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What can go wrong?

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By William Blum

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That he may not be “qualified” is unimportant.

That he’s never held a government or elected position is unimportant.

That on a personal level he may be a shmuck is unimportant.

What counts to me mainly at this early stage is that he – as opposed to dear Hillary – is unlikely to start a war against Russia. His questioning of the absolute sacredness of NATO, calling it “obsolete”, and his meeting with Democratic Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard, an outspoken critic of US regime-change policy, specifically Syria, are encouraging signs.

Even more so is his appointment of General Michael Flynn as National Security Adviser. Flynn dined last year in Moscow with Vladimir Putin at a gala celebrating RT (Russia Today), the Russian state's English-language, leftist-leaning TV channel. Flynn now carries the stigma in the American media as an individual who does not see Russia or Putin as the devil. It is truly remarkable how nonchalantly American journalists can look upon the possibility of a war with Russia, even a nuclear war.

(I can now expect a barrage of emails from my excessively politically-correct readers about Flynn's alleged anti-Islam side. But that, even if true, is irrelevant to this discussion of avoiding a war with Russia.)

I think American influence under Trump could also inspire a solution to the bloody Russia-Ukraine crisis, which is the result of the US overthrow of the democratically-elected Ukrainian government in 2014 to further advance the US/NATO surrounding of Russia; after which he could end the US-imposed sanctions against Russia, which hardly anyone in Europe benefits from or wants; and then – finally! – an end to the embargo against Cuba. What a day for celebration that will be! Too bad that Fidel won't be around to enjoy it.

We may have other days of celebration if Trump pardons or in some other manner frees Chelsea Manning, Julian Assange, and/or Edward Snowden. Neither Barack Obama nor Hillary Clinton would do this, but I think there's at least a chance with the Donald. And those three heroes may now enjoy feeling at least a modicum of hope. Picture a meeting of them all together on some future marvelous day with you watching it on a video.

Trump will also probably not hold back on military actions against radical Islam because of any fear of being called anti-Islam. He's repulsed enough by ISIS to want to destroy them, something that can't always be said about Mr. Obama.

International trade deals, written by corporate lawyers for the benefit of their bosses, with little concern about the rest of us, may have rougher sailing in the Trump White House than is usually the case with such deals.

The mainstream critics of Trump foreign policy should be embarrassed, even humbled, by what they supported in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria. Instead, what bothers them about the president-elect is his lack of desire to make the rest of the world in America's image. He appears rather to be more concerned with the world not making America in *its* image.

In the latest chapter of Alice in Trumpland he now says that he does not plan to prosecute Hillary Clinton, that he has an "open mind" about a climate-change accord from which he had vowed to withdraw the United States, and that he's no longer certain that torturing terrorism suspects is a good idea. So whatever fears you may have about certain of his expressed weird policies ... just wait ... they may fall by the wayside just as easily; although I still think that on a personal level he's a [two-syllable word: first syllable is a synonym for a donkey; second syllable means "an opening"]

Trump's apparently deep-seated need for approval may continue to succumb poorly to widespread criticism and protests. Poor little Donald ... so powerful ... yet so vulnerable.

The Trump dilemma, as well as the whole Hillary Clinton mess, could have probably been avoided if Bernie Sanders had been nominated. That large historical "if" is almost on a par with the Democrats choosing Harry Truman to replace Henry Wallace in 1944 as the ailing Roosevelt's vice-president. Truman brought us a charming little thing called the Cold War, which in turn gave us McCarthyism. But Wallace, like Sanders, was just a little too damn leftist for the refined Democratic Party bosses.

State-owned media: The good, the bad, and the ugly

On November 16, at a State Department press briefing, department spokesperson John Kirby was having one of his frequent adversarial dialogues with Gayane Chichakyan, a reporter for RT (Russia Today); this time concerning US charges of Russia bombing hospitals in Syria and blocking the UN from delivering aid to the trapped population. When Chichakyan asked for some detail about these charges, Kirby replied: "Why don't you ask your defense ministry?"

GK: Do you – can you give any specific information on when Russia or the Syrian Government blocked the UN from delivering aid? Just any specific information.

KIRBY: There hasn't been any aid delivered in the last month.

GK: And you believe it was blocked exclusively by Russia and the Syrian Government?

KIRBY: There's no question in our mind that the obstruction is coming from the regime and from Russia. No question at all.

...

MATTHEW LEE (Associated Press): Let me -- hold on, just let me say: Please be careful about saying "your defense minister" and things like that. I mean, she's a journalist just like the rest of us are, so it's -- she's asking pointed questions, but they're not --

KIRBY: From a state-owned -- from a state-owned --

LEE: But they're not --

KIRBY: From a state-owned outlet, Matt.

LEE: But they're not --

KIRBY: From a state-owned outlet that's not independent.

LEE: The questions that she's asking are not out of line.

KIRBY: I didn't say the questions were out of line.

.....

KIRBY: I'm sorry, but I'm not going to put Russia Today on the same level with the rest of you who are representing independent media outlets.

One has to wonder if State Department spokesperson Kirby knows that in 2011 Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, speaking about RT, declared: "The Russians have opened an English-language network. I've seen it in a few countries, and it is quite instructive."

I also wonder how Mr. Kirby deals with reporters from the BBC, a STATE-OWNED television and radio entity in the UK, broadcasting in the US and all around the world.

Or the state-owned Australian Broadcasting Corporation, described by Wikipedia as follows: "The corporation provides television, radio, online and mobile services throughout metropolitan and regional Australia, as well as overseas ... and is well regarded for quality and reliability as well as for offering educational and cultural programming that the commercial sector would be unlikely to supply on its own."

There's also Radio Free Europe, Radio Free Asia, Radio Liberty (Central/Eastern Europe), and Radio Marti (Cuba); all (US) state-owned, none "independent", but all deemed worthy enough by the United States to feed to the world.

And let's not forget what Americans have at home: PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) and NPR (National Public Radio), which would have a near-impossible time surviving without large federal government grants. How independent does this leave them? Has either broadcaster ever unequivocally opposed a modern American war? There's good reason NPR has long been known as National Pentagon Radio. But it's part of American media's ideology to pretend that it doesn't have any ideology.

As to the non-state American media ... There are about 1400 daily newspapers in the United States. Can you name a single paper, or a single TV network, that was unequivocally opposed to the American wars carried out against Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan, Yugoslavia, Panama, Grenada, and Vietnam while they were happening, or shortly thereafter? Or even opposed to any two of these seven wars? How about one? In 1968, six years into the Vietnam war, the *Boston Globe* (February 18, 1968) surveyed the editorial positions of 39 leading US papers concerning the war and found that "none advocated a pull-out". Has the phrase "invasion of Vietnam" ever appeared in the US mainstream media?

In 2003, leading cable station MSNBC took the much-admired Phil Donahue off the air because of his opposition to the calls for war in Iraq. Mr. Kirby would undoubtedly call MSNBC “independent”.

If the American mainstream media were officially state-controlled, would they look or sound significantly different when it comes to US foreign policy?

Soviet observation: “The only difference between your propaganda and our propaganda is that you believe yours.”

On November 25, the *Washington Post* ran an article entitled: “Research ties ‘fake news’ to Russia.” It’s all about how sources in Russia are flooding American media and the Internet with phoney stories designed as “part of a broadly effective strategy of sowing distrust in U.S. democracy and its leaders”.

“The sophistication of the Russian tactics,” the article says, “may complicate efforts by Facebook and Google to crack down on ‘fake news’.”

The *Post* states that the Russian tactics included “penetrating the computers of election officials in several states and releasing troves of hacked emails that embarrassed Clinton in the final months of her campaign.” (Heretofore this had been credited to Wikileaks.)

The story is simply bursting with anti-Russian references:

- An online magazine header – “Trolling for Trump: How Russia Is Trying to Destroy Our Democracy.”
- “the startling reach and effectiveness of Russian propaganda campaigns.”
- “more than 200 websites as routine peddlers of Russian propaganda during the election season.”
- “stories planted or promoted by the disinformation campaign were viewed more than 213 million times.”
- “The Russian campaign during this election season ... worked by harnessing the online world’s fascination with ‘buzzy’ content that is surprising and emotionally potent, and tracks with popular conspiracy theories about how secret forces dictate world events.”
- “Russian-backed phony news to outcompete traditional news organizations for audience”

- “They use our technologies and values against us to sow doubt. It’s starting to undermine our democratic system.”
- “Russian propaganda operations also worked to promote the ‘Brexit’ departure of Britain from the European Union.”
- “Some of these stories originated with RT and Sputnik, state-funded Russian information services that mimic the style and tone of independent news organizations yet sometimes include false and misleading stories in their reports.”
- “a variety of other false stories — fake reports of a coup launched at Incirlik Air Base in Turkey and stories about how the United States was going to conduct a military attack and blame it on Russia”

A former US ambassador to Russia, Michael McFaul, is quoted saying he was “struck by the overt support that Sputnik expressed for Trump during the campaign, even using the #CrookedHillary hashtag pushed by the candidate.” McFaul said Russian propaganda typically is aimed at weakening opponents and critics. “They don’t try to win the argument. It’s to make everything seem relative. It’s kind of an appeal to cynicism.” [Cynicism? Heavens! What will those Moscow fascists/communists think of next?]

The *Post* did, however, include the following: “RT disputed the findings of the researchers in an e-mail on Friday, saying it played no role in producing or amplifying any fake news stories related to the U.S. election.” RT was quoted: “It is the height of irony that an article about ‘fake news’ is built on false, unsubstantiated claims. RT adamantly rejects any and all claims and insinuations that the network has originated even a single ‘fake story’ related to the US election.”

It must be noted that the *Washington Post* article fails to provide a single example showing how the actual facts of a specific news event were rewritten or distorted by a Russian agency to produce a news event with a contrary political message. What then lies behind such blatant anti-Russian propaganda? In the new Cold War such a question requires no answer. The new Cold War by definition exists to discredit Russia simply because it stands in the way of American world domination. In the new Cold War the political spectrum in the mainstream media runs the gamut from A to B.

Cuba, Fidel, Socialism ... Hasta la victoria siempre!

The most frequent comment I’ve read in the mainstream media concerning Fidel Castro’s death is that he was a “dictator”; almost every heading bore that word. Since the 1959 revolution, the American mainstream media has routinely referred to Cuba as a dictatorship. But just what does Cuba do or lack that makes it a dictatorship?

No “free press”? Apart from the question of how free Western media is (see the preceding essays), if that’s to be the standard, what would happen if Cuba announced that from now on anyone in the country could own any kind of media? How long would it be before CIA money – secret and unlimited CIA money financing all kinds of fronts in Cuba – would own or control almost all the media worth owning or controlling?

Is it “free elections” that Cuba lacks? They regularly have elections at municipal, regional and national levels. They do not have direct election of the president, but neither do Germany or the United Kingdom and many other countries. The Cuban president is chosen by the parliament, The National Assembly of People’s Power. Money plays virtually no role in these elections; neither does party politics, including the Communist Party, since all candidates run as individuals. Again, what is the standard by which Cuban elections are to be judged? Is it that they don’t have private corporations to pour in a billion dollars? Most Americans, if they gave it any thought, might find it difficult to even imagine what a free and democratic election, without great concentrations of corporate money, would look like, or how it would operate. Would Ralph Nader finally be able to get on all 50 state ballots, take part in national television debates, and be able to match the two monopoly parties in media advertising? If that were the case, I think he’d probably win; which is why it’s not the case.

Or perhaps what Cuba lacks is our marvelous “electoral college” system, where the presidential candidate with the most votes is not necessarily the winner. Did we need the latest example of this travesty of democracy to convince us to finally get rid of it? If we really think this system is a good example of democracy why don’t we use it for local and state elections as well?

Is Cuba a dictatorship because it arrests dissidents? Many thousands of anti-war and other protesters have been arrested in the United States in recent years, as in every period in American history. During the Occupy Movement of five years ago more than 7,000 people were arrested, many beaten by police and mistreated while in custody. And remember: The United States is to the Cuban government like al Qaeda is to Washington, only much more powerful and much closer; virtually without exception, Cuban dissidents have been financed by and aided in other ways by the United States.

Would Washington ignore a group of Americans receiving funds from al Qaeda and engaging in repeated meetings with known members of that organization? In recent years the United States has arrested a great many people in the US and abroad solely on the basis of alleged ties to al Qaeda, with a lot less evidence to go by than Cuba has had with its dissidents’ ties to the United States. Virtually all of Cuba’s “political prisoners” are such dissidents. While others may call Cuba’s security policies dictatorship, I call it self-defense.