

MH17_US_PROPAGANDA

Unlike serious professional investigative reporters, intelligence analysts are often required by policymakers to reach rapid judgments without the twin luxuries of enough time and conclusive evidence. Having spent almost 30 years in the business of intelligence analysis, I have faced that uncomfortable challenge more times than I wish to remember.



President Barack Obama delivers a statement on the situation in Ukraine, on the South Lawn of the White House, July 29, 2014. (Official White House Photo by Lawrence Jackson)

So, I know what it feels like to confront issues of considerable consequence like the shoot-down of MH-17 and the killing of 298 passengers and crew amid intense pressure to choreograph the judgments to the propagandistic music favored by senior officials who want the U.S. “enemy” – in this case, nuclear-armed Russia and its Western-demonized President Vladimir Putin – to somehow be responsible. In such situations, the easiest and safest (career-wise) move is to twirl your analysis to the preferred tune or at least sit this jig out.

But the trust-us-it-was-Putin marathon dance has now run for 13 months – and it’s getting tiresome to hear the P.R. people in the office of Director of National Intelligence James Clapper still claiming that the U.S. intelligence community has not revised or updated its analysis of the incident since July 22, 2014, just five days after the crash.

Back then, Clapper’s office, trying to back up Secretary of State John Kerry’s anti-Russian rush to judgment, cited very sketchy evidence – in both senses of the word – drawn heavily from “*social media*” accounts. Obviously, the high-priced and high-caliber U.S. intelligence community has learned much more about this very sensitive case since that time, but the administration won’t tell the American people and the world. The DNI’s office still refers inquiring reporters back to the outdated report from more than a year ago.

None of this behavior would make much sense if the later U.S. intelligence data supported the hasty finger-pointing toward Putin and the rebels. If more solid and persuasive intelligence corroborated those initial assumptions, you’d think U.S. government officials would be falling over themselves to leak the evidence and declare “*we told you so.*” And the DNI office’s claim that it doesn’t want to

prejudice the MH-17 investigation doesn't hold water either – since the initial rush to judgment did exactly that.

So, despite the discomfort attached to making judgments with little reliable evidence – and at the risk of sounding like former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld – it seems high time to address what we know, what we don't know, and why it may be that we don't know what we don't know.

Those caveats notwithstanding I would say it is a safe bet that the hard technical intelligence evidence upon which professional intelligence analysts prefer to rely does not support Secretary of State Kerry's unseemly rush to judgment in blaming the Russian side just three days after the shoot-down.

'An Extraordinary Tool'?

When the tragedy occurred U.S. intelligence collection assets were focused laser-like on the Ukraine-Russia border region where the passenger plane crashed. Besides collection from overhead imagery and sensors, U.S. intelligence presumably would have electronic intercepts of communications as well as information from human sources inside many of the various factions.

That would mean that hundreds of intelligence analysts are likely to have precise knowledge regarding how MH-17 was shot down and by whom. Though there may be some difference of opinion among analysts about how to read the evidence – as there often is – it is out of the question that the intelligence community would withhold this data from President Barack Obama, Secretary of State Kerry and other top officials.

Thus, it is a virtual certainty that the Obama administration has far more conclusive evidence than the "social media" cited by Kerry in casting suspicions on the rebels and Moscow when he made the rounds of Sunday talk shows just three days after the crash. On NBC's "Meet the Press," Kerry told David Gregory that "social media" is an "extraordinary tool." The question is, a tool for what?

The DNI report two days later rehashed many of the "social media" references that Kerry cited and added some circumstantial evidence about Russia providing other forms of military equipment to the rebels. But the DNI report contains no mention of Russia supplying a Buk anti-aircraft missile system that Kerry and the DNI cited as the suspected weapon that downed the plane.

So, why does the administration continue refusing to go beyond such dubious sources and shaky information in attributing blame for the shoot-down? Why not fill in the many blanks with actual and hard U.S. intelligence data that would have been available and examined over the following days and weeks? Did the Russians supply a Buk or other missile battery that would be capable of hitting MH-17 flying at 33,000 feet? Yes or no.

If not supplied by the Russians, did the rebels capture a Buk or similar missile battery from the Ukrainians who had them in their own inventory? Or did some element of the Ukrainian government – possibly associated with one of Ukraine's corrupt oligarchs – fire the missile, either mistaking the Malaysian plane for a Russian one or calculating how the tragedy could be played for propaganda purposes? Or was it some other sinister motive?

Without doubt, the U.S. government has evidence that could support or refute any one of those possibilities, but it won't tell you even in some declassified summary form. Why? Is it somehow

unpatriotic to speculate that John Kerry, with his checkered reputation for truth-telling regarding Syria and other foreign crises, chose right off the bat to turn the MH-17 tragedy to Washington's propaganda advantage, an exercise in "soft power" to throw Putin on the defensive and rally Europe behind U.S. economic sanctions to punish Russia for supporting ethnic Russians in Crimea and eastern Ukraine resisting the new U.S.-arranged political order in Kiev?

By taking a leaf out of the Bush-Cheney-Tony-Blair playbook, Kerry could "*fix the intelligence around the policy*" of Putin-bashing. Given the anti-Putin bias rampant in the mainstream Western media, that wouldn't be a hard sell. And, it wasn't. The "*mainstream*" stenographers/journalists quickly accepted that "social media" was indeed a dandy source to rely on – and have never pressed the U.S. government to release any of its intelligence data.

Yet, in the immediate aftermath of the MH-17 shoot-down, there were signs that honest intelligence analysts were not comfortable letting themselves be used as they and other colleagues had been before the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

To buttress Kerry's shaky case, DNI Clapper arranged a flimsy "*Government Assessment*" – reprising many of Kerry's references to "*social media*" – that was briefed to a few hand-picked Establishment reporters two days after Kerry starred on Sunday TV. The little-noticed distinction was that this report was not the customary "*Intelligence Assessment*" (the genre that has been de rigueur in such circumstances in the past).

The key difference between the traditional "*Intelligence Assessment*" and this relatively new creation, a "*Government Assessment*," is that the latter genre is put together by senior White House bureaucrats or other political appointees, not senior intelligence analysts. Another significant difference is that an "*Intelligence Assessment*" often includes alternative views, either in the text or in footnotes, detailing disagreements among intelligence analysts, thus revealing where the case may be weak or in dispute.

The absence of an "*Intelligence Assessment*" suggested that honest intelligence analysts were resisting a knee-jerk indictment of Russia – just as they did after the first time Kerry pulled this "*Government Assessment*" arrow out of his quiver trying to stick the blame for an [Aug. 21, 2013 sarin gas attack](#) outside Damascus on the Syrian government.

Kerry cited this pseudo-intelligence product, which contained not a single verifiable fact, to take the United States to the brink of war against President Bashar al-Assad's military, a fateful decision that was only headed off at the last minute after President Barack Obama was made aware of grave doubts among U.S. intelligence analysts about whodunit. Kerry's sarin case has since collapsed. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[The Collapsing Syria-Sarin Case.](#)"]

The sarin and MH-17 cases reveal the continuing struggles between opportunistic political operatives and professional intelligence analysts over how to deal with geopolitical information that can either inform U.S. foreign policy objectively or be exploited to advance some propaganda agenda. Clearly, this struggle did not end after CIA analysts were pressured into giving President George W. Bush the fraudulent – not "mistaken" – evidence that he used to make the case for invading Iraq in 2003.

But so soon after that disgraceful episode, the White House and State Department run the risk that some honest intelligence analysts would blow the whistle, especially given the dangerously blasé attitude in Establishment Washington toward the dangers of escalating the Ukraine confrontation with nuclear-armed Russia. Given the very high stakes, perhaps an intelligence professional or two will summon the courage to step up to this challenge.

Falling in Line

For now, the rest of us are told to be satisfied with the Sunday media circus orchestrated by Kerry on July 20, 2014, with the able assistance of eager-to-please pundits. A review of the transcripts of the CBS, NBC, and ABC Sunday follies reveals a remarkable – if not unprecedented — consistency in approach by CBS’s Bob Schieffer, NBC’s David Gregory (ably egged on by Andrea Mitchell), and ABC’s George Stephanopoulos, all of whom hewed faithfully to a script apparently given them with two main talking points: (1) blame Putin; and (2) frame the shoot-down as a “wake-up call” (Kerry used the words repeatedly) for European governments to impose tight economic sanctions on Russia.

If the U.S. government’s hope was that the combination of Kerry’s hasty judgment and the DNI’s supportive “Government Assessment” would pin the P.R. blame for MH-17 on Putin and Russia, the gambit clearly worked. The U.S. had imposed serious economic sanctions on Russia the day before the shoot-down – but the Europeans were hesitant. Yet, in the MH-17 aftermath, both U.S. and European media were filled with outrage against Putin for supposedly murdering 298 innocents.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and other European leaders, who had been resisting imposing strong economic sanctions because of Germany’s and the European Union’s lucrative trade with Russia, let themselves be bulldozed, just two weeks after the shoot-down, into going along with mutually harmful sanctions that have hurt Russia but also have shaken the EU’s fragile economic recovery.

Thus started a new, noxious phase in the burgeoning confrontation between Russia and the West, a crisis that was originally precipitated by a Western-orchestrated coup d’état in Kiev on Feb. 22, 2014, ousting Ukraine’s elected President Viktor Yanukovych and touching off the current civil war that has witnessed some of the worst bloodshed inside Europe in decades..

It may seem odd that those European leaders allowed themselves to be snookered so swiftly. Did their own intelligence services not caution them against acquiescing over “*intelligence*” from social media? But the tidal wave of anti-Putin fury in the MH-17 aftermath was hard if not impossible for any Western politician to resist.

Just One Specific Question?

Yet, can the U.S. concealment of its MH-17 intelligence continue indefinitely? Some points beg for answers. For instance, besides describing social media as “*an extraordinary tool*,” Kerry told David Gregory on July 20, 2014:

“We picked up the imagery of this launch. We know the trajectory. We know where it came from. We know the timing. And it was exactly at the time that this aircraft disappeared from the radar.”

Odd that neither Gregory nor other “*mainstream*” stenographers have thought to ask Kerry, then or since, to share what he says he “knows” with the American people and the world – if only out of, well, a decent respect for the opinions of mankind. If Kerry has sources beyond “*social media*” for what he claims to “*know*” and they support his instant claims of Russian culpability, then the importance of his accusations dictates that he describe exactly what he pretends to know and how. But Kerry has been silent on this topic.

If, on the other hand, the real intelligence does not support the brief that Kerry argued right after the shoot-down, well, the truth will ultimately be hard to suppress. Angela Merkel and other leaders with damaged trade ties with Russia may ultimately demand an explanation. Can it be that it will take current European leaders a couple of years to realize they’ve been had — again?

The U.S. government also is likely to face growing public skepticism for using social media to pin the blame on Moscow for the downing of MH-17 – not only to justify imposing economic sanctions, but also to stoke increased hostility toward Russia.

The Obama administration and the mainstream media may try to pretend that no doubt exists – that the “*group think*” on Russia’s guilt is ironclad. And it seems likely that the official investigations now being conducted by the U.S.-propped-up government in Ukraine and other close U.S. allies will struggle to build a circumstantial case keeping the Putin-did-it narrative alive.

But chickens have a way of coming home to roost.