyn aide branded ‘disgraceful’ after saying focus on Russian atrocities in Syria are a distraction”

The Telegraph (October 13): “Anger at Jeremy Corbyn's claim that US is as bad as Russia in Syria”

The Times (October 14): “In Corbyn's warped world, the US is the enemy; The failure of the Labour leader's spokesman to condemn Russia's actions in Syria is outrageous and shames his party”

Philip Collins wrote: “Unless Mr Corbyn sacks him, Mr Milne must be thought of as his master's voice.” The Labour party was “shamed by this.”

A Daily Mail headline (October 11) quoted Brendan Cox, widower of the murdered Labour MP Jo Cox: “ ‘This isn't just wrong, it's absolutely disgraceful’: Fury as Jeremy Corbyn's top aide compares British and US bombing of ISIS terrorists to Russia's carpet-bombing of Syria”

A second Daily Mail headline (October 13) raged: “Putin's useful idiots: Warped, deluded, ignorant. Corbyn's support for Russia shames his party and his country”

Dominic Sandbrook wrote: “In his malignancy, mendacity and hypocrisy, in his narcissism and anti-patriotism, he is betraying not only the history of the Labour Party but the basic values of this country... Mr Milne and his Stop The War friends are a cancer at the heart of our political and intellectual life. Every day their influence grows, the weaker our democracy becomes.”

Sandbrook's sign-off: “What a disgrace for our democracy. What dishonour for the Labour Party, what shame for Britain.”

Another lengthy Mail piece (October 14), smearing Milne's entire life, was headlined: “Corbyn's sinister puppetmaster: Seamus Milne champions Stalin, wouldn't condemn Bin Laden . . . and spoke up for Lee Rigby's killers”

The Express headline (October 13): “Corbyn advisor slammed for comparing Putin's onslaught of Syria to British bombing of ISIS – Jeremy Corbyn's chief aide is in hot water over comments comparing the Russian onslaught in Syria to the British and US-led bombing of ISIS.”

Not all of the headlines led with the angry criticism. The Guardian, Milne's own former newspaper, held back (October 12):

The difference in press coverage in the press coverage of Seumas Milne's remarks from that afforded to Boris Johnson's comment on Syria is immediately obvious in many of the headlines

Making Comparisons

The corporate media system is ideologically aligned against an authentically left-wing Labour leader, is working to undermine his reputation, and to protect the reputation of the Conservative government

“Protests at US embassy as valid as at Russia’s, says Corbyn spokesman”

But this report also included damning criticism: “Labour backbenchers, some of whom had confronted Corbyn over his stance on Syria . . . reacted angrily to his spokesman’s remarks.

“The Barrow in Furness MP, John Woodcock, said: ‘The whole world is looking at what Russian helicopters and jets are doing in Syria, and pleading with them to stop. If this is really Labour’s position, it puts us in a group with Russia, North Korea, and probably that’s it.’”

The Politics Home website reported: “Labour former defence minister Kevan Jones branded Mr Milne ‘an apologist for the Russian regime.’ Jones said the comments were “an insult to our brave servicemen and women but is clearly aimed to excuse the abhorrent behaviour of Russia.”

Conor McGinn, Labour MP for St Helens, described Milne’s comments as “bankrupt thinking.”

The Telegraph report cited above began:

“The United States has angrily dismissed claims on Jeremy Corbyn’s behalf suggesting that America bears as much responsibility for civilian deaths in Syria as Russia does.”

The report added: “Labour’s shadow foreign and defence secretaries appeared to distance themselves from the remarks, while the party’s MPs called for Mr Milne to be sacked.”

The paper also quoted the damning comment from Brendan Cox, (see above).

The BBC cited Labour MP John Woodcock’s outrage: “This absurdity seems like a deliberate provocation, unworthy of our leader and our party.”

The Observer reported: “Lord (David) Blunkett said yesterday that Corbyn should ask whether Milne was helping Labour get back into government and, if not, then Milne should stand down.

“What does Jeremy Corbyn think are the benefits [of Milne] to the Labour party and not just himself? How does he think this is

going to help Labour get back into power? If he can’t answer those questions, he [Milne] shouldn’t be there.”

Conclusion – an attack on democracy

From the mainstream media perspective, Milne’s comments must rank far below Johnson’s as an apologetic for Assad. Milne was not defending Assad, merely calling for greater attention to US-UK atrocities. Johnson, on the other hand, was declaring that UK government policy was now to support Assad’s participation in elections and possible continued leadership.

If journalists were incensed by Milne’s apologetic, then, by their own logic, they should be exploding in outrage at a change in government policy that will have real consequences for the Syrian people that are supposed to be the media’s chief concern.

How to explain the ferocious criticism of Milne’s innocuous comments and the complete absence of any criticism of Johnson’s policy shift?

The answer is clear enough: the corporate media system is ideologically aligned against an authentically left-wing Labour leader, is working to undermine his reputation, and to protect the reputation of the Conservative government. It is equally clear that the corporate media’s outrage at Milne and its supposed compassion for the Syrian people are manufactured, fake.

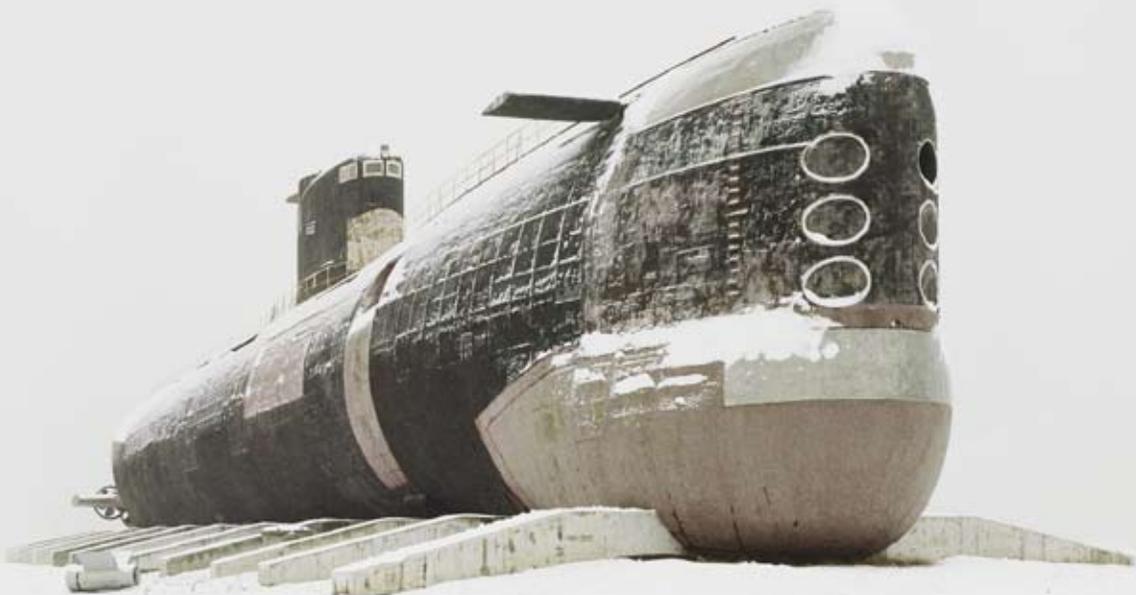
Democracy is not compatible with mass media that systematically headline and highlight angry criticism of left-wing politicians while excluding criticism of the right-wing politicians opposing them. The truth is that the UK corporate press is working relentlessly to crush democratic freedom of choice threatening elite interests. Forget ‘fake news’, the corporate media system is itself fake. It is primarily a conduit, not for news and views, but for control. **CT**

David Edwards is co-editor of *medialens*, the British media watchdog – www.medialens.org

In The Picture

COLD WAR COLD STORE

Danila Tkachenko discovers the secret burial grounds of weapons from a 45-year political conflict that might have wiped out civilisation



One of the world's largest diesel submarines. Samara region, Russia, 2013

The sole text in Russian photographer Danila Tkachenko's photobook **Restricted Areas** is an excerpt from H. G. Wells's classic work, *The Time Machine*. Strange choice: I'd have thought another Wells book – *War Of The Worlds*, with its frighteningly accurate predictions of our modern machines of war – would be a better fit for this stunning collection of images from the 50-year Cold War between the former Soviet Union and the USA, a muscle-flexing macho-political rivalry that threatened, as did Wells's Martian invaders, to annihilate us all.

Tkachenko's work, winner of the European Publishers Award for Photography, takes us to Russia's Cold War cold stores, icy graveyards of some of the extraordinary and frightening technological

In The Picture



Above:
VVA14 vertical take-off
amphibious aircraft.
Moscow area, Russia,
2013

Right:
Space rockets.
Kyzylorda region,
Kazakhstan, 2013

and cultural remnants that are hidden in isolated parts of the former USSR. There are secret cities you won't find on maps, military and scientific bases where access is still prohibited, and massive, eerily deserted, areas that were once sites for space technology or nuclear testing. The areas are symbols of a country that spent half of the last century striving to control not only its harsh environment but also the threat of nuclear destruction from the other side of the world.

Tkachenko says: "I travel in search of places which used to have great importance for technological progress – and which are





now deserted. Those places lost their significance along with the utopian ideology which is now obsolete: secret cities that cannot be found on maps, forgotten scientific triumphs, abandoned buildings of almost inhuman complexity; the perfect technocratic future that never came.”

As the West bumbles into a new Cold War, setting up Nato bases in icy Eastern European border states in response to supposed Russian aggression in Ukraine and its annexation of the Crimea peninsular, perhaps it’s worth returning to a chilling warning from the first chapter of Well’s prophetic

Above:
Former residential buildings in a deserted polar scientific town specialising in biological research. Komi Republic, Russia, 201

Left:
Headquarters of Communist Party. Bulgaria, Yugoiztochen region, 2015

In The Picture



Above:
Excavator at an
abandoned quarry.
Moscow region,
Russia, 2015

War Of The Worlds: “And before we judge them [the Martians] too harshly, we must remember what ruthless and utter destruction our own species has wrought, not only upon animals, such as the vanished Bison and the Dodo, but upon its own inferior races. The Tasmanians, in spite of their human likeness, were entirely swept out of existence in a war of extermination waged by European immigrants, in the space of 50 years. Are we such apostles of mercy as to complain if the Martians warred in the same spirit?”

We have been warned. But I don't think our leaders are listening?

– **Tony Sutton**

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Tony Sutton is the
editor of *ColdType*



RESTRICTED AREAS

Danila Tkachenko

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£22.75 (www.amazon.co.uk)

Billionaires, not ‘fake news’ are the problem

Rupert Murdoch’s access to the British prime minister shows that media power is still in hands of the few, write **Justin Schlosberg** and **Des Freedman**

In 1996, when the web was in its infancy, the American technology writer Nicholas Negroponte predicted that the coming digital revolution would facilitate a “cottage industry of information and entertainment providers.” Twenty years on and the story of “fake news,” which had wide currency during the US election, and was found emanating from basements, cafes and computer labs in the small Macedonian city of Veles would appear to prove Negroponte correct.

Except that we are living in an era when vast sections of our media, both “old” and “new,” are controlled by a tiny number of giant corporations, most of which dominate their particular sectors and face minimal competition. Take the UK local news sector which only recently argued that an arbitration system as proposed by Section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act would undermine plucky community-based titles and weaken local democracy. The problem is that five conglomerates account for 80 percent of all local newspaper titles while the remaining 58 publishers account for just 20 percent of titles.

Or take the UK’s supposedly competitive national newspaper market where five companies – largely presided over by tax exiles and media moguls – control 90 percent of daily circulation. If you take online readership into account, which bumps the Guard-

ian up the rankings, then six companies fall into this category.

The situation is even more dire when it comes to the increasingly profitable digital world. Yes, it’s possible to argue that there is a cottage industry of, for example, app and video game developers. But distribution – the means by which content actually becomes available to consumers – is subject to serious bottlenecks because of the grip exerted by dominant companies.

So while there may be thousands of digital start-ups, they have to face the fact that Apple and Spotify alone account for 63 percent of the global streaming market and that Facebook is fast becoming the most popular digital platform for news. Meanwhile Google has some 90 percent of global desktop search and Google and Facebook together account for around two-thirds of all digital advertising in the US. According to the Financial Times, 85 cents of every dollar spent on digital advertising in America went to those two companies in the first quarter of last year – evidence of “a concentration of market power in two companies that not only own the playing field but are able to set the rules of the game as well.”

One of the great misconceptions, however, is that the bewildering market power wielded by the likes of Google and Facebook has come at the expense of the mainstream press and broadcasters. Established, repu-

We are living in an era when vast sections of our media, both “old” and “new,” are controlled by a tiny number of giant corporations, most of which dominate their particular sectors and face minimal competition

Media Control

We have a media culture that is dominated by billionaire proprietors and elite insiders and a political culture that is too fearful of this media power ever to challenge it

table, professional news organisations and the “real news” that they produce, are apparently losing the ever evolving struggle for eyeballs.

It is a misconception because it conflates decline in the traditional market for news with a weakening of gatekeeping and the influence of editorial agendas. Although commercialism and agenda have always been closely intertwined, they have never been the same thing. Ironically, the power vacuum left by evaporating profits and retreating corporate investors in news publishers has put many newsrooms back in the hands of extremely wealthy individuals, from local oligarchs in Eastern Europe such as Lajos Simicska in Hungary to dot.com billionaires such as Jeff Bezos. The missing piece of the puzzle is the complex ways in which Google, Facebook and Twitter are, if anything, reinforcing the agenda-setting power of the mainstream news brands. Google’s news algorithm, for instance, gives priority weighting to news providers with scale, volume and those who cover topics that are widely covered elsewhere.

The problem with fakery is not so much the cottage news industry, but dominant algorithms and ideologically polarised audiences that are supposedly enabling it to flourish. It is, after all, nothing new: the tabloid press will certainly not be remembered for being champions of truth-telling. The problem is more to do with the failure of those very news brands that Google considers “reliable sources” to offer a meaningful corrective to fakery – and, worse, their tendency to amplify it.

As for the post-truth politics of Trump, it wasn’t his provocative and offensive “tweets” that enabled him to burst on to the mainstream political scene, but the way in which mainstream news networks were, from the outset, hanging on his every word. The more offensive, provocative, outlandish the comment – the bigger the lie – the more newsworthy it became. Twitter gave him a platform, but mainstream news provided

the microphone, and it is amplification – the ability to be heard – that is the major currency of agenda power.

Media elite

We are, therefore, witnessing not the demise of concentrated “voice,” but its resurgence in more subtle ways.

What can be done about this? We can hardly rely on our elected governments when they seem more comfortable to bow down to digital giants and media barons than to challenge them. For example, the latest research carried out by the Media Reform Coalition and the campaign group 38 Degrees shows that there has been an increase in the number of private meetings between representatives of Rupert Murdoch’s media empire and government ministers ahead of Murdoch’s bid to take full control of Sky, the UK’s largest broadcaster.

In September, 2016, alone, News Corp’s chief executive, Robert Thompson, had back-to-back meetings with the prime minister Theresa May, chancellor of the exchequer Philip Hammond, and culture secretary, Karen Bradley. May even found time to meet with Murdoch that month during a one night trip to New York.

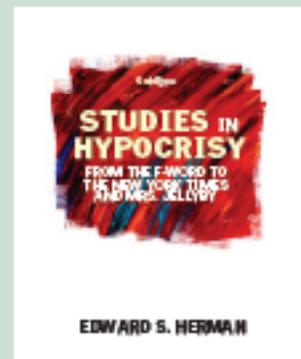
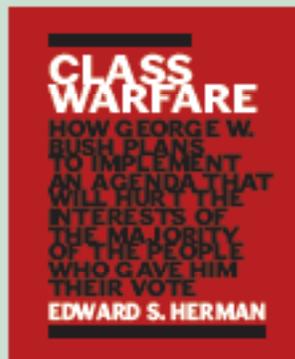
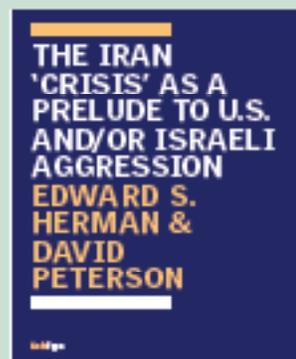
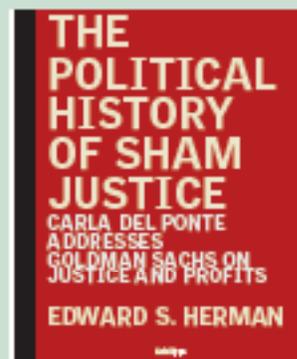
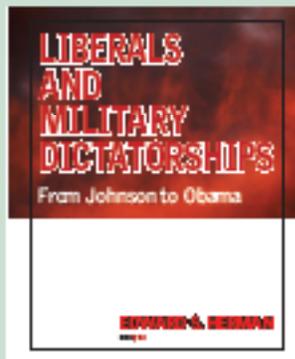
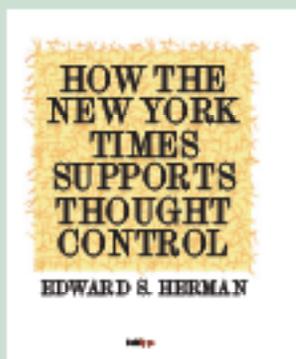
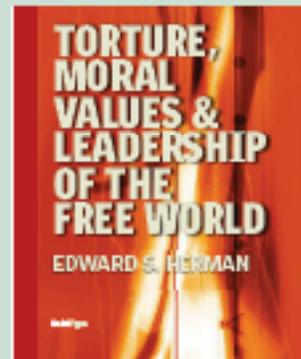
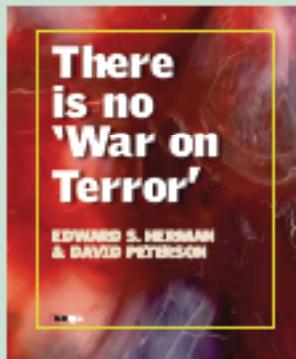
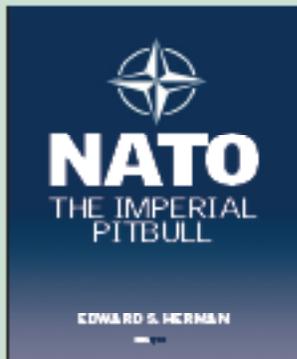
The major problem facing our democracy isn’t the subterranean digital activities of Macedonian teenagers corrupting a supposedly pure news environment. Instead, it’s the fact that we have a media culture that is dominated by billionaire proprietors and elite insiders and a political culture that is too fearful of this media power ever to challenge it. “Fake news” may be grabbing the headlines but we shouldn’t forget about the concentrated market power that has allowed it to thrive.

CT

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Des Freedman is professor of media and communications, at Goldsmiths, University of London. Justin Schlosberg is a lecturer in Journalism and Media, at Birkbeck, University of London. This article was first published at www.theconversation.com

READ THE BEST OF EDWARD S. HERMAN

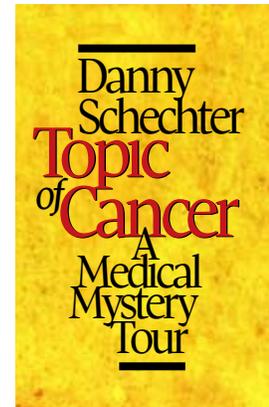
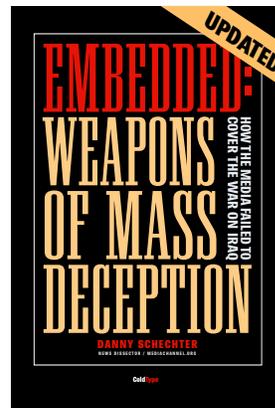
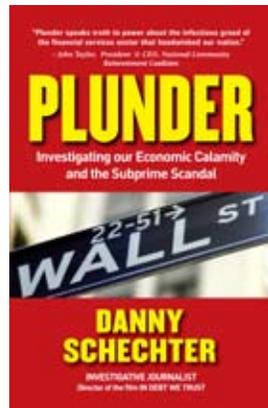
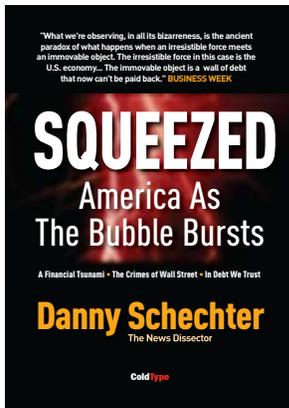
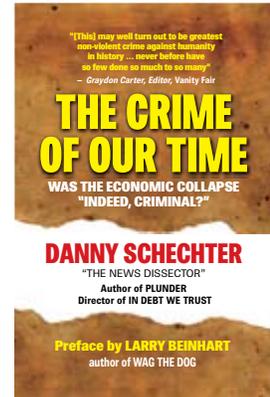
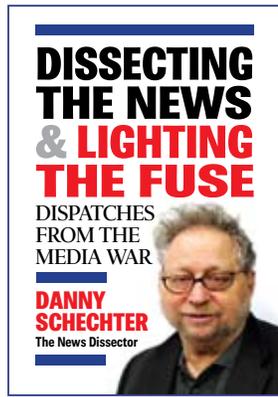
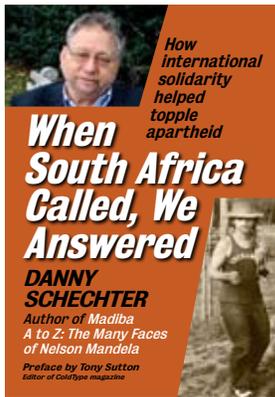
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ColdType Insights

Voter fraud? How about Trump's daughter?

Steve Bannon, Steven Mnuchin and Tiffany Trump all registered to vote in two states, writes **Judy Molland**

On January 25, Donald Trump issued (via Twitter, of course) a declaration to crack down on "VOTER FRAUD, including those who are registered to vote in two states." So, it's fascinating to discover that Steve Bannon, senior advisor to the president, is registered to vote in both New York and Florida, while Steven Mnuchin, Trump's nominee to head the Treasury Department, can cast his ballot in New York and California. Oh, and Tiffany Trump, the president's daughter, also has two voting places: New York and Pennsylvania.

It's important to note that being registered to vote in two locations is not electoral fraud unless these US citizens actually vote in two different states. Yet Trump seemed to suggest an "alternative fact" that being registered to vote in two different states is voter fraud.

The president went on to write that his VOTER FRAUD included, "those who are illegal and . . . even, those registered to vote who are dead (and many for a long time). Depending on results, we will

strengthen up voting procedures!"

It was at a private reception with congressional leaders on January 23 that Trump insisted on his unsubstantiated claims that between



TWO STATE SOLUTION: Tiffany Trump, the daughter of the president was registered to vote in New York and Pennsylvania.

Photo: Wikimedia

three-million and five-million ballots were cast illegally in the election, and that's why Hillary Clinton, his Democratic rival, won the popular vote by more than 2.8=million votes.

Neither Trump nor his aides have come up with a single fact to back up his claim, so why is he pursuing an investigation?

"A Trump adviser told the Washington Post that Trump has been stewing about his popular-vote count for weeks and insisting to friends that Clinton benefited from illegal votes in Democratic-leaning states such as California." In fact, an investigation of the 2016 elections have produced just four cases of voter fraud so far. And the idea of voter fraud has been debunked numerous times in the past. This is just another conspiracy theory.

Voter fraud almost never happens

The reality is that voter fraud almost never happens. According to the Washington Post: "One researcher conducted a comprehensive investigation of elections from 2000 to 2014 and was able to find only 31 credible allegations of voter impersonation in the entire country, during a period where over a billion votes were cast."

Justin Levitt of Loyola Law School, Los Angeles, conducted this investigation and found that some of those cases may have been because of clerical errors. He also found that the rate of voter impersonation is approximately one instance out of every 32-million ballots cast.

There have been only a few fed-

eral investigations of fraud. The George W. Bush administration conducted one over a five-year period, which “turned up virtually no evidence” of organised fraud, according to the New York Times, and instead led to resignations and further investigations for the Department of Justice.

Iowa’s Republican Secretary of State investigated voter fraud in 2014, resulting in 27 criminal charges, of which several were related to mistakes or voting rules being misunderstood.

The list goes on and on.

And let’s not forget that “Republicans have used claims of widespread voter fraud to discriminate and restrict access to the ballot box for years,” according to Democratic US Representative James Clyburn, of South Carolina.

Lawmakers from both major parties see no validity in Trump’s claims. The vast majority of those in Trump’s party share the view of House Speaker Paul Ryan, who told reporters on January 24 that he had “seen no evidence” to embrace Trump’s version of the election.

“All we want is the truth”

Meanwhile, House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi spoke at a news conference on January 25, and was perplexed why Trump is “so insecure.”

“To suggest and to undermine the integrity of our voter system is really strange,” Pelosi said. “... On top of it, he wants to investigate something that can clearly be proven to be false, but he resists investigations of a Russian disruption of our election and any connection to his campaign. All we want is the truth for the American people.”

This might be funny, if it were not so dangerous. We may well scoff at Trump for being so insecure, with his false assertion that millions of people voted illegally on November 8, but the fact is that he is the US President, and what he is doing is dangerous. Trump is displaying the traits of an authoritarian leader who seeks to undermine democracy by casting doubt on anyone or any information that he feels could challenge his authority or threaten his legitimacy. The “dishonest me-

dia” and the “phony polls” go right along with the assertions of “VOTER FRAUD.” **CT**

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*Judy Molland is an award-winning writer and teacher. She is the author of *Get Out! 150 Easy Ways for Kids and Grown-Ups to Get Into Nature and Build a Greener Future, and Straight Talk About Schools Today.* She lives in the San Francisco Bay Area, where she teaches Spanish. This article first appeared at www.care2.com*

Hype, hysteria and the Muslim Ban

Kit Knightly wonders why everyone is so surprised that Trump is doing exactly what he promised during his election campaign

They’re calling it the “Muslim Ban.” That’s the headline attention-grabber. It has its own Twitter hashtag too. Everyone, all around the progressive “free world” is coming together to denounce this barbarism with one voice. Actors are making speeches at the SAG awards, and earnest navel-gazing columnists are writing about how this travel ban clashes with “British values.”

There’s a petition to ban US President Trump from entering the UK with more than a million signatures already (only three from the British Antarctic Territories this time). John Harris, writing in the Guardian, even manages to make this all about Brexit – how triggering Article 50 will push us closer to a

Trump administration that is “ruining America’s reputation.” Not even Jeremy Corbyn was immune, his biggest weakness, it seems, is that he cannot ever miss an opportunity to be “nice.”

Hardly a surprise

So what does it all mean? I have no idea. Is it a catastrophe? Absolutely not. It’s not even a surprise. This is something Trump spoke about doing over and over again during his campaign. That we’ve got to the point where a politician actually doing something he said he was going to do is a shock, is perhaps the most revealing aspect of this whole situation.

Some fact-checking:

- It’s NOT a Muslim ban. It ap-

Insights

plies to only seven countries: Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen. All in all less than 200-million of the world's 1.6-BILLION Muslims are affected.

- It's NOT permanent, or even long-term. It's only 90 days long for everywhere but Syria.

- It's NOT unprecedented. Jimmy Carter banned all immigrants from Iran during the hostage crisis, and Barack Obama put a six-month delay on Iraqi refugees in 2011. Just two years ago, during the "ebola crisis," America imposed a travel ban on people coming in from West Africa. It is an entirely sensible and pragmatic thing to do . . . if you believe your country to be in some kind of danger.

NOTE: Somehow, in the last four years or so, the media has established a meme that protecting the borders of your country is akin to racism. (This is probably part of a corporate, globalist agenda to allow the free movement of cheap labour, to undermine workers rights).

Now - let's look at the seven named countries. Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen. These seven countries have all been bombed by America in the last 12 months, and regularly going back dozens of years.

Obama sent predator drones to attack weddings and markets in Somalia and Iraq, and Britain and US sell bombs to the Saudis, who drop them on Yemeni civilians without a thought of repercussion, or even rebuke, from their Western allies. These countries have been destroyed. Libya, Iraq and Somalia are husks of states, with barely infrastructure enough to supply water to everyone, let alone do background

HURWITT'S EYE

Mark Hurwitt



checks on all the mercenaries and militant zealots hopping over the borders between the various war-zones America has dotted the Middle-East with.

Interestingly, none of these cynical and murderous acts of war ever resulted in a petition to stop Bush, Clinton or Obama from entering Britain. Creating a failed state, killing a million people, and rendering millions homeless is less of a black-mark on your character than a 90 day travel ban.

The idea it "damages America's reputation?" That is hilarious. America's reputation was in tatters decades ago, to anyone paying even the slightest bit of attention. If drone assassinations, or dropping Agent Orange on Vietnamese children, or cluster bombs on Baghdad,

or torturing people in Gitmo doesn't dint your belief in American values . . . then a 90 travel ban shouldn't either. And if it does, you need to re-sort your priorities.

Chaos in common

What those seven countries have in common is not Islam, but chaos, violence and (allegedly) terrorism.

IF you believe in the rise of al-Qaeda and ISIS, IF you still think that these organisations are anything but American constructs for proxy wars and regime change, IF you truly believe in the fear porn and staged-managed terror the media hydra constantly pumps out, IF you truly believe these people are a threat to ordinary innocent civilians all over "the West" . . . then you

have to agree a travel ban is a practical and logical step to control that threat. Just as it was in the 1970s, just as it was in 2011, just as it was in 2014.

And if your response to this move, as the mainstream media response has been, is to talk as if this threat doesn't exist? Well, then you are admitting that you don't believe your own coverage, that all the hyped-up "terrorism" talk was at best ratings-driven hysteria, and at worst agenda-pushing lies.

The political establishment's rush to oppose this move simply confirms what so many of us in the alt-news have been saying for years – terrorism was never the threat they pretended it was. The question becomes – why is the vast majority of the media, the establishment and their various media voices so against this move? Is it because it means nothing? It is essentially

harmless, but allows "liberals" and "progressives" to add some virtuous notes to their CV though strident opposition. Is it simply a case that Trump will be opposed and ridiculed no matter what he does? If so, why? What good does turning the POTUS into a figure of scorn and mockery do anyone?

Is Trump essentially the anti-Obama? Obama was a construct that allowed immediate good-by-association. Supporting Obama meant you were a good-guy, perhaps, in a change of tack, we now have a US president you have to hate. Perhaps it's all just an elaborate social experiment. It's impossible to tell anymore.

The first ten days of Trump's presidency has, so far, produced far more questions than answers. **CT**

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Kit Knightly is co-editor of Off-Guardian - www.offguardian.org

he'd picked, but also dual passport holders and possibly even anyone born in those countries, regardless of passport. That, of course, included British citizens.

Suddenly May's repeated "US foreign policy is for the US" mantra looked cowardly and slow-witted. Her team went into panic mode, issuing a slightly tougher statement around midnight on Saturday night. You should treat Downing Street statements like phone calls: if they come in the dead of night, it means something is wrong.

The early part of the week was a test study in how May's team responds to a political crisis. It is their first big crisis. Given how complex and treacherous the negotiations in Brussels will be, it will not be the last, so this was a useful instruction in how they would perform.

First they said they would check to see if the ban affected Brits. Then they returned to say it didn't. Then official advice said it probably did. Then they said again it didn't. Then they blamed the invitation for a Trump state visit on the state visit committee, which may or may not exist. Then it turned out that might mean the royal visit committee, which does exist but wasn't responsible. Then they confirmed that actually the invitation had come from Downing Street. And that was just Monday. They were a shambles, protected from political bloodletting only by the even-greater shambles that is the official opposition.

On Wednesday, Jeremy Corbyn asked May about the Trump visit during PMQs. Had Trump told her he was planning this when she was speaking to him hours beforehand? What did she know and when? It

Getting ready for two years of disaster

Ian Dunt explains why British PM Theresa May's fawning over Donald Trump was not such a good idea

Prime Minister Theresa May was probably feeling pretty buoyant when she got on the plane from Turkey to London after her visit late last month. She'd managed to secure her alliance with the new US President and kept alive her hopes of a politically-convenient US trade deal, while simultaneously issuing sufficient criticism to protect

her from critics of Donald Trump back home. When she got on the plane, her trip appeared a success.

By the time it touched down in London on January 28, things had changed. Trump's order of a Muslim ban at US airports was causing escalating panic and outrage. Suddenly it seemed to apply not just to the citizens of the seven countries

Insights

seemed as though, for once, we'd get some decent forensic questioning from the Labour leader. May had clearly prepped for it. The answer was: No, he hadn't mentioned it.

Corbyn is congenitally unable to think on his feet, so the debate got away from him and May delivered a thumping. But her answer was remarkable. Just a week before, again at PMQs, she had been telling him that she could speak frankly with the US because she made sure the special relationship worked. Now here she was admitting the new President had not even bothered to tell her he was about to pass an order banning thousands of Brits from the US within hours of their meeting. Or, if the British exemption had always been planned, that it existed. For all May's fawning, Trump clearly did not respect her enough to inform her of this not-insignificant policy. And in exchange? In exchange she'd offered him the highest honour she had in her power to impart.

On every level, she had made her own life harder. And then, when the disaster struck, she proved unable



Theresa May: Daunting times ahead.

to deal with it. She was so cowardly she failed to condemn the ban on its own terms, so slow-witted she couldn't see how it might affect British citizens, so eager for a trade deal she created a clear channel for British anti-Trump outrage to be directed at her, and so inept at media management that the row turned her trip into a disaster.

Then, days later, the Commons voted on the second reading of the Article 50 bill, itself a result of her being forced into consulting parliament following a defeat in the

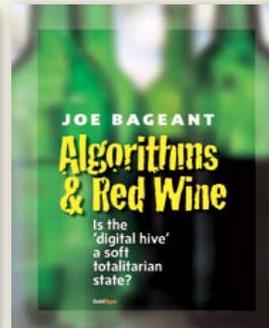
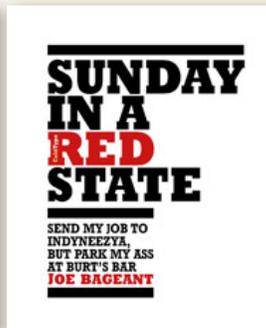
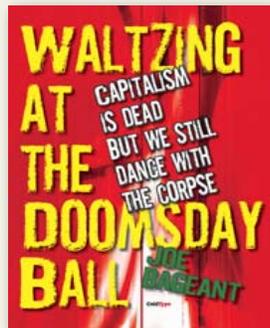
High Court and the Supreme Court. On Thursday, as a result of yet another U-turn (she averages several a week) the government published a white paper on Brexit. White was the correct word for it, although blank would also do.

It contained precious few ideas for how she would fulfil all her promises: ending free movement while keeping all the good bits of the customs union and single market membership, ending European Court of Justice jurisdiction while keeping the privileges of the system it orders, and eradicating any EU payments despite European claims that that will scupper any talks before they've even started.

That is what the next two years entail. It is a task so daunting Churchill himself would have struggled to achieve it. Given her performance over the last week, we should prepare for disaster. **CT**

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Ian Dunt is the editor of Politics.co.uk. His book - Brexit: What The Hell Happens Now? - is out now from Canbury Press

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Fake news, walls, murders and weapons

William Blum looks at the latest news and finds an astonishing set of contradictions and absurdities

The entire emphasis on the recent fake news controversy has been on whether a particular news item is factually correct or incorrect. However, that is not the main problem with mainstream media. A news item can be factually correct and still be very biased and misleading because of what's been left out, such as the relevant information about Russia's "invasion" of Crimea.

But when it comes to real fake news it's difficult to top the CIA's record in Latin America as revealed by Philip Agee, the leading whistleblower of all time.

Agee spent 12 years (1957-69) as a CIA case officer, most of it in Latin America. His first book, *Inside the Company: CIA Diary*, published in 1974 revealed how it was a common Agency tactic to write editorials and phoney news stories to be knowingly published by Latin American media with no indication of the CIA authorship or CIA payment to the particular media. The propaganda value of such a "news" item might be multiplied by being picked up by other CIA stations in Latin America who would disseminate it through a CIA-owned news agency or a CIA-owned radio station. Some of these stories made their way back to the United States to be read or heard by

unknowing North Americans.

The Great Wall of Mr. T

So much cheaper. So much easier. So much more humane. So much more popular. . . . Don't build that wall. . . . Just stop overthrowing or destabilising governments south of the border. And the United States certainly has a moral obligation to do this. So many of the immigrants are escaping a situation in their homeland made hopeless by American intervention and policy. The particularly severe increase in Honduran migration to the US in recent years is a direct result of the June 28, 2009, military coup that overthrew the democratically-elected president, Manuel Zelaya, after he did things like raising the minimum wage, giving subsidies to small farmers, and instituting free education. The coup – like so many others in Latin America – was led by a graduate of Washington's infamous School of the Americas.

As per the standard Western Hemisphere script, the Honduran coup was followed by the abusive policies of the new regime, loyally supported by the United States. The State Department was virtually alone in the Western Hemisphere in not unequivocally condemning the coup. Indeed, the Obama adminis-

tration refused to even call it a coup, which, under American law, would tie Washington's hands as to the amount of support it could give the coup government. This denial of reality continued to exist even though a US embassy cable released by Wikileaks in 2010 declared: "There is no doubt that the military, Supreme Court and National Congress conspired on June 28 [2009] in what constituted an illegal and unconstitutional coup against the Executive Branch". Washington's support of the far-right Honduran government has continued ever since.

In addition to Honduras, Washington overthrew progressive governments which were sincerely committed to fighting poverty in Guatemala and Nicaragua; while in El Salvador the US played a major role in suppressing a movement striving to install such a government. And in Mexico, over the years the US has been providing training, arms, and surveillance technology to police and armed forces to better their ability to suppress their own people's aspirations, as in Chiapas in 1994, and this has added to the influx of the oppressed to the United States, irony notwithstanding.

Moreover, Washington's North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), has brought a flood of cheap, subsidised US agricultural products into Mexico, ravaging campesino communities and driving many Mexican farmers off the land when they couldn't compete with the giant from the north. The subsequent Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) brought the same joys to the people of that area.

These "free trade" agreements –

Insights

as they do all over the world – also resulted in government enterprises being privatised, the regulation of corporations being reduced, and cuts to the social budget. Add to this the displacement of communities by foreign mining projects and the drastic US-led militarisation of the War on Drugs with accompanying violence and you have the perfect storm of suffering followed by the attempt to escape from suffering.

It's not that all these people prefer to live in the United States. They'd much rather remain with their families and friends, be able to speak their native language at all times, and avoid the hardships imposed on them by American police and other right-wingers.

Mr T, if one can read him correctly – not always an easy task – insists that he's opposed to the hallmark of American foreign policy: regime change. If he would keep his Yankee hands off political and social change in Mexico and Central America and donate as compensation a good part of the billions to be spent on his Great Wall to those societies, there could be a remarkable reduction in the never-ending line of desperate people clawing their way northward.

Murders: Theirs and ours

Amongst the many repeated denunciations of Russian president Vladimir Putin is that he can't be trusted because he spent many years in the Soviet secret intelligence service, the KGB.

Well, consider that before he became the US president George HW Bush was the head of the CIA.

Putin, we are also told, has his enemies murdered. But consider the case of Seth Rich, the 27-year-old Democratic National Committee staffer who was shot dead on a Washington, DC street last July.

On August 9, in an interview on the Dutch television program Nieuwsuur, Julian Assange seemed to suggest rather clearly that Seth Rich was the source for the Wikileaks-exposed DNC emails and was murdered for it.

Julian Assange: "Our whistleblowers go to significant efforts to get us material and often face very significant risks. A 27-year-old that works for the DNC, was shot in the back, murdered just a few weeks ago for unknown reasons, as he was walking down the street in Washington, DC."

Reporter: "That was just a robbery, I believe. Wasn't it?"

Julian Assange: "No. There's no finding. So . . . I'm suggesting that our sources take risks." (See also Washington Post, January 19, 2017)

But . . . but . . . that was Russian hacking, wasn't it? Not a leak, right?

A frightening shortage of weapons

President Trump just signed an executive order to launch what he called "a 'great rebuilding of the Armed Forces' that is expected to include new ships, planes, weapons and the modernisation of the US nuclear arsenal."

This is something regularly advocated by American military and civilian leaders. I ask them all the same question: Can you name a foreign war that the United States has ever lost due to an insufficient number of ships, planes, tanks, bombs, guns, or ammunition, or nuclear arsenal? Or because what they had was outdated, against an enemy with more modern weapons? **CT**

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William Blum is the author of many books, including *Rogue State: A Guide To The World's Only Superpower*, and *America's Deadliest Export – Democracy*. His web site is www.williamblum.org

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