

THE IRAN NUCLEAR DEAL

*Bombs,
Bureaucrats,
and Billionaires*

DENNIS C. JETT



Praise for *The Iran Nuclear Deal*

“Dennis Jett has provided startlingly clear, well-documented background to the campaign in the United States against and in favor of American approval of the deal to limit Iran’s nuclear capacity in return for international sanctions relief. He also makes it clear that the American political conflict over the agreement is not over, identifying the players and the resources at their disposal clearly.”

—Dan Simpson, *Editor of Pittsburgh Post-Gazette
and Retired US Ambassador*

“Ambassador Dennis Jett offers a fresh and insightful analysis of how American foreign policy is actually made. He leaves aside traditional academic and theoretical explanations as incomplete and misleading. Focusing on the Iran Nuclear Treaty, Jett argues instead that American foreign policy is created through the dynamic interaction of powerful forces—money, technology, truth, partisanship, and globalization. This is a highly readable, learned, and unique perspective offering clarity in the making of our foreign policy.”

—Richard K. Scher, *Professor Emeritus of Political
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Colin Powell*

“Ambassador Jett provides a fascinating, if concerning, look into how negotiations work in today’s complex world. His insight into the influence of dark money, social media, and raw politics is a must read for anyone who wants to understand how Washington works—or does not work—today.”

—Nancy Soderberg, *former Deputy National Security
Advisor and Ambassador to the UN*

“Dennis Jett’s analysis of the forging of the agreement to curb Iran’s nuclear weapons ambitions is outstanding. The private money poured into supporting and opposing the agreement is breathtaking. It raises deeply disturbing questions about exactly how policy on crucial issues is determined in democracies. This book is essential reading.”

—Richard Butler, *former UN Chief Weapons Inspector
in Iraq and Australian Ambassador to Thailand*

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*To Helen and Clifton who made all that their sons
accomplished possible.*

FOREWORD

At the start of each class that I teach at Penn State, I tell the students there are two things that they should know about me. First, that I grew up in New Mexico. Second, that I spent 28 years in the State Department before spending the last 17 as an academic.

I then explain the significance of those two facts. First, that there is nothing bad they can say about Texas that I won't believe. Second, that as a professor of social science at a large, public, northeastern university and a former career bureaucrat, the chances that I am politically liberal and believe there is an important role for government are both in the neighborhood of 99 percent.

I tell my students these two facts because I always urge them to begin reading any book by first looking at the description of the author since it will often indicate how that person's background might affect what is written. Because this book has nothing to do with the southwestern United States, the first fact is not relevant. The readers of this book, like my students, should be aware of the second however. I am not one to pretend that my experience and political beliefs do not

affect how I approach a subject or that I can present an issue in a way that all sides will think is unbiased.

This book is about the debate over the Iran nuclear agreement and the efforts of groups outside of government to influence it. The book is not about the 20 months of negotiations that were required or about the agreement itself, which runs to over 31,000 words. Both the negotiating history and the features of the agreement will be discussed, but not in depth since that is not the purpose of the book.

The book is instead about those people and organizations outside of government who attempted to influence the outcome of the negotiations and who continue their efforts to see the agreement succeed or fail. There were an incredibly large number of actors who supported the deal and who opposed it. How the two camps are labeled tells something about the view of the person doing the labeling. Are the supporters pro-diplomacy or pro-Iran? Are the opponents pro-sanctions or pro-war, even though few of them would admit that their position would lead to military conflict?

My view toward which camp has the better argument, as with everyone's position on controversial topics, is affected by my experience. In the case of the Iran deal, there are three incidents that come to mind as having a bearing.

The first was in A-100 class, which is a six-week boot camp for bureaucrats that I took in 1972. In that course, the State Department attempts to educate newly minted Foreign Service Officers about the government they are going overseas to represent. There was but one brief lecture on how to conduct negotiations, but I still remember it. The speaker asked us what should be the outcome of a successful negotiation. We offered a number of responses, all of them wrong from his point of view. He then explained that a successful outcome is when the other side has something it can take back

to its capital and defend. If the other side cannot do that, he added, the agreement reached will never last.

The second incident was from the Liberian civil war in 1990. While I did see some fighting while in uniform during the Vietnam War, it was in a bar in Honolulu. There were other conflicts and their effects that I witnessed earlier as a diplomat, but Liberia would provide an object lesson of what happens to a country at war. The war started at the end of 1989 as a minor border incident. By mid-1990, it had engulfed the entire country and the government controlled little more than a few square blocks of downtown Monrovia.

It was a drive through those streets that brought home the impact of war as I had the driver stop to take a look at what lay by the side of the road. The memory is still vivid because it included the smell, as well as the sight, of a stack of bodies decaying under a tropical sun. They were dumped in a heap on a street a couple blocks from the embassy and the presidential mansion. The dead were men in civilian clothes and it was impossible to tell whether they were rebels without uniforms or innocent civilians. It was estimated that war would go on to kill some 200,000 Liberians, though that is just a guess as no one has any idea of what the real death toll was.

The final incident was considerably more upbeat. It happened in Brasilia when I went to witness the presidents of Peru and Ecuador sign a treaty that ended a border dispute between the two countries. A US military plane in the late 1940s was helping demarcate the border in a particularly remote region and discovered a river that had never been previously mapped. The resulting uncertainty over where the border lay had flared up periodically over the years in short military confrontations with casualties on both sides. The territory in dispute was a trackless jungle, but it had become the object of national pride for both countries. An innovative

solution was finally found, with the help of mediators from the United States, Argentina, Brazil and Chile, that allowed both sides to claim victory. The resulting agreement that was negotiated put to rest this long-standing source of conflict that had held back the economic and political development of both countries for many years.

The takeaway lessons of those three experiences for me were first that negotiations were not about one side winning but about both sides being able to say they won. Second, that war is best avoided as a way of solving disputes. And third, that diplomacy can succeed with a lot of hard work and creativity.

As a result, I fall into the pro-deal camp on the Iran nuclear accord and that will be reflected in what I write even though I will attempt to describe the other side and its arguments accurately. While I believe that diplomacy did work in this case, I am not writing to argue the merits of the agreement that was reached. Instead, it is to describe the enormous number of actors outside of government that were involved in the debate and the methods they used to try to influence the outcome.

The purpose of the book is also to more generally portray how the influence of money, technology, partisan politics, a growing disregard for truth and globalization has complicated the making of foreign policy, especially when the issue is controversial. It leaves me to wonder how much these factors have all diminished the chances for diplomacy to succeed, for negotiations to reach lasting agreements and for war to be avoided. It also raises the question as to whether these changes have made a foreign policy based on the national interest possible. Or whether policy on each issue will be forged by the victor in a battle between special interests. While it is hard to be optimistic about the outcome, each reader can reach his or her own conclusions and just considering the questions may make a somewhat better result possible.

PREFACE

The nineteenth-century Prussian statesman, Otto von Bismarck, once said, “Laws are like sausages, it is better not to see them made.” Or, maybe he didn’t. As with many quotes that are often repeated over the years, historical accuracy is less important than a good turn of a phrase.

There is no definitive evidence that Bismarck actually uttered those words.¹ The reason the quote, accurate or not, has had such a long life is that it is true. When governments make laws, the process has always been messy. And it can be just as messy for other decisions that governments make. That is especially true for domestic policy decisions as those affected by such actions recognize their impact and work to influence them.

In the past, when it came to foreign policy, the process seemed a little neater. During the Cold War, for instance, before use of the word “globalization” became commonplace, the impact of international issues seemed remote to most Americans. There was the threat of nuclear war with the Soviet Union, but dealing with that possibility was left to the military planners and strategic thinkers. With fewer people feeling they needed to have a say in the decision making, and given

that the issues were complicated and somewhat arcane, foreign policy was largely left to the experts in government.

The process of making foreign policy has gotten much messier in recent years, however. This book will use the debate over the Iran nuclear agreement to describe how that has happened, what new factors have come into play and why the policy that results from such a process may be incoherent, inconsistent and have little to do with the nation's interests. It won't attempt to describe either the negotiations or the deal itself in great detail. Both were very long and complicated and the focus will instead be on individuals and groups outside of government and how they attempted to influence the outcome.

The debate over the nuclear deal also demonstrates that there are a number of things that affect foreign policy more profoundly today than in the past. Those factors are money, technology, truth, partisan politics and globalization. None of these influences are new, as they have always been a part of politics and, therefore, have had an effect on government deliberations. But they have greater weight on foreign policy today than they used to, in part because of their interaction with each other.

Before beginning to describe the case of the Iran nuclear agreement, it is necessary to consider how each of these factors has changed the sausage-making process. That will be followed by a discussion of why the traditional theories of international relations do not take those factors sufficiently into account. Because of that, while grand theories can be constructed, they offer little real insight into how foreign policy is made today, especially when contentious and high-profile issues are involved. This chapter will then end with a brief outline of the remainder of the book.

WHAT'S CHANGED: MONEY FOR STARTERS

Money has always played a significant role in American politics and elections. Thanks to the 2010 Citizens United case and other decisions by the conservative majority on the Supreme Court, however, there is now no effective limit on how much a wealthy individual can give to political campaigns. As National Public Radio's Supreme Court reporter, Nina Totenberg, noted the decision "essentially undid about a century's worth of understandings about regulation of campaign money and at least three decades of specific decisions" and "opened the floodgates to enormous—millions and millions—probably hundreds of millions of dollars in campaign cash."²

The cost of congressional and presidential elections had been growing steadily even before the Citizens United decision (Table P.1). The Center for Responsive Politics has charted how elections have mushroomed into a multibillion-dollar industry.³

Table P.1 Cost of presidential and congressional elections

<i>Cycle</i>	<i>Total cost of election</i>	<i>Congressional</i>	<i>Presidential</i>
2016*	\$6,917,636,161	\$4,266,514,050	\$2,651,122,110
2014	\$3,921,590,197	\$3,921,590,197	N/A
2012*	\$6,609,557,743	\$3,853,016,288	\$2,756,541,454
2010	\$4,020,984,328	\$4,020,984,328	N/A
2008*	\$5,927,046,595	\$2,787,598,803	\$3,139,447,791
2006	\$3,416,234,314	\$3,416,234,314	N/A
2004*	\$5,300,543,183	\$2,859,135,182	\$2,441,408,000
2002	\$2,927,842,804	\$2,927,842,804	N/A
2000*	\$4,321,482,961	\$2,340,275,009	\$1,981,207,952
1998	\$2,397,891,231	\$2,397,891,231	N/A

*Presidential election year. All dollar amounts adjusted for inflation

In the *Citizens United* case, the Supreme Court, by a 5 to 4 vote, removed any practical limit on the amount that corporations and labor unions could spend to support or oppose political candidates. Declaring that political spending was protected under the First Amendment's free speech provision, the Court equated corporations, and other entities like labor unions, with individuals, entitling them to the same free speech protections.

Because labor unions favor Democrats in their spending and corporations give more to Republicans, it could be argued that this ruling would not have that much effect on the balance of power between the two political parties. Union membership has been falling nationwide, however, and at the same time corporate giving via political action committees (PACs) has increased dramatically. A paper by the Brookings Institution describes the change:

In 1978, congressional campaign contributions made by labor PACs actually surpassed corporate contributions slightly at a difference of \$35.9 to \$34.5 million (in 2014 inflation-adjusted dollars). But that relationship flipped in 1980, when corporate giving increased by \$20.7 million to \$55.2 million total while labor giving only increased \$2 million. That difference only grew as time went on, resulting in a discrepancy of \$178.1 million in corporate PAC giving compared to just \$50.7 million labor PAC contributions to congressional campaigns in 2014.⁴

So, while political spending by unions grew about 41 percent from 1978 to 2014, spending by corporations quadrupled over the same time period. Corporations were not the only ones who saw opportunity in being able to buy political influence through increased campaign thanks to the Supreme Court's decision. Harvesting such contributions has become

a big business and the superrich have become eager customers. The creation of an unlimited number of PACs has made possible, and they are dedicated to collecting unlimited amounts of money from billionaires and others who want to have an impact on policy.

As US News put it in a 2015 article on the decision: “As a result, a small group of wealthy donors has gained even more influence on elections, and are able to maintain that influence once candidates take office. Of the \$1 billion spent in federal elections by super PACs since 2010, nearly 60 percent of the money came from just 195 individuals and their spouses, according to the Brennan Center report. Thanks to Citizens United, supporters can make the maximum \$5200 donation directly to a candidate, then make unlimited contributions to single-candidate super PACs.”⁵

And the mega-donors are not giving just because they want the best candidate to win. As one woman, whose father and husband were both billionaires, and who has given over \$5 million to political campaigns since 2011, put it: “I have decided to stop taking offense at the suggestion that we are buying influence. Now I simply concede the point. They are right. We do expect something in return. We expect to foster a conservative governing philosophy consisting of limited government and respect for traditional American virtues. We expect a return on our investment.”⁶

The woman who wrote that in a 1997 opinion piece in *Roll Call* is Betsy DeVos. She was confirmed by the narrowest margin possible when the Senate voted on her nomination by President Trump as his Secretary of Education. She was thought by many to be the least prepared and least qualified nominee for a cabinet position in many years. But she was very good at spreading her money around among the right politicians. Seventeen of the senators voting on her nomination had

received donations from her.⁷ While having no previous experience in education of any significance, DeVos can now limit government and promote respect for her kind of virtue in ways that will affect school children throughout the country.

While the Supreme Court did make clear its support for transparency in the decision, the reality is big donors wishing to hide their identity can easily do so. Corporate CEOs, for instance, can use their company's money to support candidates without any fear of a backlash from shareholders or customers simply by concealing their actions from the public. That can be accomplished by giving to 501(c) organizations that don't have to reveal the source of the money.

Or it can be done through entities like Donors Trust, a nonprofit that was created to "support charities and sponsor programs which alleviate, through education, research and private initiatives, society's most pervasive and radical needs, including those relating to social welfare, health, environment, economics, governance, foreign relations and arts and culture."⁸ Donors Trust says it is dedicated to "safeguarding the charitable intentions of donors who are committed to promoting a free society."⁹ In other words, it is dedicated to hiding the identity of those who wish to use their charitable giving to promote a society free of taxes and government regulation.

Founded in 1999, Donors Trust took in \$83 million in 2015 and has steered hundreds of millions of dollars to organizations like the Heritage Foundation, Grover Norquist's Americans for Tax Reform, the National Rifle Association's foundation, the Cato Institute, the American Enterprise Institute, the Federalist Society, and the Americans for Prosperity Foundation. Those groups were then able to work to undermine labor unions, prevent action on climate change, block efforts at gun control and mount opposition to foreign

policy initiatives that the far-right objects to like the Iran nuclear agreement.¹⁰

In this way, Citizens United has helped drive hundreds of millions of dollars into nonprofit political organizations where it is possible to hide the source of the money.¹¹ Trevor Potter, a former chairman of the Federal Election Commission, described the situation in a *New Yorker* article this way: “A single billionaire can write an eight-figure check and put not just their thumb but their whole hand on the scale—and we often have no idea who they are. Suddenly, a random billionaire can change politics and public policy—to sweep everything else off the table—even if they don’t speak publicly, and even if there’s almost no public awareness of his or her views.”¹²

As with the spending by labor unions and corporations, the two political parties are not affected equally. The billionaires have a very clear preference for one party over the other. According to a study done by the Campaign Finance Institute, a nonpartisan think tank associated with George Washington University, the Democrats had only 35 donors who contributed more than \$100,000, which amounted to 21 percent of what the party collected. The Republicans, on the other hand, had 441 such mega-donors, and they accounted for 64 percent of what that party took in.¹³

It should, therefore, be no surprise that whenever Republicans talk about tax reform, the plan includes massive reductions for the rich, chump change for the middle class and no benefit to the working poor.¹⁴ Their reform proposals also include doing away with the “death tax,” which when framed less negatively is known as the inheritance tax. The tax is one that 99.8 percent of Americans will never pay since it does not kick in until an estate exceeds \$5.5 million.¹⁵ Any legislation to eliminate it should be called the Plutocrats

Protection Act since, without it, billionaires will be able to pass on all that they have accumulated to their offspring.

One example of this kind of “reform” was the tax plan put forth by President Trump in April 2017. It was a bare bones proposal that would not fill the back of a cocktail napkin but it amounted to “a multitrillion-dollar shift from federal coffers to America’s richest families and their heirs,” according to a *New York Times* analysis.¹⁶ Even when Republicans are not reforming taxes, who they hope to help most is clear. The health care reform proposal that a group of 13 Republican senators crafted in secret in June 2017 would have given the poorest 20 percent of American households a tax cut or \$280 while those in the top 0.1 percent, who make \$5 million or more a year, would receive \$250,000.¹⁷

Even without “tax reform,” the wealthy have the opportunity to influence elections to a greater extent than ever before. Given the importance of money in today’s elections, the American system of democracy has become one where it is more like “one dollar, one vote” than “one person, one vote.” And that money does not go to educate the voters about policy choices but instead is designed mainly to appeal to their fears. What is best for the country’s interests and even what most would consider as facts is, at best, secondary.

THE PARTIALLY TRUE, THE WHOLLY UNTRUE AND NOTHING BUT UNTRUTH

Another feature of today’s political process that deserves mention is the remarkable disregard for facts. There has always been a tendency on the part of politicians to ignore or deny evidence that they do not like or that threatens the interests of their key constituents or financial supporters. But that proclivity had not risen to the point that it could prompt them to

ignore consequences that could be as grave as affecting the habitability of the earth.

Despite the overwhelming consensus among some 97 percent of scientists that the earth's climate is changing and that human activity is a major contributor to that change, there are many politicians who will deny that fact in return for campaign contributions from energy companies. When Scott Pruitt was Attorney General in Oklahoma, he had two political action committees supporting him that collected three quarters of a million dollars in 2015 and 2016. Of that amount, 27 percent came from the energy industry.¹⁸ Pruitt was named by Trump as the head of the Environmental Protection Agency, which should probably now be renamed the Energy Industry Protection Agency. Pruitt has said repeatedly he does not believe carbon dioxide is the main driver of climate change even though the agency he heads is on record saying it is.¹⁹

Pruitt was not the only politician who denies climate change. According to one study, there are 142 congressmen and 38 senators, all Republicans, that would agree.²⁰ To the extent there are scientists who argue the climate is not changing because of human activity, they are also probably on the payroll of the oil companies or the billionaire Koch brothers. According to one article in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, corporate funding has swayed public opinion on the issue, polarized the politics around it and prevented an effective policy response.²¹ One analysis by the Center for American Progress Action Fund found that the 180 climate change deniers in Congress had received more than \$82 million in campaign contributions from the fossil fuels industry.²²

While spending by fossil fuel companies has bought politicians and swayed public opinion, it has also generated some

pushback. On Earth Day in April 2017, demonstrators held marches in Washington and 600 other places around the world in support of science.²³ Thousands of people felt compelled to march in support of the facts that scientific inquiry produces. This was their reaction to President Trump's repeated assertion that climate change is a hoax and the fear that his policies will not only fail to address it but make it far worse.²⁴

It is not just people in the street who are concerned about climate change. A September 2016 report by agencies of the American intelligence community concluded that "Long-term changes in climate will produce more extreme weather events and put greater stress on critical Earth systems like oceans, freshwater, and biodiversity. These, in turn, will almost certainly have significant effects, both direct and indirect, across social, economic, political, and security realms during the next 20 years."²⁵ Yet, despite these obvious risks to national security, Congress has remained largely indifferent and done nothing to address the problem.

THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY

One development that even Congress could agree has changed is the impact of technology on every aspect of life including politics. A remarkable story in the January 18, 2017, *New York Times* described that fact by demonstrating how untruth has become an industry thanks to technology.²⁶ It was about a 23-year-old, recent college graduate named Cameron Harris who had an intense interest in politics and a need for some income. Early in the fall of 2016, as the presidential election was heating up, Harris came up with a way to satisfy both.

Harris, an aspiring Republican political strategist, sat down at his kitchen table and made up a fake news story about an electrician in Ohio, which is always a crucial swing state in

presidential elections. The gist of the story was that the electrician had found boxes full of ballots already marked for Hillary Clinton. To give the story more credibility, Harris included a photo that he found on the Internet of a man in work clothes standing next to some ballot boxes.

The story was a total fabrication, but as Harris told the *Times*: “Given the severe distrust of the media among Trump supporters, anything that parroted Trump’s talking points people would click. Trump was saying ‘rigged election, rigged election.’ People were predisposed to believe Hillary Clinton could not win except by cheating.”²⁷

Harris put the article he invented on his website, ChristianTimesNewspaper.com, an abandoned domain name he had bought for \$5. The story went viral and was eventually seen by an estimated 6 million people. At one point, the website was earning \$1000 an hour in ad revenue and had an estimated value of over \$100,000. Unfortunately for Harris, he did not sell the site at that point.

Once Ohio officials investigated and announced that the story was entirely false, the ads dried up and the website became worthless even faster than it had become valuable. Harris did manage to collect 24,000 e-mail addresses, however, of people who signed up to find out how “Hillary intends to steal the election.” Those can no doubt be sold to someone looking for a gullible audience predisposed to believe any negative story about Clinton.

There appears to be no limit to that gullibility thanks to a hyper-partisan political atmosphere where anything bad said about one side will be believed by many on the other. One good example of this partisan divide is another story that made its way around the Internet. It was a report that Comet Ping Pong, a Northwest Washington DC pizzeria, was the headquarters of a satanic child pornography ring that involved high-level Democratic Party officials.

The story was spread by a number of websites including one called Infowars. Run by Alex Jones, a right-wing radio talk show host, the site traffics in conspiracy theories including claims that the 9/11 terrorist attacks were an inside job carried out by the US Government and that the 2012 killings at Sandy Hook elementary school were a hoax invented by gun control advocates.²⁸

The pizzeria story was believed by one man from South Carolina who became so enraged that he drove to Washington with an AR-15 assault rifle, went into the restaurant and fired multiple rounds into the ceiling as he searched for evidence of the pornography ring. He was arrested, tried and sentenced to four years in prison for the attack. In an interview with the *New York Times* explaining his actions, he uttered a line that ought to go down with “alternative facts” as symptomatic of the current age. He said: “The intel on this wasn’t 100 percent,” but he still refused to admit the online articles were wrong and conceded only that there were no children inside that particular building.²⁹

The spread of the Internet, social media and other technology has done more than just provide fake news to people willing to believe negative stories about political opponents. It has provided a route to wealth for those interested in engaging their proliferation. President Trump’s chief policy advisor, Steve Bannon, is one such person. Trump thinks so highly of Bannon that he elevated him to a seat on the National Security Council (NSC).³⁰ Putting a political strategist formally on the NSC was without precedent and generated so much criticism that less than 10 weeks later, the decision was reversed.³¹ Even though Bannon was taken off the NSC, there is little doubt that his influence on the president continued.

Financial disclosure forms revealed Bannon made millions trading on his association with a billionaire hedge fund man-

ager, Robert Mercer and his daughter Rebekah.³² Mercer bankrolled Breitbart News, which Bannon ran. While the website is called alt-right, that hardly does justice to describing its white supremacist, racist, often anti-Semitic content, and its far-right conspiracy theories. It may have been an article from Breitbart that prompted Trump's tweet falsely accusing President Obama of wiretapping Trump Tower. Trump admitted his only evidence was a couple of news reports and said more information would come out soon proving him right, but as with so many of Trump's claims, nothing was ever produced.³³

Social media and the Internet provide opportunities for the like-minded to share information and opinions, often without benefit of any real facts. It can provide validation to any opinion or worldview regardless of how extreme. And it can encourage acts of violence like the one carried out by the man who shot up Comet Ping Pong. Social media platforms, like Facebook, were the source of at least some news for 62 percent of US adults according to a 2016 poll, and nearly a third of them consumed news that way frequently.³⁴

With the capacity of technology to spread misinformation and disinformation with such speed, and the financial benefits of doing so, it has made the growing partisan divide between Americans and their elected representatives even deeper.

CAN POLITICS GET ANY MORE PARTISAN?

One reason stories like the one about Comet Ping Pong are credible is the willingness of many conservatives to believe the worst about liberals. And many liberals are as ready to hold equally low opinions of conservatives. Welcome to the more-polarized-than-ever America.

The willingness of people to believe fake news is not distributed evenly over the political spectrum, however. It is much more prevalent on right than on the left despite the articles

that talk about an increase in progressive fake news.³⁵ Some studies show liberals think more critically than conservatives making them somewhat less susceptible to stories that are obviously false.³⁶ In addition, a number of studies have shown the viewers of Fox News to be the least well informed and more likely to believe only what they learn from that source.³⁷

Technology, the disregard for the truth and the increasingly partisan view combine and interact to amplify the effect of all three. For example, Fox News reported in May 2017 what it claimed to be sensational developments in the case of Seth Rich, a Democratic National Committee staff member, who was murdered on the streets of Washington the previous July in what the police believe was a botched robbery attempt. The Fox story claimed Rich had provided tens of thousands of DNC e-mails to WikiLeaks. This was Fox's way of attempting to validate President Trump's claim that the Russians were not responsible for those leaks despite the fact that the entire American intelligence community had concluded they were. It then quoted one of its own contributors who claimed "someone with the D.C. government, Democratic Nation Committee or Clinton team is blocking the murder investigations from going forward."³⁸

Buzzfeed, a liberal news website, and other media outlets quickly debunked every one of those claims.³⁹ Rich's parents wrote an opinion piece for the *Washington Post* imploring conservative news outlets and commentators to stop politicizing the death of their son and denying he had any contact with WikiLeaks.⁴⁰

When asked by a reporter from CNN about Rich's alleged connection to WikiLeaks, the investigator who was the source for the Fox story said he had no proof and that he was just repeating what the Fox reporter had told him.⁴¹ Fox then retracted the story and removed it from its website saying in a

statement that it had not gone through “the high degree of editorial scrutiny we require for all our stories.”⁴² That degree of scrutiny did not constrain Fox personality Sean Hannity, however. After promoting the story constantly, when faced with the truth he said he retracted nothing. After advertisers began to abandon his show, he claimed they were doing so because of a liberal plot, but he added he would drop the story “for now” out of respect for the parents’ feelings.⁴³ He also said his search for the truth would continue.

Even when confronted with the lack of truth in his story, Hannity, not unlike President Trump, just doubled down and kept on asserting he will be shown to be right someday. The lack of regard for even the most basic facts about a story is not as important as providing his viewers a narrative that they want to hear. The result is the consumers of right-wing news and progressive news live in parallel universes and their distrust of each other is amplified and justified by the media from which they choose to get their information. Thanks to technology and the partisan segmentation of the media market, they can select whatever source that reinforces their beliefs and worldview. It also amplifies partisan differences and makes a rational discussion of policy all the more difficult.

The result of these parallel universes is that the middle ground for American voters seems to have slipped away to the point that, instead of a bell-shaped curve, there is a bimodal distribution among the electorate. According to a Pew Survey, “ideological overlap between the two parties has diminished: Today, 92% of Republicans are to the right of the median Democrat, and 94% of Democrats are to the left of the median Republican.”⁴⁴

Partisan politics is also reinforced by the way the members of the House of Representatives are elected. Gerrymandering, the drawing of congressional districts to favor one party, is

often attributed as a source of polarization.⁴⁵ Although some studies claim its effect is minor,⁴⁶ others credit gerrymandering with being responsible for growing polarization in Congress as exemplified by the creation of the Freedom Caucus. It is a collection of about three dozen, all male, far-right Republicans who appear to be beyond the control of even their party's leaders and President Trump.⁴⁷

Because gerrymandering predetermines the outcome of the general election by favoring one party or the other, the only thing many congressmen fear is a challenge in the primary election by someone even more extreme than they are. Because only the most partisan, politically active voters take part in primary elections, the more extreme candidate usually wins. And so it is a race to the right in Republican primaries and to the left in Democratic ones.

Another theory explaining the growing partisan divide is a growing tendency of people to live in communities that tend to think alike. A journalist and a sociologist teamed up to write a book titled *The Big Sort*, which described what they saw happening:

Living in politically like-minded groups has had its consequences. People living in homogenous communities grow both more extreme and more certain in their beliefs. Locally, therefore, governments backed by large majorities are tackling every conceivable issue. Nationally, however, Congress has lost most of its moderate members and is mired in conflict.⁴⁸

This partisan divergence among Americans, regardless of its cause, has implications for the ability of their government to construct policy solutions to any problem, foreign or domestic. It has also led to a tendency to even reject the idea that there is a problem and to have no faith in those who claim so. A Pew poll found that “Clinton and Trump supporters have

widely diverging views of scientists who study climate change. About half of Clinton supporters (51%) say climate scientists understand very well whether or not climate change is occurring while only 17% of Trump supporters do. Clinton and Trump backers were similarly divided over whether climate scientists understand the causes of climate change: 41% of Clinton supporters say climate scientists understand this very well compared with 15% of Trump supporters.”⁴⁹

The distrust of experts extends beyond climate change to all areas of government. According to one poll, a slight majority of Americans think “Everyday Americans understand what the government should do better than so-called experts.” Among those who voted for Trump, 71 percent agreed with that statement.⁵⁰

There have been a number of books over recent decades written about the anti-intellectual tendency of Americans. A recent one, titled *The Death of Expertise—The Campaign Against Knowledge and Why It Matters*, was reviewed in the *New York Times* by Michiko Kakutani.⁵¹ She commented that “Citizens of all political persuasions (not to mention members of the Trump administration) can increasingly live in their own news media bubbles, consuming only views similar to their own. When confronted with hard evidence that they are wrong, many will simply double down on their original assertions. ‘This is the ‘backfire effect,’ in which people redouble their efforts to keep their own internal narrative consistent, no matter how clear the indications that they’re wrong. As a result, extreme views are amplified online, just as fake news and propaganda easily go viral.”

Clearly, Sean Hannity is the poster boy for the backfire effect. Thanks to the disregard for the truth and expertise, technology, political partisanship and the money to be made, fake news and propaganda can easily go viral and affect policy

making as well as elections. It can even be used by one country to attack another country in ways that may not be as direct but can be just as destructive.

WAR BY OTHER MEANS

Social media and other technological innovations have enabled a country to attack other nations in an attempt to destabilize their political systems, undermine their elections and disrupt their economies without ever firing a shot. One name for such cyber activities is active measures. The Federation of American Scientists described the term in the following way:

Active measures were clandestine operations designed to further Soviet foreign policy goals and to extend Soviet influence throughout the world. This type of activity had long been employed by the Soviet Union abroad, but it became more widespread and more effective in the late 1960s. Among these covert techniques was disinformation: leaking of false information and rumors to foreign media or planting forgeries in an attempt to deceive the public or the political elite in a given country or countries. The United States was the prime target of disinformation, in particular forgery operations, which were designed to damage foreign and defense policies of the United States in a variety of ways.⁵²

This definition is accurate but misleading because of its use of the past tense. The end of the Cold War did not bring an end to active measures. Russia has not only continued but expanded the use of such tactics under Vladimir Putin's leadership. Putin was a career KGB intelligence officer before he became a politician and was well acquainted with the use and power of such tactics. They were employed extensively in the Russian efforts to interfere in the American presidential elections in 2016 and elections in other countries. And the

obsession of Sean Hannity with the Seth Rich case was little more than an attempt to shift the responsibility from the Russians to someone within the Democratic Party itself. Hannity probably did it because it fit into his never-ending negative ranting about liberals, but he was certainly doing something that Moscow welcomed.

A cyber warfare expert, testifying at a March 2017 Senate Select Committee on Intelligence hearing on Russian active measures put the blame for them where it belonged. He identified four general themes to the propaganda messages put out by the Russians⁵³:

1. Political messages—Designed to tarnish democratic leaders and undermine democratic institutions.
2. Financial propaganda—Created to weaken confidence in financial markets, capitalist economies and Western companies.
3. Social unrest—Crafted to amplify divisions amongst democratic populaces to undermine citizen trust and the fabric of society.
4. Global calamity—Pushed to incite fear of global demise such as nuclear war or catastrophic climate change.

Those kinds of propaganda messages were just part of the Russian efforts at disruption aimed at the United States. A report by the intelligence community, representing the opinion of all 17 agencies, concluded the following about Russian activities and intentions during the 2016 elections⁵⁴:

- Russian President Vladimir Putin’s efforts to influence the 2016 election were a significant escalation in directness, level of activity, and scope compared to previous operations.