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Subject: FW: Vice Presidential News Clips for Tuesday, December 8, 2015
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Ukrainians See Conflict In Biden's Anticorruption Message
Vice president's son serves on board of closely held Ukrainian oil firm
By Paul Sonne And Laura Mills
Wall Street Journal, December 8, 2015
Full-text stories from the Wall Street Journal are available to Journal subscribers by clicking the link.

-----Original Message-----
From: Bulletin Intelligence [mailto:VP@BulletinIntelligence.com]
Sent: Monday, December 07, 2015 10:57 PM
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Subject: Vice Presidential News Clips for Tuesday, December 8, 2015

TO: THE VICE PRESIDENT AND STAFF

DATE: TUESDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2015 -- 6:15 AM EST

----------TODAY'S EDITION----------

BIDEN IN THE NEWS:
+ Joe Biden Says U.S. Is Still Backing Ukraine (NYT)
+ Biden Announces More US Aid For Ukraine (AP)
+ Ukraine Still Has Work To Do On Reforms, U.S. VP Biden Says (REU)
+ Ongoing Violence Threatens Ukraine Cease-fire (USAT)
+ Biden Says 'Illegal' Russian Occupation Of Crimea Must End (BLOOMPOL)
+ Biden Gives Ukraine 'one More Chance' To Reform (POLITICEU)
+ Ukrainians See Conflict In Biden's Anticorruption Message (WSJ)
+ Ukraine's Decisive Moment (COFOREL)
+ Joe Biden Is Visiting Ukraine (VICE)
+ Biden Presses Russia On Ukraine Peace Deal, Return Of Crimea (AFP)
+ The Fight Against Graft Goes Online (INTLBIZ)
+ Mr. Biden Goes To Ukraine (RADEUR)
+ Biden Pledges US Support, Seeks Stronger Action On Rule Of Law (KYIVPOST)
+ Signs Of Economic Progress Noticeable In Ukraine (NTRFXUKR)
+ Pushkov Called The Union Biden To Poroshenko Barren (RIN)

+ Joe Biden Likely To Bring Harsh Criticism To Ukraine (DEUTSCW)
+ Commentary: What To Expect From Biden's Visit To Ukraine? (NEE)

NEW YORK TIMES AND WASHINGTON POST OP-EDS:
+ The Big Hole In Obama's Islamic State Strategy (WP)
+ Republicans Ignore The Lessons Of World War II (WP)
+ In Fighting Terrorism, Patience Is Not A Virtue (WP)
+ Obama's Brave Admission About Terrorism (WP)
+ Look At What You've Done, Wayne LaPierre (WP)
+ Millennials' Mysterious Support For Permissive Gun Laws (WP)
+ Obama Tries To Re-gift His Failed Terror Strategy (WP)
+ Mr. Obama Makes His Pitch On The Islamic State (WP)
+ Voters And Non-voters Should Count In Legislative Districts (WP)
+ A Perfect Storm Of Deceit In Chicago (WP)

BIDEN IN THE NEWS:

JOE BIDEN SAYS U.S. IS STILL BACKING UKRAINE (NYT)
By Peter Baker
New York Times, December 8, 2015
KIEV, Ukraine - The United States will not sacrifice Ukraine in pursuit of Russian cooperation in Syria, Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. assured Ukrainian leaders on Monday, even as the Obama administration tries to manage complicated diplomacy with Moscow.
Opening a two-day visit, Mr. Biden told the Ukrainians that the United States still supported them in their conflict with pro-Russian separatists, and accused President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia of violating a cease-fire agreement reached in Minsk, Belarus. To reinforce American backing, Mr. Biden promised another $190 million in aid.
"The United States stands firmly with the people of Ukraine in the face of continued - and I emphasize continued - aggression from Russia and Russian-backed separatists," he said. "Minsk cannot succeed if Russia does not fulfill its commitment and President Putin fails to live up to the promises he has repeatedly made to my president, to you and to the international community."
Ukrainian officials have been nervous about what Russia's renewed interest in the Middle East would mean for their country. American officials interpret Russia's intervention in Syria as an attempt by Mr. Putin to distract world attention from the Ukrainian conflict, break out of the isolation the West has tried to impose on Moscow and weaken international resolve to maintain sanctions.
President Obama has insisted that the situations in Ukraine and Syria are separate, and he sent Mr. Biden to drive that point home. Even if Washington and Moscow cooperate to settle the Syrian civil war and battle the Islamic State, Mr. Obama has said, it would not stop the West from maintaining pressure on Russia over Ukraine. The European Union likewise appears poised to renew sanctions on Russia next week.
Michael A. McFaul, Mr. Obama's former ambassador to Russia, said the Ukrainians should be reassured. "Vice President Biden's trip to Kiev sends a clear message that the United States is not willing to trade Ukraine for Russian cooperation on Syria," he said in an email. "That kind of linkage never works," Mr. McFaul said.
Mr. Biden also used his trip to press President Petro O. Poroshenko and Prime Minister Arseniy P. Yatsenyuk to put aside their differences and do more to battle corruption, arguing that the country has an opportunity to get its own house in order while Russia is focused on the Middle East.
Mr. Poroshenko was elected in 2014 after a pro-Moscow government was driven from office by mass protests that were met with violence. But he has yet to break the system of control wielded by powerful magnates over Ukrainian politics and economics.
While he has taken some steps, including the creation of a new police force and a move to install independent management of the state-owned energy company, critics said he has so far failed to make enough structural change. The president is fighting with Parliament over the prosecutor

general, whom some lawmakers see as unwilling to tackle corruption.
Moreover, friction has grown between Mr. Poroshenko and Mr. Yatsenyuk, who hail from different parties and are struggling in a constitutional system that makes the division of power between their offices sometimes unclear. While American officials view both men as reformers, each has his own clan to protect and neither has been willing to abandon that as long as the other does not. Western officials believe the two may need to overhaul the cabinet to make a fresh start.
"Unfortunately the current cabinet is one of the most corrupt in the history of Ukraine," former Prime Minister Yulia V. Tymoshenko, an advocate of reform who has turned increasingly populist lately, said in an interview. "Preservation of the bad status quo is what's losing Ukraine as a viable state."
Without taking sides, Mr. Biden met separately with Mr. Poroshenko and Mr. Yatsenyuk to press them to work together. American officials said the vice president warned them that the Ukrainian public was growing frustrated at the pace of reform and warned them "don't squander this opportunity," as one official put it.
"Future generations of Ukrainians will look back at this moment," Mr. Biden later told reporters, with Mr. Yatsenyuk at his side. They will ask about their leaders, Mr. Biden said, " 'Did they deliver for us? Did they fundamentally change the nature of my country or did they not?' History will be a very, very harsh judge."
Mr. Yatsenyuk assured Mr. Biden that he got the message and cited various reforms he wanted to push through, including privatizing state enterprises and fighting corruption. "We understand our responsibilities, our obligations," he said.
Mr. Biden underlined his point by meeting with what his office called a "reformers' round table" of government officials, lawmakers and advocacy group leaders, and he will make some of the same points again on Tuesday when he addresses Parliament.
"Vice President Biden's most important challenge in Ukraine is to keep the president and prime minister on a common, unequivocal path of reform that shows Ukraine is helping itself and merits the world's support," said Carlos Pascual, a former American ambassador to Ukraine. "With Russia recapturing a leadership role in the Middle East, Ukraine cannot give the world an excuse to forget Ukraine."
Oksana Syroyid, the deputy speaker of Parliament, said Mr. Poroshenko should listen to the vice president's point. "We do hope that the message will be heard and that the prosecutor general will step down from his position and allow us to further move the reform of the prosecutor general," she said.
During his travels around Kiev on Monday, Mr. Biden visited a monument to people who were killed during the pro-Western demonstrations in Maidan Square that led to the ouster of President Viktor F. Yanukovych. Mr. Biden tried to visit the monument last year, but had to cancel at the last minute when an unruly group of protesters unnerved his security detail.
Somber-faced and coatless on a brisk day, Mr. Biden viewed a display of about 100 photographs of slain protesters, along with candles, bouquets of flowers and banners with tributes to the victims.
"Imagine what it was like," Geoffrey R. Pyatt, the American ambassador, could be heard telling Mr. Biden. He pointed to surrounding buildings. "Snipers up on the buildings there."
Mr. Biden left a commemorative vice-presidential coin at the base of an elaborately carved wooden cross at the monument.

BIDEN ANNOUNCES MORE US AID FOR UKRAINE (AP)
Associated Press, December 8, 2015
KIEV, Ukraine (AP) - U.S. Vice President Joe Biden assured Ukraine Monday of continuing U.S. support and announced the release of an additional $190 million in U.S. aid to help support reforms.
Biden, speaking Monday on a trip to the Ukrainian capital, also emphasized the need for Russia to fully meet its obligations under February's Minsk agreement that was intended to end the fighting in eastern Ukraine.
"The United States stands firmly with the people of Ukraine in the face of continued - I emphasize, continued - aggression from Russia and Russian-backed separatists," Biden said after his talks with Ukraine's President Petro Poroshenko.

Ukraine and the West have accused Russia of backing the rebels in eastern Ukraine with troops and weapons, accusations Moscow has denied.
Fighting between Ukrainian forces and Russia-backed separatists has abated significantly since early September, after killing some 8,000 people since April 2014, but tensions remain high because of unresolved questions about the final political status of the rebel regions in the east.
"Moscow has to fully implement the Minsk agreement and work constructively with Ukraine to create the conditions for free, fair and safe local elections to occur in Donbass," Biden said, referring to the collective name for the two rebel regions.
Biden also underlined that the U.S. will never accept Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula. "Moscow eventually has to end its occupation of Ukraine's sovereign territory," he said.
After a separate meeting with Ukraine's Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, Biden pledged that Washington will talk to its allies to make sure that Russia pays an increased price if it fails to meet its obligations under the Minsk agreement, but he emphasized that Ukraine has to fulfill its end of the deal.
"The Russians haven't kept their part of their bargain, but you can't, and the prime minister knows this, you can't fail to keep your part, otherwise there are people in Europe (who) will say: 'well, they're both the same,'" he said.
Biden also stressed the need for Ukraine to ramp up the fight against corruption and undertake critical reforms.
"It's absolutely critical for Ukraine in order to be stable and prosperous and part of a secure Europe to definitely, thoroughly, completely root out the cancer of corruption," he said.
Biden added that the additional roughly $190 million in U.S. assistance will help fight corruption in Ukraine's law-enforcement and reform the justice sector, helping attract more investment by streamlining regulations and privatizing state-owned enterprises in a transparent way.
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UKRAINE STILL HAS WORK TO DO ON REFORMS, U.S. VP BIDEN SAYS (REU)
By Alessandra Prentice
Reuters, December 8, 2015
Full-text stories from Reuters currently cannot be included in this document. You may, however, click the link above to access the story.

ONGOING VIOLENCE THREATENS UKRAINE CEASE-FIRE (USAT)
By Oren Dorell
USA Today, December 7, 2015
Fighting between Ukraine's military and separatist forces in the east has escalated with scant notice this fall as world attention is focused on increased terrorism and a refugee crisis caused by the conflicts in Syria and Iraq.
Fighting that dropped off dramatically in September after Ukraine and Russian-backed separatists agreed to a new cease-fire plan picked up again in November, causing multiple deaths and injuries to Ukrainian troops, according to Ukrainian military spokesman Col. Andriy Lysenko.
Vice President Biden, who announced a $190 million aid package for Ukraine during a visit to the capital, Kiev, on Monday, said Russia holds the key to peace. "The United States continues to stand with the people of Ukraine in the face of continued ...aggression from Russia and Russian-backed separatists," Biden said.
Together with a failure by Russia-backed separatists to implement measures of the cease-fire agreement reached in the Belarussian capital, Minsk, the ongoing fighting means it is unlikely the two sides will meet a self-imposed year-end deadline to end the conflict, NATO Supreme Allied Commander Philip Breedlove said last week.
NATO's General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg warned of renewed war after a meeting about Ukraine with foreign ministers of the U.S.-led alliance last week. "Russian-backed separatists have not yet withdrawn their troops and equipment. Illegal groups in Eastern Ukraine have not been disarmed. And Ukraine has not been able to re-establish control over its border," Stoltenberg said.
The fighting in Ukraine will be a factor when the European Union decides in January whether to continue economic sanctions against Russia for its role in the conflict, which has resulted in 8,000

deaths since it began in April 2014, according to the United Nations.
The fighting subsided in September after ramping up during the summer. The lull coincided with Russia's preparations for its air campaign in Syria, and as Russia sought overflight rights from eastern European nations for Russian aircraft transporting personnel and supplies to Syria.
The low point in fighting came during October, when Russia lobbied for international acceptance of Russia's air campaign in Syria.
When fighting picked up in mid-November, it was "too large and coordinated to be random," said Phillip Karber, president of the Potomac Foundation, a military consultancy that has advised eastern European countries preparing to join NATO.
Karber, who has traveled more than a dozen times to assess Ukrainian military performance since 2014, attributes the cease-fire violations to shooting that began on the separatist side. The repeated violations of the peace-keeping agreement has contributed to "Ukrainian jitters and declining faith in Western negotiated cease-fires," he said.
Despite evidence from journalists, NATO and U.S. leaders of Russian military involvement in the Ukrainian conflict, Moscow denies it has given any military backing to the separatists.
The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which has a monitoring mission in Ukraine staffed by European, Ukrainian and Russian personnel, says it's impossible to verify who's at fault.
Since the beginning of November, OSCE monitors registered an increase in fighting, mostly around what's left of the airport in Donetsk, a separatist stronghold, Alexander Hug, the principal deputy chief monitor of the OSCE's Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine, told USA TODAY.
Most violations involved exchanges of small arms fire, and some have escalated to artillery and multiple rocket launchers, Hug said.
"It's an exchange of fire," he said. "It's difficult, if not impossible, to find in which direction (it begins). The fact remains both sides do not respect the cease-fire all the time and everywhere."
The OSCE and the Ukrainian government have yet to gain full access to 250 miles of the Ukraine-Russia border that is not controlled by the Government, he said.
In places, where fighting has been ongoing for many months, the OSCE has seen civilians who lack access to running water, reconstruction material for shelter, heat, electricity or medicine, Hug said. Civilians, relief agencies and international monitors have all been hampered by restricted freedom of movement in areas not controlled by the Ukrainian government, he added.
John Herbst, a former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine who's now at the Atlantic Council, a think tank in Washington, said the level of violence in Ukraine is up to Russia, while Russia is preoccupied with Syria.
"Moscow has the ability to get these guys largely under control," Herbst said. "There's no question they are concerned with Syria and not with Ukraine at the moment."

BIDEN SAYS 'ILLEGAL' RUSSIAN OCCUPATION OF CRIMEA MUST END (BLOOMPOL)
By Margaret Talev
Bloomberg Politics, December 7, 2015
Vice President Joe Biden called Russia's annexation of Crimea "illegal" in a demonstration of solidarity with Ukraine's government that signaled the U.S. won't bargain away its support for the country to win Russian cooperation in the fight against Islamic State in Syria.
"The United States stands firmly with the people of Ukraine in the face of continued - and I emphasize continued - aggression from Russia and Russian-backed separatists," Biden said in Kiev on Monday, following a meeting with Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko.
Biden announced $190 million in new aid for Ukraine contingent on the government continuing to make progress rooting out corruption. That brings direct U.S. assistance to nearly $760 million since the formation of a new government in 2014, including more than $260 million for security.
The latest funds is for helping law enforcement fight corruption, reforming the justice sector, and streamlining regulations and privatization of state-owned enterprises, Biden said.
Biden's two-day visit to Ukraine is intended to deliver reassurance that the U.S. won't budge in its commitment to Ukraine at a time when attention has shifted to Syria and fighting the Islamic State. That includes keeping in place sanctions on Russia to pressure President Vladimir Putin's government to fully implement the Minsk agreements that outline a path to end nearly two years of conflict.Minsk Accords

The separatists, Ukraine and Russia must continue to respect a cease-fire signed earlier this year in Minsk, Belarus, Biden said. "Both sides need to hold up that bargain," he said, echoing the position of U.S. allies in Europe.
"The fact that we are not talking as much every single day about Crimea does not mean in any way we have forgotten" what happened, Biden said, calling Russia's move to annex Crimea in 2014 an "illegal invasion" that "will not be accepted" by the U.S. or international community. "We will not accept it under any circumstance, and Moscow eventually has to end its occupation of Ukraine's sovereign territory" including Crimea.
Tensions rose recently after power lines to Crimea were cut by Ukrainian saboteurs. Russia and the U.S. remain at loggerheads over both Ukraine and Syria, where a Russian military intervention has complicated that country's civil war.Syria Conflict
Putin says his military is attacking Islamic State in Syria. The U.S. says Putin's forces have targeted relatively few Islamic State-held areas, and instead is attempting to reinforce Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, a close ally, by bombing rebels backed by the U.S. and Persian Gulf states.
Poroshenko, through a translator, told reporters that he pledged to Biden that Ukraine is ready to provide "maximum support" to U.S.-led coalition forces in Syria, though he did not say what such support might entail.
"Ukraine is no stranger to terrorist threats," he said. "We cannot be frightened by the terrorist threat."
As Russia has turned its attention to Syria, Ukraine sees signs for hope and concern. While clashes between separatists and Ukrainian forces have eased since September, eastern Ukraine's status remains unsettled. Insurgent tanks were spotted in Horlivka northeast of Donetsk, and rebels continued provocations with mortars, rifles, machine guns and grenade launchers, officials said Sunday.
Ukraine is seeking assurances from the U.S. and European Union that it will not become a bargaining chip in efforts to coordinate with Russia on attacking Islamic State targets.
Biden earlier Monday held a closed-door roundtable discussion on political and government reforms with about a dozen Ukrainian officials and members of civil society. He also visited the Heavenly Hundred memorial, an unofficial memorial with a wooden cross and framed photos of those killed in the Maidan protests of February 2014.
"We are starting to see real signs of economic progress" in Ukraine, Biden said, including "stabilized" currency.
Biden is to meet with Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk later Monday. He will address Ukraine's parliament on Tuesday.

BIDEN GIVES UKRAINE 'ONE MORE CHANCE' TO REFORM (POLITICEU)
By Paul Dallison
Politico Europe, December 7, 2015
The United States pledged an extra $190 million in aid to Ukraine Monday, but Vice President Joe Biden warned that Kiev has just "one more chance" to root out corruption or lose the funding.
Biden held talks with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, pledging support for Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression and urging the country's leaders to continue on the path to reform.
"The Ukrainian people cannot once again have their hopes dashed based on corruption," Biden said.
"One more chance. It's absolutely critical for Ukraine in order to be stable and prosperous and part of a secure Europe to definitely, thoroughly, completely root out the cancer of corruption. The people need to see that the ways of the past are permanently gone, they no longer exist. That means hard decisions. That means ramping up the pace of reforms, avoidance of past practices, advancing good governance, increasing transparency across the board at every level of the government and strengthening the rule of law. It means everybody playing by the same rules, from the folks at the bottom to the folks at the very top."
The $190 million in funding brings the total American assistance in recent years to $760 million.
Biden made it clear that the U.S. "stands firmly with the people of Ukraine in the face of continued - and I emphasize continued - aggression from Russia and Russian-backed separatists."
"We continue to believe that the best way to end the conflict in Donbas is through a diplomatic

framework that was laid out in the Minsk agreement. But both sides need to hold up that bargain. Minsk cannot succeed if Russia does not fulfill its commitment and President Putin fails to live up to the promises he has repeatedly made to my president, to you and to the international community."
He added: "The fact that we are not talking as much every single day about Crimea does not mean in any way we have forgotten that the illegal invasion - and it's an invasion - by Russia of Crimea will not be accepted by us or the international community.
Poroshenko said that there had been a reduction in the violence in the east of the country, but "unfortunately the war is still raging." He added that the government has made progress in reforms, including the selection of an anti-corruption prosecutor.

UKRAINIANS SEE CONFLICT IN BIDEN'S ANTICORRUPTION MESSAGE (WSJ)
Vice president's son serves on board of closely held Ukrainian oil firm
By Paul Sonne And Laura Mills
Wall Street Journal, December 8, 2015
Full-text stories from the Wall Street Journal are available to Journal subscribers by clicking the link.

UKRAINE'S DECISIVE MOMENT (COFOREL)
By Robert Kahn
Council On Foreign Relations, December 7, 2015
Budget debates are often dry affairs, but not so in Kiev. By the end of this month, the Ukrainian parliament (Verkhovna Rada) must decide on a budget that will have profound effects on the future course of the government. The Ministry of Finance has proposed a budget that sets most tax rates at 20 percent, while closing loopholes and holding the deficit to an estimated 3.7 percent of GDP. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has endorsed the plan, and the passage of the bill, or something close to it, is essential to completing the IMF review and keeping the government's adjustment program on track.
An alternative plan, which is supported by the opposition and, disappointingly, by elements of President Poroshenko's own party, involves a massive tax cut that would reduce rates to a flat rate of 10 percent, causing the deficit to soar to over 10 percent of GDP. A continued IMF role would be ruled out. Following a deep recession from which Ukraine is just starting to recover, populist fiscal policy promising quick fixes understandably is attractive, and opponents of the government may well believe that the government can do it alone without foreign financing (and, importantly, without the rule of law reforms that form the core of the government's IMF-backed program). But it would be a tremendous mistake.
It's important to remember how much has been achieved by this government on the economic front. Against the backdrop of war and a historic political transition, the economic team has carried forward a difficult and ambitious adjustment program. After a fall of GDP of around 20 percent, the economy has stabilized, fiscal deficits have been slashed to levels consistent with available domestic and external financing, and a deep restructuring of the banking sector has been launched. Perhaps more importantly, significant structural reforms have been enacted including hikes in energy prices and a comprehensive rewriting of the legal framework underpinning the economy.
Recently, a broad debt restructuring was completed that provides over $15 billion in cash flow relief over the next three years, as well as a modest reduction in principal. Russia refused to participate and restructure a $3 billion bond due in December, but later this week the IMF Board will meet and agree to a policy change that will allow Ukraine's IMF program to proceed even if the bond is not paid.
Unfortunately, the program has faltered in some important aspects. The move against corruption has stalled in recent months, raising serious concerns among Ukraine's allies whether vested interests were reasserting themselves. Rule of law reforms are central to the IMF program and critical to any effort to break from the past decades of corruption and poor economic performance. But the implementation of these reforms (including paying adequate salaries) is costly. Further, without a sound macroeconomic framework, it will be increasingly hard to sustain popular support for this reform effort. A sound budget is a gateway test for any serious reform effort.

Vice President Biden is in Kiev and will speak to the Rada tomorrow. He is expected to deliver a tough measure on the need for Ukraine to jumpstart the reform process, particularly the anti-corruption agenda, and will also promise additional U.S. assistance. This message, which was foreshadowed and endorsed by my colleague Stephen Sestanovich, includes a strong case for an attack on corruption but there also needs to be a stepping up of financial support for the government to allow for a budget that can support the reform effort and enhance security.
A grand bargain is urgently needed. The Ukraine government needs to jumpstart the implementation of rule of law, judiciary and civil service reforms and take on vested interests. President Poroshenko must come out and fully endorse the Ministry of Finance proposal (and his finance minister Natalie Jaresko), and then whip the votes needed to get it passed. And Western governments must provide more bilateral assistance so that Ukrainians can have confidence that the program can succeed and restore growth. Ukraine should not go back.

JOE BIDEN IS VISITING UKRAINE (VICE)
By Simon Ostrovsky
Vice, December 8, 2015
It's a diplomat's job to stay all smiles and keep the business of international relations chugging along, no matter how bad things look. But sometimes, even diplomats lose their cool.
This week, US Vice President Joe Biden is visiting Kiev to tell Ukrainians they still have Washington's support in their fight against Russia and Russia-backed separatists in the country's east. But his message may be overshadowed by the US ambassador to Kiev, who hasn't been acting very diplomatically lately.
At the end of September, Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt got up in front of a group of businessmen and investors at a conference in the city of Odessa and told them that Ukrainian prosecutors were protecting the corrupt owner of an energy company that employs Biden's son, Hunter, instead of prosecuting him.
"We have learned that there have been times when the Prosecutor General's Office not only did not support investigations into corruption, but rather undermined prosecutors working on legitimate corruption cases," Pyatt said in Ukraine's main port city.
Related: The Priest, the Pianist, a Cat, and a DIY Sauna: One Week in Ukraine's Forgotten War
He then pointed specifically to a case involving former Ukrainian Ecology Minister Mykola Zlochevsky, owner of the Burisma Holdings energy firm, which hired Hunter Biden to its board of directors shortly after the Euromaidan revolution overthrew Zlochevsky's former boss Viktor Yanukovych.
Burisma likely hired Biden's son in the hopes that some of the family prestige would rub off on the company in the uncertain times that followed the revolution, Daria Kaleniuk, director of Ukraine's Anti-Corruption Action Center, told VICE News.
"They want there to be less suspicion that they're involved in corrupt under-the-table dealings and are instead seen as operating in line with international standards," Kaleniuk said, adding that Burisma received gas production licenses in questionable circumstances under the former regime.
Watch the VICE News dispatch The War May Be Over: Russian Roulette:
Burisma insists it hired the vice president's son to its board because he is an experienced lawyer. "This is totally based on merit," the company's chairman, Alan Apter said when the younger Biden was hired.
According to the US ambassador, Hunter Biden's boss Zlochevsky stole $23 million from the Ukrainian people. But when a British court seized the money and asked Ukrainian prosecutors to send documents to confirm the funds were illicit, they stalled, forcing the court to release the assets back to the former ecology minister.
Related: Did the Islamic State Go Shopping For Weapons in Ukraine?
The elder Biden arrives in Ukraine at a time when there is no bigger issue than corruption. With the war in the east stabilized for the time being, the media have nominated graft as the country's number one enemy - not Russia.
The vice president also lands after months of acrimony between reformers and Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko over the prosecutor general, who Poroshenko has refused to dismiss despite numerous allegations about abuse of authority.
But the White House wants the focus of Biden's visit to be Ukraine's close alliance with the US.

One senior administration official, who asked not to be named, said a major goal was to remind people that Ukraine was not forgotten despite the fact that attention has shifted toward Russia's involvement in Syria.'That's going to be a major theme of the trip - that nothing that's going on in the Middle East has changed one iota of our commitment to the Ukrainian people.'
"That's going to be a major theme of the trip - that nothing that's going on in the Middle East has changed one iota of our commitment to the Ukrainian people and to their security," the official said in a briefing for journalists.
The official also acknowledged that the administration has had to fall into line with the ambassador's now public views.
"The Office of the Prosecutor General itself is in desperate need of reform," the official said. "And so [Biden] has made this very clear to President Poroshenko in previous conversations… So I think we are largely in line with Ambassador Pyatt's sense that much more needs to be done."
Related: Russia Is Freaking Out Its Northern Neighbors
But Biden's meeting with Poroshenko may be a bit awkward, given that the US backs Ukraine on the presumption that it wants to have a Western-style democratic system with checks and balances - not a Russian-style autocracy where anyone who is friends with top officials gets a free pass.
Ukrainian reformers will be watching closely to hear what Biden tells the president.
"We have been very happy with the criticism the embassy has been bringing against the prosecutor's office," said Kaleniuk. "It has been very direct. So if Biden continues in the same vein and highlights the activities of the prosecutor's office in defending people associated with Burisma, then it will be clear that he is doing his job fairly and is not beholden to narrow family interests."
Follow Simon Ostrovsky on Twitter: @SimonOstrovsky

BIDEN PRESSES RUSSIA ON UKRAINE PEACE DEAL, RETURN OF CRIMEA (AFP)
By Olga Shylenko And Dmytro Gorshkov
AFP, December 8, 2015
Kiev (AFP) - US Vice President Joe Biden said Monday that Washington remained determined to see Russia adhere to a shaky Ukrainian peace agreement and hand back Crimea to Kiev.
Biden's visit is his fourth to Kiev since Russia annexed Ukraine's Black Sea peninsula in March 2014 and then watched with approval as pro-Kremlin fighters carved out their own region in the eastern industrial heart of the ex-Soviet state.
The war-scarred nation now fears slipping off the global radar due to recent international efforts to enlist Moscow in a joint fight against the Islamic State (IS) group in Syria and Iraq.
But Biden brought a message of reassurance to Kiev.
"The US stands firmly with the people of Ukraine in the face of continued - I emphasise continued - aggression from Russia and Russian-backed separatists," he told Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko.
Washington's EU allies support Ukraine's view of Russia orchestrating and backing the separatist revolt in reprisal for the February 2014 ouster of a Moscow-backed president - an assertion the Kremlin denies.
Both Washington and Brussels have slapped stiff economic sanctions on Russian President Vladimir Putin's inner circle and have helped train and equip Ukraine's underfunded army with defensive equipment such as advanced radar.
But the situation changed when Russia began launching ferocious air strikes against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's foes on September 30.
Washington accused Putin of trying to prop up his remaining Middle East ally by targeting Syria's Western-backed rebels instead of extremist groups.
- 'Hold Russia accountable' -
Yet the Islamic State's claim of downing a Russian airliner carrying 224 people over Egypt on October 31 appears to have prompted Moscow to focus more on bombing IS's oil infrastructure and other jihadist targets.
The November 13 Paris attacks the IS also claimed saw France make a push to enlist Russia in a "grand coalition" against the jihadist group alongside the United States and some European and Arab states.
Biden said the latest developments in the Middle East in no way appeased Washington's anger

with Putin or slackened its support for Poroshenko's pro-Western team.
"The invasion by Russia of Crimea will not be accepted by us or by the international community. This attempted annexation is contrary to international law, is wrong, and will not be accepted in any circumstance," he said.
Biden also hinted that Russia may face additional US sanctions if its peace commitments were not met.
Washington was in contact with "our fellow leaders around the world... to make sure the international community stands and holds Russia accountable for the actions against Ukraine," Biden said after meeting with Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk.
"If they do not meet their obligations, (one must) increase the price Russia has to pay for its illegal actions internationally."
- The 'cancer' of corruption -
Biden also spoke out on the issue of graft in a country where morale is sagging due to Poroshenko's seeming inability to tackle the corruption that has plagued Ukraine for much most of its recent years.
Poroshenko's prosecutor general has been accused of blocking investigations and hiring workers who have since been detained with huge stashes of gold and cash in their flats.
"It's absolutely critical for Ukraine... to root out the cancer of corruption," the US vice president said.
"There's a growing degree of popular frustration about the slow pace of the reforms and the efforts to root out corruption," Biden warned.
Poroshenko said he agreed that the 19-month war in which more than 8,000 have died "cannot be used as an excuse for failing to conduct reforms."

THE FIGHT AGAINST GRAFT GOES ONLINE (INTLBIZ)
By Lydia Tomkiw
International Business Times, December 8, 2015
Natalia Shyrba had never even been to the southwestern Ukrainian city of Odessa when she decided to move there in August to take an unpaid job fighting one of the country's biggest problems: corruption. The 26-year-old, who was born in Ukraine, left behind a comfortable life in Philadelphia to help build an online government platform where people can ask questions and submit complaints about day-to-day issues like damaged roads. The service is supposed to reduce face-to-face government interactions and the potential for corrupt officials to extract bribes from desperate citizens, a pervasive problem in the former Soviet republic.
"Here in Ukraine, the biggest issue is that the government is a roadblock to getting things done whereas the government should really be a service for the citizens," Shyrba said. "If you eliminate the human factor, you can eliminate corruption. You can't bribe a computer."
Two years after Ukraine's Euromaidan revolution swept the streets of Kiev with cries to fight corruption and turn the nation westward toward the European Union, a new generation of government activists is working to fight graft by going online. A network of unpaid volunteers across the country is trying to disrupt a deeply entrenched culture of theft by digitizing government services and documents in an effort to create transparency and hold politicians accountable. They face significant challenges, with only 7 percent of Ukrainians recently saying the longtime fight against corruption has shown any results.
Ukraine's push against graft comes after the Euromaidan revolution that began in November 2013 when President Viktor Yanukovych refused to sign an association agreement with the EU. His eventual ouster set off a ripple of events, with Russia annexing Crimea in March 2014 and war breaking out in the eastern Donbass region that has left 8,000 dead. Yanukovych's massive estate replete with a zoo and several mansions was turned into a museum highlighting the country's corruption problem after he fled for Russia in February 2014. Documents left behind at the estate showed how public money was spent to enrich Yanukovych, his family and close associates.
But Ukraine's problems go further than corrupt politicians driving expensive cars and building mansions. Average citizens report paying bribes to low-ranking government workers to either receive basic services or ensure preferential treatment. For example, Ukrainians sometimes must pay health workers extra to receive care and they can guarantee their children will receive higher grades in school by opening their wallets. The endemic corruption has led Transparency

International, a global anti-corruption nonprofit, to name Ukraine one of the world's most corrupt nations along with Uganda and the Comoros.
The Department of Information Technologies of the Odessa region meets for a planning meeting in late November to discuss an open budget project, e-petitions and e-medical projects.
Department of Information Technologies of the Odessa region
A big part of putting information online is about gaining trust, Shyrba says, and that will require making Ukrainians comfortable with using online resources and reassuring them it's not a gimmick - someone will actually answer their queries. The team is working on numerous projects such as getting administrative services like passport requests online, as well as some not so "glamorous" projects including teaching older civil servants how to use email and introducing online project management tools.
"There is political pushback," said Shyrba, who works with a 15-person team. "We are trying to break a really old and corrupt system."
Hopes were high that with the May 2014 election of Ukraine's current president, Petro Poroshenko, reforms and the fight against theft would begin in earnest, but change has been slow. During a visit to Kiev to discuss the ongoing war, U.S. Vice President Joe Biden urged Ukrainians Monday to "root out the cancer of corruption."
"It's the issue of the country's survival," said Daria Kaleniuk, 28, executive director of the Anti-Corruption Action Center, a Ukrainian civil society organization based in Kiev with 15 staff members mainly in their 20s. "If we don't succeed in the this war [against corruption], we risk losing the whole country."
Constructive 'Hackers'
When the prime minister of Ukraine asked Denis Gursky, 30, to join him for a meeting this spring he never expected to walk out of the government building as the leader's open data adviser. The IT professional had been working with other civil society organizations to create an open data law for Ukraine that was passed in April and requires government agencies to publish their data online in machine-readable form and also on a national open data portal. Gursky now envisions a world where any Ukrainian can sit down at their kitchen table and look at online registries to see how a country long plagued by corruption is spending its money.
Ukraine has a growing IT sector and a large talent pool that often makes news for all the wrong reasons with headlines such as "U.S. Identifies Insider Trading Ring With Ukraine Hackers." But as the government takes steps to implement the open data law by its March 2016 deadline, Gursky said he hopes more of the country's IT professionals will be drawn to working with public officials on projects citizens need and want.
"We have to provide real data to people about finances, budgeting and everything that is possible," Gursky said. He estimates the cost of maintaining the national open data portal will be around $1 million a year.
Some financial information has already been put online, including registries of companies and property the government owns. Journalist Andrii Bashtovyi, 25, co-founder of Hromadske TV, a journalism outlet born during Ukraine's revolution, says his media organization has been able to publish stories about money stolen from the country's war effort because of the open registries.
There are other signs that Ukraine's anti-graft campaign has made strides. Last month, 30-year-old Nazar Kholodnytsky was appointed Ukraine's top anti-corruption prosecutor.
"The job of the [anti-corruption] bureau is to uncover large-scale corruption," said Alexander Motyl, a professor of political science at Rutgers University in Newark, New Jersey, who specializes in Ukraine. "They are supposed to go after the big fry ... there is a lot of hope they will be able to do it."
But open data and e-government initiatives will get Ukraine only so far, experts say. Activists have also called on Ukrainian lawmakers to privatize some of the over 1,800 state corporations that continue to allow oligarchs and politicians to siphon off state funds. Experts estimate that well over 1,000 state corporations could be sold off or eliminated to reduce theft in key sectors including energy and infrastructure.
E-government reforms "won't address billion-dollar kickbacks in the energy sector," Motyl said. "It's relatively small-scale, but on the other hand these are the things that concern most people."
Ukraine is also grappling with crucial financial problems that could slow down efforts to invest in record keeping and online services. The International Monetary Fund has vowed to bail out

Ukraine with a multibillion-dollar package and the World Bank has predicted a 12 percent decline in gross domestic product this year.
But advocates of putting more government records online say national lawmakers must prioritize transparency to nurture citizens' faith in Ukraine's future.
"We are moving in slow steps," said Bashtovyi, the investigative journalist. "But we should constantly see progress and constantly see people going to prison if they are stealing money."

MR. BIDEN GOES TO UKRAINE (RADEUR)
By Brian Whitmore
Radio Free Europe, December 8, 2015
Washington sends a loud signal that Ukraine remains a priority as U.S. Vice President Joe Biden arrived in Kyiv for a two-day visit this week.
The visit - in which Biden will deliver a highly anticipated speech to the Ukrainian parliament - comes at a particularly sensitive time.
Kyiv is clearly worried that the Syria conflict and the potential for Western cooperation with Russia will weaken resolve to continue supporting Ukraine.
On this week's Power Vertical Briefing, I discuss what we can expect from Biden's visit with RFE/RL Senior Editor Steve Gutterman.
Enjoy...

BIDEN PLEDGES US SUPPORT, SEEKS STRONGER ACTION ON RULE OF LAW (KYIVPOST)
By Johannes Wamberg Andersen
Kyiv Post (Ukraine), December 8, 2015
U.S. Vice President Joseph Biden's message to Ukraine remains consistent: The United States will continue to support, but Ukraine's leaders need to do more to fight corruption and create a strong judicial system.
Biden is scheduled speak before the Ukrainian parliament at 11 a.m. on Dec. 8.
After meeting Biden upon arrival at Kyiv Boryspil International Airport late on Dec. 6, Kyiv Mayor Vitali Klitschko said that Biden stressed that faster reforms were essential to national development, "especially of the justice system."
Later, during a joint public statement with President Petro Poroshenko, Biden said he saw signs of progress but that more needs to be done with overhauling the judicial system, which is widely distrusted among Ukrainians as corrupt, politically subservient and ineffective.
He pledged that the U.S. "would stand by your side as you strengthen the rule of law … from top to bottom," pointing to the new patrol police force as something tangible.
Biden also said that "there is no democracy in the world without strong civil society." He met with civil society leaders, members of parliament and some government officials earlier in the day. Some participants described the talks as an intensive discussion over Ukraine's continuing corruption in high places.
Poroshenko, in turn, thanked Biden for U.S. support including training assistance to the new police force.
Timothy Ash, an analyst for Nomura International, said "the US is concerned at backsliding from the Poroshenko administration - particularly over the issue of the rule of law."
According to an anonymous Washington top official cited by Western news services, Biden was expected to ask Poroshenko to have Prosecutor General Viktor Shokin replaced. Seen as a key obstacle to the pursuit of justice, the powerful Shokin is criticized for stalling high-level cases against former officials.
Poroshenko defended his record, saying that the recent establishment of new anti-corruption bodies showed that the nation is on the right track.
Pledging $190 million in fresh financial U.S. aid to Ukraine, Biden hammered the anti-graft message home, saying the U.S. money is earmarked for the fight against corruption, not for defense or other needs. The U.S. has provided a total of $660 million plus $2 billion in loan guarantees since last year, with a third $1 billion possible.
Political analyst Vyacheslav Potapenko said that a number of large state-owned enterprises depended on corrupt deals for their survival.
Kyiv Post staff writer Johannes Wamberg Andersen can be reached at johannes.wa@gmail.com

SIGNS OF ECONOMIC PROGRESS NOTICEABLE IN UKRAINE (NTRFXUKR)
Interfax (UKR), December 8, 2015
U.S. Vice President Joseph Biden has said that economic progress is noticeable in Ukraine.
"We with the president discussed the progress that has occurred in Ukraine during this time... We started to notice the signs of economic progress. GDP started rising, industrial production began to grow, and exports of agricultural products have increased. The Ukrainian currency has stabilized," he said at a joint briefing with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko in Kyiv.

PUSHKOV CALLED THE UNION BIDEN TO POROSHENKO BARREN (RIN)
Russian Information Network, December 8, 2015
Head of the state Duma on international Affairs Alexei Pushkov explained the message of the Vice-President of the United States Joseph Biden about the fact that he more talks with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, than with his own wife.
"the joke Biden that he talks with Poroshenko more often than with his wife, is the truth. But it is the result of painfully disappointing. Barren Union ", ? wrote Pushkov in Twitter.
before the first day of the week Vice President Joe Biden said that more talks with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, than with his own wife. Before that, Biden said that North America provide Ukraine with 190 million dollars in financial aid to conduct reforms. On Sunday, the White house said that Biden left on a visit to Ukraine. In November, the White house announced the visit of Joe Biden to Ukraine on 7 December. This will be the fifth trip of the Vice-President to Ukraine. On 6 November, Joe Biden promised that North America will provide for the battle with illegal activities of officials and the implementation of tax reform in Ukraine the third tranche of $ 1 billion. At the end of October the Head of the U.S. Department of Commerce penny Pritzker stated that the U.S. President Barack Obama is going to take steps to provide the 3rd tranche of macroeconomic aid to Ukraine for reforms in the country in the coming months.

JOE BIDEN LIKELY TO BRING HARSH CRITICISM TO UKRAINE (DEUTSCW)
By Frank Hoffman
Deutsche Welle (DEU), December 8, 2015
It took over a year and a half for Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko to even begin implementing his most important campaign promise: On December 1, a new head of the anti-corruption prosecution agency was finally appointed, and now the office is ready to start working. US officials think this took far too long, and they are losing patience with Ukraine's government, especially since Prosecutor General Viktor Shokin, a Poroshenko confidant, has delayed filling the anti-corruption position. In September of this year, Geoffrey Pyatt, the US ambassador to Kyiv, took an unusual step. He tweeted - albeit in a convoluted, diplomatic manner - his demand for Shokin's dismissal.
But Poroshenko is holding on to Shokin, a man who has been accused of leading an extremely corrupt state apparatus. After Euromaidan, the judiciary holds great emotional significance for Ukrainians. Almost 100 people were killed in the revolt two years ago.
"The entire Prosecutor General's Office must urgently be reformed," a high-ranking US official demanded ahead of Joe Biden's visit to Kyiv, where the US vice president is scheduled to start holding meetings on Monday. Ukraine has a "long history of corruption," the official said, requesting anonymity to speak candidly. Biden's schedule for the visit reflects how low respect for Ukraine's leadership has sunk in the United States: The vice president will speak with representatives of pro-EU civil society groups before holding talks with politicians.
Biden will put pressure on the Ukrainian government, the US official said, and "the recently adopted anti-corruption reforms will be implemented." The vice president will probably urge Ukraine's government to force Shokin to resign. Diplomats in Kyiv are becoming increasingly distraught with regard to the placatory attitude of Ukrainian leaders.
It seems questionable that the required judicial reform will be swiftly implemented. Poroshenko's people are being advised by the European Council in Strasbourg - an institution that is not known for quick reforms. Behind the scenes, a Japanese diplomat insisted that the entire Ukrainian judiciary be thrown out. In the past, judges often acted as trustees, representing the interests of oligarchs. Japanese officials suggest that the Ukrainian government dismiss all its jurists and then

start a "recruitment campaign" to put "judges with integrity" in office. This has already worked for Ukraine's new traffic police, for which Japan has donated about 1,300 cars. Since summer, the hybrid vehicles have zipped around Kyiv, blue lights flashing to give a sense of security. Above all, these actions are meant to say, "We are doing something." Now it turns out that the police patrols just showcase a proclaimed change in politics, but, behind the display, many moldy structures prevail.

This also applies to political structures. It is striking how intricately entangled they are with Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk's milieu. That is why Yatsenuk confidant Mykola Martynenko remains chairman of the energy committee in Ukraine's unicameral parliament, or Rada, although Switzerland has been directing investigations into him for at least half a year. Martynenko is suspected of transferring bribes worth millions to a Swiss account. It is doubtful that the Ukrainian prosecutor general has provided the Swiss with satisfactory support.

Conflict with Russia as an excuse?

The accused just shrug the allegations off. In other European countries, officials would break out in a cold sweat just thinking about the consequences, but German bank managers in Kyiv say Ukrainians cynically sneer at the idea of "honorable gentlemen." Martynenko himself speaks of a Russian conspiracy against him. Last Monday he stated that he would resign from parliament, but his departure has not been voted on yet.

All in all, many Ukrainian leaders use the conflict with Russia as an excuse for their failure to act. Instead of building democratic structures, the country seems to be stabilizing the old system of oligarchy, cronyism and corruption. Russian President Vladimir Putin has thus achieved his goal of halting Ukraine's establishing stronger bonds with the United States and EU. The excesses of the judiciary are reminiscent of the situation in Russia, where prosecutors are involved in shady dealings and act arbitrarily.

Ukrainian authorities are also known for violations of freedom of speech, another similarity the country has with Russia. The critical blogger Ruslan Kozaba has been in custody since February. His crime: He spoke out against the civil war in eastern Ukraine.

Apparently, the blogger was reported to authorities by a volunteer who works for the Security Service of Ukraine. The 31,000-employee SBU appears to serve as the third element in the justice system and is also traditionally a tool of oligarchic interests. But US officials say the days of standing by and watching are over: The grace period has apparently come to an end.

COMMENTARY: WHAT TO EXPECT FROM BIDEN'S VISIT TO UKRAINE? (NEE)

By Maksym Beznosiuk

New Eastern Europe, December 8, 2015

US Vice President Joe Biden is paying a two day visit to Ukraine which has already been labeled as "historic" by many experts. In spite of the fact it is his fourth visit to post-Maidan Ukraine, Biden will be the second American politician from such a high rank to give a speech at the Ukrainian Parliament. Former President George H.W. Bush was the first high-ranking US official who addressed Ukrainian parliamentarians on August 1st, 1991, which occurred only three weeks prior to its declaration of independence.

As part of his visit on December 7th, 2015, Joe Biden is expected to participate in roundtable talks with state and civil representatives and bilateral meetings with Ukraine's President Poroshenko and Prime Minister Yatseniyk. The next day, he will give a speech before the Ukrainian Parliament.

Without a doubt, such a visit is of crucial importance and demonstrates US support of Ukrainian sovereignty and closer convergence with the West. This is in light of ongoing Russian attempts to further destabilise Ukraine's situation.

It is expected Biden's message will consist of alarming criticism of persistent corruption and slow progress, mixed with additional assurances of further support and cooperation with Ukraine towards its integration with Europe. Hence, the assessment of the overall Ukrainian political situation will be based on the combination of such crucial factors as securing political stability and enhancing anti-corruption measures' efficiency. Not surprisingly, such an important visit will take place before Ukraine's annual governmental report on its government's activity results, as well as its plans for the next year.

Fight against corruption, economic reforms and financial assistance

According to some predictions, Vice President Biden will voice concern over the urgency of more active reforms of structural and institutional aspects of the Ukrainian state apparatus. Notably, the White House has serious concerns regarding the quality and pace of current economic and judicial reforms, especially in relation to prevalent corruption schemes in high echelons of Ukrainian power.

Special attention will be paid to the judicial sector. It should be recalled that during his speech at the Brookings Institution at the end of May, 2015, Biden particularly emphasised Ukraine needs to use newly introduced laws and policies to investigate and prosecute corruption on all levels in order for its reforms to succeed. Biden also mentioned his frequent communication on a weekly basis, both with the Ukrainian Prime Minister and President. Moreover, US Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt has criticised the General Prosecutor's Office on numerous occasions, by stressing its responsibility in fighting corruption in Ukraine. On September 24th, 2015, Ambassador Pyatt stated during the Odessa Financial Forum the General Prosecutor's Office's inability to fight corruption undermines effective reform implementation in Ukraine.

For a long time, the White House has tried to convey a powerful and clear message to Ukraine's leaders concerning the need to undertake more active efforts against corruption. In light of this heightened concern over high corruption levels and the Ukrainian authorities' lack of action, many Ukrainian experts have assumed the General Prosecutor's, Prime Minister's and several other high ranking Ukrainian officials' political futures could be seriously questioned.

Most importantly, the question of stable US financial assistance to Ukraine is closely tied to progress in conducting anti-corruption reforms within Ukraine's state institutions. In June, Ukrainian Prime Minister Yatseniuk met with US Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew to discuss an additional tranche of 1 billion dollars to support Ukrainian reforms in order to increase Ukraine's investment attractiveness and lay foundations for its economic growth. At the end of October, 2015, US Secretary of Commerce Penny Pritzker stated the readiness of US President Barack Obama to take necessary steps towards granting a third tranche of macroeconomic assistance to Ukraine to implement its reforms. During her recent meeting with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, she emphasised that visible and steady Ukrainian progress in implementing anti-corruption measures were a prerequisite for new financial assistance in the near future.

Last month, Joe Biden confirmed the US' readiness to grant Ukraine a third tranche of credit guarantees of 1 billion dollars. However, he emphasised Ukraine's government should fight corruption more actively, including conducing tax reforms in compliance with the IMF. Possible US assistance in reaching an agreement on the Ukraine's debt restructuring will also be predicated on these conditions.

Security and military cooperation

US presidential administration officials stated Joe Biden would underline US support of Ukraine's territorial integrity in his speech at the Ukrainian Parliament. He will reiterate the US' position concerning Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and its current involvement in desabilizing eastern Ukraine. In this regard, it is also expected he will reassure Ukrainian leaders that any US communication with Russia over Syria's situation will not impact its position concerning Ukraine. Additionally, a diplomatic strategy to keep sanctions against Russia will be discussed with Ukrainian counterparts.

Ukraine's army requires serious investment, specialised military experience and modernisation assistance . In 2015, thanks to Biden's active involvement, the US provided Ukraine security and military assistance totaling $265 million. Earlier this year, the US committed to training Ukrainian troops, a mission conducted by 300 US soldiers at a compound in western Ukraine. The US also provided specialised military equipment which was transferred to the country's eastern battle zone. According to the National Defense Authorisation Act for the 2016 Fiscal Year, approved by the US Senate, it could be possible to increase assistance to $300 million. However, it is not clear if Biden will touch upon possible additional military assistance to Ukraine during his visit early next week.

Based on this, Vice President Biden's visit is expected to reaffirm the US' support of Ukraine on its path towards democratisation and its struggle against Russian hostile activities in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. Simultaneously, the US will emphasise that further comprehensive support of Ukraine will depend on the tempo and quality of a broad range of reforms within Ukraine's state apparatus.

Maksym Beznosiuk is an international relations specialist from Kyiv, Ukraine.

NEW YORK TIMES AND WASHINGTON POST OP-EDS:

THE BIG HOLE IN OBAMA'S ISLAMIC STATE STRATEGY (WP)
By David Ignatius
Washington Post, December 7, 2015
At the center of President Obama's strategy for dealing with the Islamic State is an empty space. It's supposed be filled by a hypothetical "Sunni ground force," but after more than a year of effort, it's still not there. Unless this gap is filled, Obama's plan won't work.
Otherwise, Obama made a reasonable case in his speech to the nation Sunday night. He's right to argue for patience and persistence in fighting the Muslim terrorists, rather than "tough talk." He's correct that the United States shouldn't feed the jihadists' fantasies with "a long and costly ground war." And especially right that we'll be safer at home and abroad if most Muslims are allies against the extremists.
But there was a mysterious black box in the middle of Obama's speech. Here's how he tried to explain it: "The strategy that we are using now - airstrikes, special forces and working with local forces who are fighting to regain control of their own country - that is how we'll achieve a more sustainable victory."
What "local forces" is Obama talking about? If he means Kurdish fighters in Iraq and Syria, yes, they've performed admirably. In Kurdish areas. They don't want to clear and hold the Sunni heartland of the Islamic State, nor should they. If Obama is talking about the Shiite-led Iraqi military, their performance is still just barely adequate, even backed by American air power, and they're disdained and mistrusted by the Sunnis of Ramadi, Fallujah and Mosul. If he's talking about the Islamist brigades in Syria armed by Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar, it's still not entirely clear whether they're friend or foe.
The disturbing fact is that a strong, reliable, indigenous Sunni ground force doesn't exist yet in Iraq or Syria. The United States has been trying to fix this problem since the fall of Mosul in June 2014, with very little success. We're like the joke about the starving economist who needs to open a can of beans on a desert island and posits: "Assume we had a can opener!"
Consider the false hopes and missed connections over the past year: In Iraq, U.S. trainers were dispatched to Al Asad and Al Taqaddum air bases in Anbar province to train thousands of Sunni tribal fighters. The tribesmen mostly didn't show up, and no wonder: The Shiite-led government in Baghdad still refuses to approve a Sunni "national guard" with real power. In Syria, Congress authorized a $500 million plan to train and equip a largely Sunni force to fight the Islamic State. Only a few hundred signed up, instead of the expected 5,000, and the first wave of fighters walked into a trap and was savaged by jihadists in northern Syria.
Why have these efforts gone so badly, and what needs to be fixed? Basically, I'd argue that Sunnis don't trust an America that turned their world upside down in the 2003 invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein. Tribal leaders have been our default Sunni strategy ever since: We're trying now to use them as mercenaries against the Islamic State. But it's a corrupt bargain on both sides.
The Sunni no-show problem illustrates a deeper trauma. Across the Middle East, Sunnis are experiencing a kind of vertigo. The Sunni powerhouses - Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Libya - are in ruins. The people feel dispossessed and disillusioned, disgusted with the autocrats who ruled them before and the religious fanatics who want to rule them today.
Filling this Sunni vacuum with new self-confidence will be the work of a generation, but it must start now, for it's an essential part of defeating the jihadists. The West's best think tanks should be working on this problem; the Arab world's brightest young activists should be making plans for governance and economic development. Global institutions such as the United Nations, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund should be developing plans for trusteeship, reconstruction and governance.
It's 1944 in the Arab world: Defeating the jihadists demands the creation of a healthy Sunni body politic.
What would a revived Sunni heartland in Iraq and Syria look like? Well, you can get a pretty good idea by examining Iraqi Kurdistan. It flowered under a U.S. no-fly zone known as " Operation Provide Comfort" that started in 1991. Under this protective cover, investment, security and

political stability came together in a virtuous cycle.
When we think about the future of Iraq and Syria, we should have in mind vibrant Sunni provinces that, like Kurdistan, are part of a loose federal state. In building a strategy for defeating the Islamic State, creating this "Sunnistan" will be the long pole in the tent.

REPUBLICANS IGNORE THE LESSONS OF WORLD WAR II (WP)
By Dana Milbank
Washington Post, December 7, 2015
Dec. 7, 2015: A date which will live in immaturity.
President Obama addressed the nation Sunday night from the Oval Office, a rare use of the sacred symbols of the presidency to reassure Americans about their security while steeling them for a long and complex struggle against the Islamic State.
And the loyal opposition answered his rallying cry over the next day with a patriotic display of carping and dyspepsia.
Donald Trump answered Obama's call for tolerance by declaring that no Muslims should be permitted to enter the United States: "We need a new president - FAST!"
Marco Rubio proclaimed a "growing sense we have a president who is completely overwhelmed."
From Republicans on Capitol Hill came a profusion of insults and epithets. "Repackaged half measures . . . Tone deaf . . . sales pitch for the status quo . . . President Obama is riding the bench at T-ball today."
It was tiresome. There's a real case to be made that Obama's minimalist strategy isn't working. But the only thing this reflexive complaining does is divide the country further and make a coherent response to Islamic State more difficult.
Rather than cover this National Day of Carping, I went to the World War II Memorial on the Mall, where 20 veterans of that war were observing the 74th anniversary of the Pearl Harbor attack. There, I met Dale "Red" Robinson, a Pearl Harbor survivor and a staff sergeant in the infantry who was later part of the Normandy landing. He recalled the national unity of that war and lamented the divisions that make fighting this one so difficult.
"We were gung-ho. Everybody was," said Robinson, who is almost 94 but whose blue eyes are as clear as his mind. "Nothing like this, these days. It's sad, kind of sad, my friend."
Robinson said he feels "sorry for all of the soldiers" serving today, let down by their political leaders. And he sees little chance of these leaders finding their way. "How could you change this bunch now?"
One thing we can do is admonish them to follow, or at least remember, the example of Robinson's generation. That's what Monday afternoon's ceremony was about. A sailor rang a bell at 1:57 p.m. Eastern time, the moment 74 years earlier when Japanese planes struck, and 2,400 Americans were soon lost with much of the Pacific Fleet.
A military band played the national anthem and, in the front row, the able-bodied veterans stood, some rising from their wheelchairs, and snapped salutes or put hands to hearts. Later, while the band played "America the Beautiful," the veterans, some wheeled, some walking with support, made a slow procession around the memorial's pool to place wreaths, and to hear the sounding of taps.
Rear Adm. Craig Faller addressed the old men. "We live all of us today with the prosperity and the security built on the shoulders of these heroes," he said. "Our challenge as we face the uncertainty and complexity associated with today's threats is to live up to the example of our World War II veterans."
That's our challenge - and we're failing.
One of the vets, Laura Mays, told me he finds it "very scary" that the nation is so divided in confronting Islamic State. "The difference is the uncertainty of today, and it's a big difference," said Mays, who was a fireman on the USS Oconto and saw action in the Pacific. "Back then we knew we were strong and . . . we felt that we were supported."
Mays, from Texas, said he thinks political leaders aren't as patriotic as those who sent him to war. "I thought they were more loyal, more concerned about the nation than their position," he said. Now, "it just seems like everything they do, right or wrong - and mostly wrong - is [because] it'll get them somewhere." Mays complained about the sharp partisan divisions in Congress. "How can we bring unity when you have that?"

Mays and his contemporaries, facing a common enemy, mobilized and sacrificed, regardless of political ideology. Now, our representatives can't even manage to come up with a resolution authorizing the use of military force against the Islamic State - and they've been at it for a year. "I think it's time for Congress to vote to demonstrate that the American people are united and committed to this fight," Obama said Sunday night.

House Speaker Paul D. Ryan responded to this call to unite by deriding Obama's speech as "just a half-hearted attempt to defend and distract from a failing policy." Ryan said we are "one step behind our enemy."

It does sometimes feel that way. But the opposition has yet to propose a constructive alternative - and the constant sniping at each other does nothing to defeat the Islamic State. As those old soldiers on the Mall taught us, victory comes from unity.

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IN FIGHTING TERRORISM, PATIENCE IS NOT A VIRTUE (WP)

By Michael Gerson

Washington Post, December 8, 2015

In his address to the nation on terrorism, President Obama warned against "tough talk." On this, at least, no one can accuse him of hypocrisy.

In the aftermath of recent attacks, Obama perfunctorily ticked off a series of inputs: airstrikes, arming and training Iraqi and Syrian forces, cooperating with allies on counterterrorism and pursuing a cease-fire in the Syrian conflict. And then he issued this directive: "I've ordered the Departments of State and Homeland Security to review the visa-waiver program." Who at the White House thought it would be helpful for the commander in chief, after a terrorist attack on the U.S. homeland, to order an interdepartmental review process?

Obama gave a speech of reassurance for a policy that appears to be collapsing. The Islamic State has solidified control of vast territory and is displaying many of the characteristics of an actual nation. It has attracted jihadists from around the world to the conflict in Syria and Iraq, many of whom will return home with deadly skills. With the Paris attacks, the Islamic State has demonstrated the strategic capacity to strike in Western capitals. It counts affiliates in about a dozen nations, including a particularly successful Libyan branch operation. And it has become a rallying point for self-radicalization, as close as a Facebook pledge of allegiance.

Before the events of the past few weeks, it might have been possible to argue that Obama's anaconda plan of slow strangulation could work in, say, five years. But is the threat revealed in Paris and elsewhere acceptable for five years? In this case, patience is a dangerous course.

In his speech, Obama talked of a 65-nation coalition fighting the Islamic State and claimed that France, Germany and the United Kingdom "have ramped up their contributions to our military campaign." But when France decided to take action after the Paris attacks, it invoked an obscure passage of the European Union treaty to avoid a NATO commitment that might offend Russia and imply U.S. leadership. Germany has tested the boundaries of its constitution to make a small military contribution (up to six planes and 1,200 soldiers) in solidarity with France, not the United States. And our country has generally rejected the Eisenhower role of supreme commander in a coalition of the willing - constrained by political commitments (" no boots on the ground") and highly restrictive rules of engagement.

Obama's strategy has many elements that any future president, Republican or Democrat, would adopt. The only things missing are urgency and leadership. The president should convene his security team and ask: What would it take to degrade the Islamic State's capabilities to strike in the West within one year? And to defeat it completely in two? Then the president should assemble a coalition sufficient to that task, composed of forces from European allies, boots on the ground from Sunni nations and a more aggressive U.S. support role (much larger Special Operations forces to assist on the front lines, forward air controllers, relaxed rules of engagement).

Obama is correct that a parallel political track is essential. Syria will require a Lebanon-esque peace, in which minorities (including the Alawites) are granted protection and power. It will be necessary to somehow re-convince the Sunni tribal leaders in Iraq that, if they fight the Islamic State, they will find protection and fair treatment in a unified country, instead of living under Shiite despotism.

The complexity of this military and diplomatic task would challenge any president. It is pretty much

inconceivable that the "ender of wars" would suddenly assume this role in his seventh year in office. Obama has consistently done the minimal amount necessary to avoid the charge of fecklessness.
Obama's call for tolerance of the Islamic faith is more than minimal; it is essential. But even this is put at risk by the broader crisis. "A continued failure to recognize the scale of the challenge and to construct the means necessary to meet it," says former British prime minister Tony Blair, "will result in terrorist attacks potentially worse than those in Paris, producing a backlash which then stigmatizes the majority of decent, law-abiding Muslims and puts the very alliance so necessary at risk, creating a further cycle of chaos and violence."
This is the challenge of the United States' involvement in the Middle East. Because it is politically unpopular, there is a natural temptation to disengage. But after attacks, engagement will come - with more anger, on worse terms.

OBAMA'S BRAVE ADMISSION ABOUT TERRORISM (WP)
By Eugene Robinson
Washington Post, December 7, 2015
"A cancer that has no immediate cure" was not the most soothing metaphor President Obama could have chosen, but it was the most honest. He has no idea how to prevent another terrorist attack like the one in San Bernardino - and neither does anyone else, including his Republican critics.
The president used that somber phrase in his Oval Office address Sunday to describe what "many Americans are asking." The answer was implicit: Yes, that is indeed what we face, and the cure for the disease will take time.
The specific actions Obama demanded from Congress are no-brainers. Yes, individuals on terrorism watch lists should be prohibited from buying guns. Yes, the sale of military-style assault rifles should be banned. Yes, there should be better screening of foreigners who enter the country without a visa.
But none of these measures would have stopped the barbaric assault in San Bernardino, Calif., that killed 14 and injured 21. That's no reason to reject the president's initiatives - the steps he proposed might well stop some future attack or at least reduce the carnage - but it means we must all be realistic about the "new phase" of the terrorist threat that the president so soberly described. "As we've become better at preventing complex, multifaceted attacks like 9/11," Obama said, "terrorists turned to less complicated acts of violence like the mass shootings that are all too common in our society."
We saw this new pattern at Fort Hood, Tex., in 2009, when Army Maj. Nidal Malik Hasan fatally shot 13 people and wounded 32 others; in Chattanooga, Tenn., in July of this year, when Mohammad Youssef Abdulazeez killed five people at an Armed Forces Career Center and a U.S. Navy Reserve center; and last week in San Bernardino, when Syed Rizwan Farook and his wife, Tashfeen Malik, raked a county health department holiday party with gunfire before dying in a last-stand shootout with police.
There is no indication that any of these attacks was organized and directed by the Islamic State, al-Qaeda or any other known terrorist organization. Rather, they appear to be instances of do-it-yourself terrorism, inspired by events overseas but resulting from a process that authorities cannot reliably detect in advance: self-radicalization.
In a free society with more guns than people, there was no way to see any of these terrorist acts coming - any more than there was a way to know beforehand that a young white supremacist named Dylann Roof would allegedly show up at a prayer meeting at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, S.C., and kill nine innocent black worshipers.
The Republican candidates for president, obviously, have no answers. Sen. Marco Rubio (Fla.) scoffed that "I don't hear anybody talking about bomb control," noting that Farook and Malik apparently put together an arsenal of pipe bombs. But none of those devices was successfully detonated. It's hard to build a bomb and even harder to make it explode when and where you choose. The San Bernardino victims all died from gunshots; the assailants were armed with semiautomatic assault rifles that had been modified to make them more lethal.
So would common-sense gun control measures make a difference? I've argued repeatedly that they might, but let's be realistic. There are so many guns already in circulation that anyone who

wants one can get one. California has an assault-weapons ban, theoretically, but there is a loophole that made the weapons used in San Bernardino - clearly military-style assault rifles - legal for sale and purchase.
What methods remain of possibly preventing attacks? Donald Trump wants increased surveillance of mosques, but aside from the constitutional questions about such action, there is no indication it would have made a difference in San Bernardino. The National Security Agency program to log all domestic phone calls - which ended last week - apparently failed, over the years, to uncover a single terrorist plot; reinstating it would be useless.
Tougher visa rules might conceivably have raised questions about Malik, who was born in Pakistan and got a visa to enter the United States as Farook's fiancee. But Farook was a U.S. citizen, born in Chicago.
The truth is that self-radicalization is by definition an interior process. It requires no telltale communications with known terrorist suspects and can take place with no outward signs of any change.
The existence of the Islamic State "caliphate" is obviously an inspiration to potential terrorists; if it were gone, presumably the threat would eventually subside. Obama's plan to "destroy" the group is cautious, slow and uncertain. But the one thing I haven't heard from his critics is a better idea.

LOOK AT WHAT YOU'VE DONE, WAYNE LAPIERRE (WP)
By Richard Cohen
Washington Post, December 7, 2015
Years ago, I rushed up the stairs to the Tobacco Institute in Washington and confronted the people working there: How could you? How could you lie to us about the dangers of smoking? Everyone there was smoking, I remember that, and I either referred to a mound of bodies outside the door or wanted to. Now I want to do something similar - rush to the National Rifle Association and confront Wayne LaPierre, its chief executive, and yell, "LaPierre, look what you've done."
The "done" refers to San Bernardino. It refers to Planned Parenthood and Columbine and Sandy Hook. It refers to Roseburg and Chattanooga, Charleston, Fort Hood and every place of mass killing, where some crazy person, some lunatic, someone who thinks he's got the thumbs-up from God, had the legal right to get a gun, often an assault rifle, a weapon of war, and then just shoot away - rat-a-tat-tat. Bodies everywhere. You did this, LaPierre. You and your NRA.
Oh, I know: Don't personalize this, Cohen. If LaPierre weren't the head of the NRA, someone else would be. Someone else would warn us about what would happen if assault weapons were banned - "jack-booted government thugs" would "break in our doors, seize our guns, destroy our property and even injure or kill us," LaPierre once said.
Even if the NRA didn't exist, we would still be a nation just moony over guns. If we did away with assault weapons, the day-to-day threat would still be the handgun. You can't shove a .223- caliber assault rifle in your pocket or put it into the glove compartment of your car. Still, it was two assault rifles that were used to murder 14 people in San Bernardino. Two otherwise ordinary individuals, dressed as soldiers, went to war.
The United States' inability to control guns has made it dizzy with incoherence. The president draped the august Oval Office around himself to give a speech in which he said nothing. Looking like a man in need of some Zoloft, Obama said he would respond to the murders in California by increasing the pressure on the Islamic State in Syria. He also mentioned that there's no evidence that the shooters had been in touch with the Islamic State, so bombing it, while always a good idea, in this case is just beside the point.
The Republicans have an even worse idea. Realizing that they have to come up with something, the GOP is considering putting more money into mental-health programs. More money for mental health is always welcome, but just how it relates to mass murders is beyond me. Should the government troll the streets looking for people who talk to themselves? Did House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy (Calif.) - "mental health . . . seems to be a core problem" - notice that there was nothing untoward in the behavior of Syed Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik? Farook had a job. The couple just had a child. They were normal, until they were not. (McCarthy, cure thyself.)
We cannot predict a homicidal act. The shooter is almost always described as a loner. Is being alone a crime? Shall we criminalize shyness? Will Donald Trump let us use his guys to round up the introverted while sweeping for Mexicans? (How's that for synergy, Donald?)

The one thing we can do - the thing we and every other nation know how to do - is restrict gun ownership. In the past, that was not considered either un-American or unfeasible. In 1969, Milton S. Eisenhower, the former president of Johns Hopkins University, the brother of an ex-president and the very personification of a stolid Republican, recommended the confiscation of handguns. As far as I know, no one considered Eisenhower a left-wing kook.

The solution to the menace of domestic terrorism is staring us in the face. It is some sort of gun control. We cannot close down the Internet so that the Islamic State's siren call cannot reach the susceptible. We cannot cull our population for the potentially homicidal. We cannot - we must not - monitor or surveil Muslims in general. Instead, we must look at all these incidents and see what they have in common: guns.

So, excuse me if I do personalize this crisis. It's about guns and the NRA and chicken politicians who know right from wrong but vote wrong. It's about common sense and taking responsibility for your actions. It's about LaPierre and the NRA. Open the door, Wayne. See what you've done. See the bodies.

MILLENNIALS' MYSTERIOUS SUPPORT FOR PERMISSIVE GUN LAWS (WP)

By Catherine Rampell

Washington Post, December 8, 2015

When I was in middle and high school, there were spirited public debates about whether the proliferation of grisly movies, gore-glorifying song lyrics and shoot-'em-up video games might desensitize my peers and me to violence.

While I'm reluctant to pin any of this on pop culture, it's true that my generation appears somewhat inured to violence - at least violence involving firearms.

A decade or two post-adolescence - as our own preschool-age children now practice "active shooter" drills in which they're coached to cower in the closet or throw toys at a tactical-gear-outfitted maniac - millennials seem to have neither the desire nor the willpower to pressure our political leaders to do much to prevent such tragedies. If anything, we may be slightly more blasé about them than our elders.

Which does not bode well for liberals hoping that the arc of history will eventually bend toward greater gun control.

Poll data about views of gun control and specific gun-control measures are mixed, and responses vary depending how questions are asked. But statements about protecting gun rights generally elicit at least as much support from younger Americans as from older ones.

Gallup regularly asks, for example, whether "laws covering the sale of firearms should be made more strict, less strict, or kept as they are now." Over the past two years, about 49 percent of American adults under 35 have said they support "more strict" gun laws, compared with 56 percent of those 55 and older.

Two other recent surveys, from the Pew Research Center and The Post/ABC News, also asked about the relative importance of protecting gun rights versus other objectives, such as controlling gun ownership or reducing gun violence. Both found that about half of Americans young and old believe gun rights should take priority.

This is a bit puzzling, given that younger Americans are less Republican in their political leanings than older people are and are also less likely to own a gun - two factors that are usually strong predictors of opposition to gun restrictions. These survey data suggest, then, that younger people might be especially predisposed to oppose gun-control measures, after controlling for these variables.

The survey questions I've cited so far are of course relatively abstract. What about nitty-gritty, concrete policy proposals?

Again, for the most part, young people reveal themselves to be at least as pro-gun-rights as their elders, if not more so.

Pew found that younger and older Americans are about equally likely to favor background checks for gun shows (with more than 8 in 10 saying this) and to support laws barring mentally ill people from owning guns (also about 8 in 10).

The General Social Survey likewise shows that about 7 in 10 Americans across all age groups favor a law "which would require a person to obtain a police permit before he or she could buy a gun," according to calculations from my Post colleague Scott Clement.

On proposed bans of "assault-style weapons ," though, older people are considerably more supportive, with 63 percent of those 65 and older believing these are appropriate, compared with only 49 percent of people under 30, according to Pew .
YouGov similarly finds that older people are more likely to back bans on semiautomatic weapons, bans on selling magazine clips for semiautomatic weapons that hold 10 or more rounds and a five-day waiting period for purchasing a handgun.
The only gun-control policy proposal for which I've been able to find generally higher support among younger than older people is some sort of gun sale database or gun-owner registry. According to YouGov, about half of those under 30 support a federal gun-owner registry, versus about a third of those over 65. But it's possible that young people have become more comfortable with bulk data collection than their elders are, whether or not such data are connected to a hot-button issue such as firearms.
You may have noticed that sizable shares - sometimes healthy majorities - of Americans of all ages express support for tighter controls on gun ownership, both in the abstract and the specific. Despite such public support, of course, nothing has happened, presumably because politicians are more fearful of the gun lobby than their own constituents' views on gun control. (Shocker, I know, that legislation doesn't necessarily reflect the democratic will of the people.)
Given the ambivalence of today's young people - who are tomorrow's high-voter-turnout middle-aged and older people - I wouldn't expect that balance of power to shift anytime soon.

OBAMA TRIES TO RE-GIFT HIS FAILED TERROR STRATEGY (WP)
By Marc A. Thiessen
Washington Post, December 8, 2015
Usually when a president delivers a prime-time address to the nation, he has something new to announce - like, say, a new military strategy. Not President Obama. Like a notorious Christmas "re-gifter," Obama did nothing more Sunday night than repackage his old, failing strategy in the shiny wrapping of tougher language.
With a new CNN/ORC poll showing that 64 percent of Americans disapprove of the president's handling of the Islamic State and 68 percent say his military response to the terrorist group is not aggressive enough, Obama decided to ratchet up the rhetoric - acknowledging that we are "at war with terrorists" and promising to "destroy ISIL and any other organization that tries to harm us."
But rip away the rhetorical bows and paper, and the substance of what Obama offered is unchanged from his petulant news conference after the Paris attacks where he insisted against all evidence that "the strategy that we are pursuing is the right one."
Nothing has changed. After declaring the Islamic State "contained" a day before the Paris attacks and assuring Americans a day before the San Bernadino, Calif., massacre that the United States was safe from a Paris-style attack, Obama is "staying the course."
To fend off growing displeasure with his strategy, Obama once again resorted to tearing down straw men. He promised that he would "not be drawn once more into a long and costly ground war in Iraq or Syria," because "if we occupy foreign lands, [our enemies] can maintain insurgencies for years, killing thousands of our troops, draining our resources, and using our presence to draw new recruits."
This is ridiculous - and revealing. Obama fails to understand that it was not the U.S. presence in Iraq that allowed the Islamic State to rebuild its insurgency; it was the U.S. withdrawal. It was his glib dismissal of the Islamic State as "JV" terrorists who did not pose "a direct threat to us" that allowed the group's insurgency to grow. And it was his continuing refusal to take the steps necessary to re-defeat the group that is today allowing the Islamic State to grow and "maintain" its insurgency "for years."
Obama declared he would not send "a new generation of Americans overseas to fight and die for another decade on foreign soil." No one is proposing that. Retired Gen. Jack Keane, the author of the successful 2007 surge in Iraq, has laid out a strategy to defeat the Islamic State that requires a minimum of about 10,000 U.S. troops, including advisers, trainers and forward air controllers, as well as Apache helicopters and AC-130 gunships. Keane's strategy would unleash our Special Operations forces "not just to target leaders or conduct hostage rescue but to conduct large-scale in/out raids to target ISIS critical nodes and functions." And it would lift the restrictive rules of engagement that result in 75 percent of U.S. air missions returning without dropping their bombs.

Most Americans support this. The CNN/ORC poll finds that a 53 percent majority say the United States should send ground troops to Iraq or Syria to fight the Islamic State. The American people understand: We don't need another invasion; we need another surge.
We also need to understand what inspires terrorists like Tashfeen Malik and Syed Farook to join the global jihad and carry out attacks like the one in California. Obama said Sunday that groups like the Islamic State are "using our presence to draw new recruits." This is wrong. They are using the perception of American weakness. In August 2014, Obama promised to destroy the Islamic State, but after more than a year of bombing, the group still controls territory in Iraq and Syria the size of the United Kingdom and has expanded its area of operations to include Europe and now quite possibly the United States. Its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, has boasted: "The crusaders' airstrikes and constant bombardment - day and night - upon the Islamic State have not prevented its advance or weakened its resolve."
Obama does not get it. But Americans do. And they are not interested in a policy of weakness wrapped in a new package from our re-gifter-in-chief.

MR. OBAMA MAKES HIS PITCH ON THE ISLAMIC STATE (WP)
By Editorial Board
Washington Post, December 7, 2015
THE HEART of President Obama's address to the country Sunday concerned what he does not want to do in response to terrorism. After reviewing steps he has already taken or proposed to fight the Islamic State and prevent attacks inside the homeland, the president delivered what sounded like his main appeal: "Our success won't depend on tough talk, or abandoning our values or giving into fear." He went on to explain - again - why he opposes "a long and costly ground war in Iraq or Syria," and why "we cannot turn against one another by letting this fight be defined as a war between America and Islam."
Mr. Obama had good reasons to make this pitch. The San Bernardino, Calif., shooting, following closely on the Paris attacks, has understandably raised anxiety among Americans, who wonder, as the president put it, "whether we are confronted by a cancer that has no immediate cure." It has also prompted irresponsible and bigoted rhetoric on the presidential campaign trail, where GOP candidates are promising to "carpet bomb them into oblivion" (Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas) or a "total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States" (Donald Trump).
While no one - with the partial exception of Sen. Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.) - has propped up Mr. Obama's straw man of launching another U.S. ground war, some are pretending that quick and facile military solutions exist. More seriously, there is a real danger that the rhetoric of Republicans will poison one of America's greatest strengths in this fight, which is the vast majority of American Muslims' relatively strong integration and loyalty to the country. Mr. Obama got it right in saying that while Muslims must confront the extremist ideology that has spread within some of their communities, for Americans to turn on that minority as a whole is exactly what the jihadists hope for.
Mr. Obama also was correct in saying that he has stepped up the war in Iraq and Syria since the Paris attacks, taking measures that critics (including us) have recommended for a year or more. Bombing has increased, and Special Operations forces will be deployed in both countries to help coordinate offensives by local troops - though it appears the U.S. boots may not arrive on the ground for months.
The new measures give the lie to Mr. Obama's claim a month ago that the only alternative to his military strategy was putting "large numbers of U.S. troops on the ground." Unfortunately, he still is not doing what is needed to "destroy" the Islamic State, as the president defined the goal on Sunday. That destruction would require a Sunni ground force, made up of Syrians, Iraqis and perhaps foreign troops from the Persian Gulf and Turkey, with substantial U.S. support.
But no such force will go after the Islamic State as long as Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad and his Iranian and Russian allies are waging their barbaric war on Sunnis in Syria. Though Secretary of State John F. Kerry is pushing a diplomatic process that he hopes could lead to a cease-fire, he's unlikely to succeed until anti-Assad rebels are substantially strengthened on the ground. That remains the missing piece of Mr. Obama's strategy.

VOTERS AND NON-VOTERS SHOULD COUNT IN LEGISLATIVE DISTRICTS (WP)

By Editorial Board
Washington Post, December 8, 2015
IN TUESDAY'S oral arguments in Evenwel v. Abbott , the Supreme Court will consider a Texas state Senate map that put equal numbers of people - rather than equal numbers of eligible voters - in each legislative district. In fact, drawing districts with equal numbers of people is the American norm. But the challengers in this case are essentially asking: Why should non-voters count?
The constitutionality of counting people, not voters, would seem to have been settled in the 18th century - and again in the 19th. The Constitution infamously required enslaved African Americans to each count as three-fifths of a person for the purposes of drawing House of Representatives district boundaries, though they certainly were not allowed to vote. The 14th Amendment thankfully scrapped the three-fifths provision but maintained the principle that congressional boundaries should reflect equal distributions of people, including aliens, not just eligible voters.
Texas's opponents attempt to explain away these provisions by arguing that they really concern the distribution of congressional seats among the states, not how districts are drawn within each state. The Framers had good reasons to structure things this way - in particular, so that states would not game their voter eligibility rules in order to get more representation in the House - that do not apply within states. The challengers further point out that the court rejected an analogy between federal and state electoral procedures in a previous ruling that struck down Alabama's scheme to assign each county a state senator, roughly in the style of the U.S. Senate.
That is all true. But it is not enough to show that the Constitution explicitly requires drawing legislative districts according to total population in one context but implicitly prohibits it in another. As New York University's Richard H. Pildes points out, "the House was designed to be the most democratic element of the national government, and its structure was based on 'the fundamental principle of representative government' of 'equal representation for equal numbers of people.' " Drawing legislative lines according to total population, then, is an active, constitutionally valid method of apportioning popular representation.
So the Constitution clearly allows districting based on total population. That doesn't necessarily mean that states must draw legislative lines this way. But there are good policy reasons to do so. First, the census counts people, not voters; any redistricting based on voter numbers would become more complicated and probably less reliable. And second, non-voters - children, for example, or green-card holders - deserve representation too. We think the Founding Fathers had the right idea here.

A PERFECT STORM OF DECEIT IN CHICAGO (WP)
By Editorial Board
Washington Post, December 8, 2015
THE JUSTICE Department investigation of Chicago's trigger-happy police department, announced Monday by Attorney General Loretta E. Lynch, is welcome. It is also long overdue.
For years, watchdogs, lawyers and journalists have documented instances of police misconduct, including violent episodes caught on video and then subjected to the same silent treatment that nearly buried the death of black teenager Laquan McDonald, who was shot to death by a white Chicago police officer in October 2014.
What distinguished the McDonald case, which has now triggered the federal investigation, is that the officer's actions appear so outrageous, the city's coverup so blatant and the official line so thoroughly discredited by the release of a video , which Mayor Rahm Emanuel's (D) administration tried so hard to keep under wraps. In the face of that perfect storm, the Justice Department had to act. (The officer, Jason Van Dyke, has pleaded not guilty, and his lawyer says he will be exonerated at trial.)
It is critical that the Justice Department now examine not only the police force, where a culture of impunity and a code of silence are deeply ingrained, but also Chicago's entire system. That includes the Independent Police Review Authority, which examined 409 cases of police-involved shootings in the eight years ending Sept. 30 - and found just two unjustified. (Both involved off-duty police.) It includes the prosecutor's office, headed by Cook County State's Attorney Anita Alvarez, which seems to blanch at the prospect of indicting abusive officers, perhaps for fear of losing police cooperation in criminal investigations.
And it includes legal protections enshrined in union contracts as well as a state law known as the

law enforcement officers' "bill of rights." The effect of those protections is to erect formidable barriers to discipline, let alone prosecution, in the event of police misconduct. For example: Officers involved in a shooting are afforded a 24-hour grace period before they must speak to investigators - a privilege that may be used to ensure their accounts jibe with those of their colleagues. In the McDonald killing, at least seven other officers were on the scene and five of them corroborated the allegedly mendacious account of Mr. Van Dyke, who said Mr. McDonald was menacing him with a knife. In fact, the video shows the victim heading away from the officers. The problems in Chicago are complex and decades in the making; cleaning up the police force will require investigators to use a wide aperture. While Mr. Emanuel has promised cooperation, there is likely to be a good deal of institutional resistance to the federal probe. But the payoff, in terms of building the case for real reform, could be enormous.

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TODAY'S EDITION

Biden In The News

Joe Biden Says U.S. Is Still Backing Ukraine (NYT)....1
Biden Announces More US Aid For Ukraine (AP)....3
Ukraine Still Has Work To Do On Reforms, U.S. VP Biden Says (REU)....4
Ongoing Violence Threatens Ukraine Cease-fire (USAT)....4
Biden Says 'Illegal' Russian Occupation Of Crimea Must End (BLOOMPOL)....5
Biden Gives Ukraine 'one More Chance' To Reform (POLITICEU)....7
Ukrainians See Conflict In Biden's Anticorruption Message (WSJ)....7
Ukraine's Decisive Moment (COFOREL)....7
Joe Biden Is Visiting Ukraine (VICE)....9
Biden Presses Russia On Ukraine Peace Deal, Return Of Crimea (AFP)....10
The Fight Against Graft Goes Online (INTLBIZ)....11
Mr. Biden Goes To Ukraine (RADEUR)....13
Biden Pledges US Support, Seeks Stronger Action On Rule Of Law (KYIVPOST)....14
Signs Of Economic Progress Noticeable In Ukraine (NTRFXUKR)....14
Pushkov Called The Union Biden To Poroshenko Barren (RIN)....15
Joe Biden Likely To Bring Harsh Criticism To Ukraine (DEUTSCW)....15
Commentary: What To Expect From Biden's Visit To Ukraine? (NEE)....16

New York Times and Washington Post Op-Eds

The Big Hole In Obama's Islamic State Strategy (WP)....18
Republicans Ignore The Lessons Of World War II (WP)....19
In Fighting Terrorism, Patience Is Not A Virtue (WP)....21
Obama's Brave Admission About Terrorism (WP)....22
Look At What You've Done, Wayne LaPierre (WP)....23
Millennials' Mysterious Support For Permissive Gun Laws (WP)....25
Obama Tries To Re-gift His Failed Terror Strategy (WP)....26
Mr. Obama Makes His Pitch On The Islamic State (WP)....27
Voters And Non-voters Should Count In Legislative Districts (WP)....28
A Perfect Storm Of Deceit In Chicago (WP)....29

Online Version

Visit http://www.bulletinintelligence.com/vp for searchable archive, interactive story index, and links to complete stories where appropriate.

BIDEN IN THE NEWS

Joe Biden Says U.S. Is Still Backing Ukraine

By Peter Baker

New York Times, December 8, 2015

KIEV, Ukraine — The United States will not sacrifice Ukraine in pursuit of Russian cooperation in Syria, Vice President Joseph R. **Biden** Jr. assured Ukrainian leaders on Monday, even as the Obama administration tries to manage complicated diplomacy with Moscow.

Opening a two-day visit, Mr. **Biden** told the Ukrainians that the United States still supported them in their conflict with pro-Russian separatists, and accused President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia of violating a cease-fire agreement reached in Minsk, Belarus. To reinforce American backing, Mr. **Biden** promised another $190 million in aid.

"The United States stands firmly with the people of Ukraine in the face of continued — and I emphasize continued — aggression from Russia and Russian-backed separatists," he said. "Minsk cannot succeed if Russia does not fulfill its commitment and President Putin fails to live up to the promises he has repeatedly made to my president, to you and to the international community."

Ukrainian officials have been nervous about what Russia's renewed interest in the Middle East would mean for their country. American officials interpret Russia's intervention in Syria as an attempt by Mr. Putin to distract world attention from the Ukrainian conflict, break out of the isolation the West has tried to impose on Moscow and weaken international resolve to maintain sanctions.

President Obama has insisted that the situations in Ukraine and Syria are separate, and he sent Mr. **Biden** to drive that point home. Even if Washington and Moscow cooperate to settle the Syrian civil war and battle the Islamic State, Mr. Obama has said, it would not stop the West from maintaining pressure on Russia over Ukraine. The European Union likewise appears poised to renew sanctions on Russia next week.

Michael A. McFaul, Mr. Obama's former ambassador to Russia, said the Ukrainians should be reassured. "Vice President **Biden**'s trip to Kiev sends a clear message that the United States is not willing to trade Ukraine for Russian cooperation on Syria," he said in an email. "That kind of linkage never works," Mr. McFaul said.

Mr. **Biden** also used his trip to press President Petro O. Poroshenko and Prime Minister Arseniy P. Yatsenyuk to put aside their differences and do more to battle corruption, arguing that the country has an opportunity to get its own house in order while Russia is focused on the Middle East.

Mr. Poroshenko was elected in 2014 after a pro-Moscow government was driven from office by mass protests that were met with violence. But he has yet to break the system of control wielded by powerful magnates over Ukrainian politics and economics.

While he has taken some steps, including the creation of a new police force and a move to install independent management of the state-owned energy company, critics said he has so far failed to make enough structural change. The president is fighting with Parliament over the prosecutor general, whom some lawmakers see as unwilling to tackle corruption.

Moreover, friction has grown between Mr. Poroshenko and Mr. Yatsenyuk, who hail from different parties and are struggling in a constitutional system that makes the division of power between their offices sometimes unclear. While American officials view both men as reformers, each has his own clan to protect and neither has been willing to abandon that as long as the other does not. Western officials believe the two may need to overhaul the cabinet to make a fresh start.

"Unfortunately the current cabinet is one of the most corrupt in the history of Ukraine," former Prime Minister Yulia V. Tymoshenko, an advocate of reform who has turned increasingly populist lately, said in an interview. "Preservation of the bad status quo is what's losing Ukraine as a viable state."

Without taking sides, Mr. **Biden** met separately with Mr. Poroshenko and Mr. Yatsenyuk to press them to work together. American officials said the vice president warned them that the Ukrainian public was growing frustrated at the pace of reform and warned them "don't squander this opportunity," as one official put it.

"Future generations of Ukrainians will look back at this moment," Mr. **Biden** later told reporters, with Mr. Yatsenyuk at his side. They will ask about their leaders, Mr. **Biden** said, " 'Did they deliver for us? Did they fundamentally change the nature of my country or did they not?' History will be a very, very harsh judge."

Mr. Yatsenyuk assured Mr. **Biden** that he got the message and cited various reforms he wanted to push through, including privatizing state enterprises and fighting corruption. "We understand our responsibilities, our obligations," he said.

Mr. **Biden** underlined his point by meeting with what his office called a "reformers' round table" of government officials, lawmakers and advocacy group leaders, and he will make some of the same points again on Tuesday when he addresses Parliament.

"Vice President **Biden**'s most important challenge in Ukraine is to keep the president and prime minister on a common, unequivocal path of reform that shows Ukraine is helping itself and merits the world's support," said Carlos Pascual, a former American ambassador to Ukraine. "With Russia recapturing a leadership role in the Middle East, Ukraine cannot give the world an excuse to forget Ukraine."

Oksana Syroyid, the deputy speaker of Parliament, said Mr. Poroshenko should listen to the vice president's point. "We do hope that the message will be heard and that the prosecutor general will step down from his position and allow us to further move the reform of the prosecutor general," she said.

During his travels around Kiev on Monday, Mr. **Biden** visited a monument to people who were killed during the pro-Western demonstrations in Maidan Square that led to the ouster of President Viktor F. Yanukovych. Mr. **Biden** tried to visit the monument last year, but had to cancel at the last minute when an unruly group of protesters unnerved his security detail.

Somber-faced and coatless on a brisk day, Mr. **Biden** viewed a display of about 100 photographs of slain protesters, along with candles, bouquets of flowers and banners with tributes to the victims.

"Imagine what it was like," Geoffrey R. Pyatt, the American ambassador, could be heard telling Mr. **Biden**. He pointed to surrounding buildings. "Snipers up on the buildings there."

Mr. **Biden** left a commemorative vice-presidential coin at the base of an elaborately carved wooden cross at the monument.

Biden Announces More US Aid For Ukraine

Associated Press, December 8, 2015

KIEV, Ukraine (AP) — U.S. Vice President Joe **Biden** assured Ukraine Monday of continuing U.S. support and announced the release of an additional $190 million in U.S. aid to help support reforms.

Biden, speaking Monday on a trip to the Ukrainian capital, also emphasized the need for Russia to fully meet its obligations under February's Minsk agreement that was intended to end the fighting in eastern Ukraine.

"The United States stands firmly with the people of Ukraine in the face of continued — I emphasize, continued — aggression from Russia and Russian-backed separatists," **Biden** said after his talks with Ukraine's President Petro Poroshenko.

Ukraine and the West have accused Russia of backing the rebels in eastern Ukraine with troops and weapons, accusations Moscow has denied.

Fighting between Ukrainian forces and Russia-backed separatists has abated significantly since early September, after killing some 8,000 people since April 2014, but tensions remain high because of unresolved questions about the final political status of the rebel regions in the east.

"Moscow has to fully implement the Minsk agreement and work constructively with Ukraine to create the conditions for free, fair and safe local elections to occur in Donbass," **Biden** said, referring to the collective name for the two rebel regions.

Biden also underlined that the U.S. will never accept Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula. "Moscow eventually has to end its occupation of Ukraine's sovereign territory," he said.

After a separate meeting with Ukraine's Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, **Biden** pledged that Washington will talk to its allies to make sure that Russia pays an increased price if it fails to meet its obligations under the Minsk agreement, but he emphasized that Ukraine has to fulfill its end of the deal.

"The Russians haven't kept their part of their bargain, but you can't, and the prime minister knows this, you can't fail to keep your part, otherwise there are people in Europe (who) will say: 'well, they're both the same,'" he said.

Biden also stressed the need for Ukraine to ramp up the fight against corruption and undertake critical reforms.

"It's absolutely critical for Ukraine in order to be stable and prosperous and part of a secure Europe to definitely, thoroughly, completely root out the cancer of corruption," he said.

Biden added that the additional roughly $190 million in U.S. assistance will help fight corruption in Ukraine's law-enforcement and reform the justice sector, helping attract more investment by streamlining regulations and privatizing state-owned enterprises in a transparent way.

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Ukraine Still Has Work To Do On Reforms, U.S. VP Biden Says

By Alessandra Prentice

Reuters, December 8, 2015

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Ongoing Violence Threatens Ukraine Cease-fire

By Oren Dorell

USA Today, December 7, 2015

Fighting between Ukraine's military and separatist forces in the east has escalated with scant notice this fall as world attention is focused on increased terrorism and a refugee crisis caused by the conflicts in Syria and Iraq.

Fighting that dropped off dramatically in September after Ukraine and Russian-backed separatists agreed to a new cease-fire plan picked up again in November, causing multiple deaths and injuries to Ukrainian troops, according to Ukrainian military spokesman Col. Andriy Lysenko.

Vice President **Biden**, who announced a $190 million aid package for Ukraine during a visit to the capital, Kiev, on Monday, said Russia holds the key to peace. "The United States continues to stand with the people of Ukraine in the face of continued ...aggression from Russia and Russian-backed separatists," **Biden** said.

Together with a failure by Russia-backed separatists to implement measures of the cease-fire agreement reached in the Belarussian capital, Minsk, the ongoing fighting means it is unlikely the two sides will meet a self-imposed year-end deadline to end the conflict, NATO Supreme Allied Commander Philip Breedlove said last week.

NATO's General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg warned of renewed war after a meeting about Ukraine with foreign ministers of the U.S.-led alliance last week. "Russian-backed separatists have not yet withdrawn their troops and equipment. Illegal groups in Eastern Ukraine have not been disarmed. And Ukraine has not been able to re-establish control over its border," Stoltenberg said.

The fighting in Ukraine will be a factor when the European Union decides in January whether to continue economic sanctions against Russia for its role in the conflict, which has resulted in 8,000 deaths since it began in April 2014, according to the United Nations.

The fighting subsided in September after ramping up during the summer. The lull coincided with Russia's preparations for its air campaign in Syria, and as Russia sought overflight rights from eastern European nations for Russian aircraft transporting personnel and supplies to Syria.

The low point in fighting came during October, when Russia lobbied for international acceptance of Russia's air campaign in Syria.

When fighting picked up in mid-November, it was "too large and coordinated to be random," said Phillip Karber, president of the Potomac Foundation, a military consultancy that has advised eastern European countries preparing to join NATO.

Karber, who has traveled more than a dozen times to assess Ukrainian military performance since 2014, attributes the cease-fire violations to shooting that began on the separatist side. The repeated violations of the peace-keeping agreement has contributed to "Ukrainian jitters and declining faith in Western negotiated cease-fires," he said.

Despite evidence from journalists, NATO and U.S. leaders of Russian military involvement in the Ukrainian conflict, Moscow denies it has given any military backing to the separatists.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which has a monitoring mission in Ukraine staffed by European, Ukrainian and Russian personnel, says it's impossible to verify who's at fault.

Since the beginning of November, OSCE monitors registered an increase in fighting, mostly around what's left of the airport in Donetsk, a separatist stronghold, Alexander Hug, the principal deputy chief monitor of the OSCE's Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine, told USA TODAY.

Most violations involved exchanges of small arms fire, and some have escalated to artillery and multiple rocket launchers, Hug said.

"It's an exchange of fire," he said. "It's difficult, if not impossible, to find in which direction (it begins). The fact remains both sides do not respect the cease-fire all the time and everywhere."

The OSCE and the Ukrainian government have yet to gain full access to 250 miles of the Ukraine-Russia border that is not controlled by the Government, he said.

In places, where fighting has been ongoing for many months, the OSCE has seen civilians who lack access to running water, reconstruction material for shelter, heat, electricity or medicine, Hug said. Civilians, relief agencies and international monitors have all been hampered by restricted freedom of movement in areas not controlled by the Ukrainian government, he added.

John Herbst, a former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine who's now at the Atlantic Council, a think tank in Washington, said the level of violence in Ukraine is up to Russia, while Russia is preoccupied with Syria.

"Moscow has the ability to get these guys largely under control," Herbst said. "There's no question they are concerned with Syria and not with Ukraine at the moment."

Biden Says 'Illegal' Russian Occupation Of Crimea Must End

By Margaret Talev

Bloomberg Politics, December 7, 2015

Vice President Joe **Biden** called Russia's annexation of Crimea "illegal" in a demonstration of solidarity with Ukraine's government that signaled the U.S. won't bargain away its support for the country to win Russian cooperation in the fight against Islamic State in Syria.

"The United States stands firmly with the people of Ukraine in the face of continued – and I emphasize continued – aggression from Russia and Russian-backed separatists," **Biden** said in Kiev on Monday, following a meeting with Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko.

Biden announced $190 million in new aid for Ukraine contingent on the government continuing to make progress rooting out corruption. That brings direct U.S. assistance to nearly $760 million since the formation of a new government in 2014, including more than $260 million for security. The latest funds is for helping law enforcement fight corruption, reforming the justice sector, and streamlining regulations and privatization of state-owned enterprises, **Biden** said.

Biden's two-day visit to Ukraine is intended to deliver reassurance that the U.S. won't budge in its commitment to Ukraine at a time when attention has shifted to Syria and fighting the Islamic State. That includes keeping in place sanctions on Russia to pressure President Vladimir Putin's government to fully implement the Minsk agreements that outline a path to end nearly two years of conflict.Minsk Accords

The separatists, Ukraine and Russia must continue to respect a cease-fire signed earlier this year in Minsk, Belarus, **Biden** said. "Both sides need to hold up that bargain," he said, echoing the position of U.S. allies in Europe.

"The fact that we are not talking as much every single day about Crimea does not mean in any way we have forgotten" what happened, **Biden** said, calling Russia's move to annex Crimea in 2014 an "illegal invasion" that "will not be accepted" by the U.S. or international community. "We will not accept it under any circumstance, and Moscow eventually has to end its occupation of Ukraine's sovereign territory" including Crimea.

Tensions rose recently after power lines to Crimea were cut by Ukrainian saboteurs. Russia and the U.S. remain at loggerheads over both Ukraine and Syria, where a Russian military intervention has complicated that country's civil war.Syria Conflict

Putin says his military is attacking Islamic State in Syria. The U.S. says Putin's forces have targeted relatively few Islamic State-held areas, and instead is attempting to reinforce Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, a close ally, by bombing rebels backed by the U.S. and Persian Gulf states.

Poroshenko, through a translator, told reporters that he pledged to **Biden** that Ukraine is ready to provide "maximum support" to U.S.-led coalition forces in Syria, though he did not say what such support might entail.

"Ukraine is no stranger to terrorist threats," he said. "We cannot be frightened by the terrorist threat."

As Russia has turned its attention to Syria, Ukraine sees signs for hope and concern. While clashes between separatists and Ukrainian forces have eased since September, eastern Ukraine's status remains unsettled. Insurgent tanks were spotted in Horlivka northeast of Donetsk, and rebels continued provocations with mortars, rifles, machine guns and grenade launchers, officials said Sunday.

Ukraine is seeking assurances from the U.S. and European Union that it will not become a bargaining chip in efforts to coordinate with Russia on attacking Islamic State targets.

Biden earlier Monday held a closed-door roundtable discussion on political and government reforms with about a dozen Ukrainian officials and members of civil society. He also visited the Heavenly Hundred memorial, an unofficial memorial with a wooden cross and framed photos of those killed in the Maidan protests of February 2014.

"We are starting to see real signs of economic progress" in Ukraine, **Biden** said, including "stabilized" currency.

Biden is to meet with Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk later Monday. He will address Ukraine's parliament on Tuesday.

Biden Gives Ukraine 'one More Chance' To Reform

By Paul Dallison

Politico Europe, December 7, 2015

The United States pledged an extra $190 million in aid to Ukraine Monday, but Vice President Joe **Biden** warned that Kiev has just "one more chance" to root out corruption or lose the funding.

Biden held talks with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, pledging support for Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression and urging the country's leaders to continue on the path to reform.

"The Ukrainian people cannot once again have their hopes dashed based on corruption," **Biden** said.

"One more chance. It's absolutely critical for Ukraine in order to be stable and prosperous and part of a secure Europe to definitely, thoroughly, completely root out the cancer of corruption. The people need to see that the ways of the past are permanently gone, they no longer exist. That means hard decisions. That means ramping up the pace of reforms, avoidance of past practices, advancing good governance, increasing transparency across the board at every level of the government and strengthening the rule of law. It means everybody playing by the same rules, from the folks at the bottom to the folks at the very top."

The $190 million in funding brings the total American assistance in recent years to $760 million.

Biden made it clear that the U.S. "stands firmly with the people of Ukraine in the face of continued – and I emphasize continued – aggression from Russia and Russian-backed separatists."

"We continue to believe that the best way to end the conflict in Donbas is through a diplomatic framework that was laid out in the Minsk agreement. But both sides need to hold up that bargain. Minsk cannot succeed if Russia does not fulfill its commitment and President Putin fails to live up to the promises he has repeatedly made to my president, to you and to the international community."

He added: "The fact that we are not talking as much every single day about Crimea does not mean in any way we have forgotten that the illegal invasion — and it's an invasion — by Russia of Crimea will not be accepted by us or the international community.

Poroshenko said that there had been a reduction in the violence in the east of the country, but "unfortunately the war is still raging." He added that the government has made progress in reforms, including the selection of an anti-corruption prosecutor.

Ukrainians See Conflict In Biden's Anticorruption Message

Vice president's son serves on board of closely held Ukrainian oil firm

By Paul Sonne And Laura Mills

Wall Street Journal, December 8, 2015

Full-text stories from the Wall Street Journal are available to Journal subscribers by clicking the link.

Ukraine's Decisive Moment

By Robert Kahn

Council On Foreign Relations, December 7, 2015

Budget debates are often dry affairs, but not so in Kiev. By the end of this month, the Ukrainian parliament (Verkhovna Rada) must decide on a budget that will have profound effects on the future course of the government. The Ministry of Finance has proposed a budget that sets most tax rates at 20 percent, while closing loopholes and holding the deficit to an estimated 3.7 percent of GDP. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has endorsed the plan, and the passage of the bill, or something close

to it, is essential to completing the IMF review and keeping the government's adjustment program on track.

An alternative plan, which is supported by the opposition and, disappointingly, by elements of President Poroshenko's own party, involves a massive tax cut that would reduce rates to a flat rate of 10 percent, causing the deficit to soar to over 10 percent of GDP. A continued IMF role would be ruled out. Following a deep recession from which Ukraine is just starting to recover, populist fiscal policy promising quick fixes understandably is attractive, and opponents of the government may well believe that the government can do it alone without foreign financing (and, importantly, without the rule of law reforms that form the core of the government's IMF-backed program). But it would be a tremendous mistake.

It's important to remember how much has been achieved by this government on the economic front. Against the backdrop of war and a historic political transition, the economic team has carried forward a difficult and ambitious adjustment program. After a fall of GDP of around 20 percent, the economy has stabilized, fiscal deficits have been slashed to levels consistent with available domestic and external financing, and a deep restructuring of the banking sector has been launched. Perhaps more importantly, significant structural reforms have been enacted including hikes in energy prices and a comprehensive rewriting of the legal framework underpinning the economy.

Recently, a broad debt restructuring was completed that provides over $15 billion in cash flow relief over the next three years, as well as a modest reduction in principal. Russia refused to participate and restructure a $3 billion bond due in December, but later this week the IMF Board will meet and agree to a policy change that will allow Ukraine's IMF program to proceed even if the bond is not paid.

Unfortunately, the program has faltered in some important aspects. The move against corruption has stalled in recent months, raising serious concerns among Ukraine's allies whether vested interests were reasserting themselves. Rule of law reforms are central to the IMF program and critical to any effort to break from the past decades of corruption and poor economic performance. But the implementation of these reforms (including paying adequate salaries) is costly. Further, without a sound macroeconomic framework, it will be increasingly hard to sustain popular support for this reform effort. A sound budget is a gateway test for any serious reform effort.

Vice President **Biden** is in Kiev and will speak to the Rada tomorrow. He is expected to deliver a tough measure on the need for Ukraine to jumpstart the reform process, particularly the anti-corruption agenda, and will also promise additional U.S. assistance. This message, which was foreshadowed and endorsed by my colleague Stephen Sestanovich, includes a strong case for an attack on corruption but there also needs to be a stepping up of financial support for the government to allow for a budget that can support the reform effort and enhance security.

A grand bargain is urgently needed. The Ukraine government needs to jumpstart the implementation of rule of law, judiciary and civil service reforms and take on vested interests. President Poroshenko must come out and fully endorse the Ministry of Finance proposal (and his finance minister Natalie Jaresko), and then whip the votes needed to get it passed. And Western governments must provide more bilateral assistance so that Ukrainians can have confidence that the program can succeed and restore growth. Ukraine should not go back.

Joe Biden Is Visiting Ukraine

By Simon Ostrovsky

Vice, December 8, 2015

It's a diplomat's job to stay all smiles and keep the business of international relations chugging along, no matter how bad things look. But sometimes, even diplomats lose their cool.

This week, US Vice President Joe **Biden** is visiting Kiev to tell Ukrainians they still have Washington's support in their fight against Russia and Russia-backed separatists in the country's east. But his message may be overshadowed by the US ambassador to Kiev, who hasn't been acting very diplomatically lately.

At the end of September, Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt got up in front of a group of businessmen and investors at a conference in the city of Odessa and told them that Ukrainian prosecutors were protecting the corrupt owner of an energy company that employs **Biden**'s son, Hunter, instead of prosecuting him.

"We have learned that there have been times when the Prosecutor General's Office not only did not support investigations into corruption, but rather undermined prosecutors working on legitimate corruption cases," Pyatt said in Ukraine's main port city.

Related: The Priest, the Pianist, a Cat, and a DIY Sauna: One Week in Ukraine's Forgotten War

He then pointed specifically to a case involving former Ukrainian Ecology Minister Mykola Zlochevsky, owner of the Burisma Holdings energy firm, which hired Hunter **Biden** to its board of directors shortly after the Euromaidan revolution overthrew Zlochevsky's former boss Viktor Yanukovych.

Burisma likely hired **Biden**'s son in the hopes that some of the family prestige would rub off on the company in the uncertain times that followed the revolution, Daria Kaleniuk, director of Ukraine's Anti-Corruption Action Center, told VICE News.

"They want there to be less suspicion that they're involved in corrupt under-the-table dealings and are instead seen as operating in line with international standards," Kaleniuk said, adding that Burisma received gas production licenses in questionable circumstances under the former regime.

Watch the VICE News dispatch The War May Be Over: Russian Roulette:

Burisma insists it hired the vice president's son to its board because he is an experienced lawyer. "This is totally based on merit," the company's chairman, Alan Apter said when the younger **Biden** was hired.

According to the US ambassador, Hunter **Biden**'s boss Zlochevsky stole $23 million from the Ukrainian people. But when a British court seized the money and asked Ukrainian prosecutors to send documents to confirm the funds were illicit, they stalled, forcing the court to release the assets back to the former ecology minister.

Related: Did the Islamic State Go Shopping For Weapons in Ukraine?

The elder **Biden** arrives in Ukraine at a time when there is no bigger issue than corruption. With the war in the east stabilized for the time being, the media have nominated graft as the country's number one enemy — not Russia.

The vice president also lands after months of acrimony between reformers and Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko over the prosecutor general, who Poroshenko has refused to dismiss despite numerous allegations about abuse of authority.

But the White House wants the focus of **Biden**'s visit to be Ukraine's close alliance with the US. One senior administration official, who asked not to be named, said a major goal was to remind people that Ukraine was not forgotten despite the fact that attention has shifted toward Russia's involvement in Syria.'That's going to be a major theme of the trip — that nothing that's going on in the Middle East has changed one iota of our commitment to the Ukrainian people.'

"That's going to be a major theme of the trip — that nothing that's going on in the Middle East has changed one iota of our commitment to the Ukrainian people and to their security," the official said in a briefing for journalists.

The official also acknowledged that the administration has had to fall into line with the ambassador's now public views.

"The Office of the Prosecutor General itself is in desperate need of reform," the official said. "And so [**Biden**] has made this very clear to President Poroshenko in previous conversations… So I think we are largely in line with Ambassador Pyatt's sense that much more needs to be done."

Related: Russia Is Freaking Out Its Northern Neighbors

But **Biden**'s meeting with Poroshenko may be a bit awkward, given that the US backs Ukraine on the presumption that it wants to have a Western-style democratic system with checks and balances — not a Russian-style autocracy where anyone who is friends with top officials gets a free pass.

Ukrainian reformers will be watching closely to hear what **Biden** tells the president.

"We have been very happy with the criticism the embassy has been bringing against the prosecutor's office," said Kaleniuk. "It has been very direct. So if **Biden** continues in the same vein and highlights the activities of the prosecutor's office in defending people associated with Burisma, then it will be clear that he is doing his job fairly and is not beholden to narrow family interests."

Follow Simon Ostrovsky on Twitter: @SimonOstrovsky

Biden Presses Russia On Ukraine Peace Deal, Return Of Crimea

By Olga Shylenko And Dmytro Gorshkov

AFP, December 8, 2015

Kiev (AFP) – US Vice President Joe **Biden** said Monday that Washington remained determined to see Russia adhere to a shaky Ukrainian peace agreement and hand back Crimea to Kiev.

Biden's visit is his fourth to Kiev since Russia annexed Ukraine's Black Sea peninsula in March 2014 and then watched with approval as pro-Kremlin fighters carved out their own region in the eastern industrial heart of the ex-Soviet state.

The war-scarred nation now fears slipping off the global radar due to recent international efforts to enlist Moscow in a joint fight against the Islamic State (IS) group in Syria and Iraq.

But **Biden** brought a message of reassurance to Kiev.

"The US stands firmly with the people of Ukraine in the face of continued – I emphasise continued – aggression from Russia and Russian-backed separatists," he told Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko.

Washington's EU allies support Ukraine's view of Russia orchestrating and backing the separatist revolt in reprisal for the February 2014 ouster of a Moscow-backed president – an assertion the Kremlin denies.

Both Washington and Brussels have slapped stiff economic sanctions on Russian President Vladimir Putin's inner circle and have helped train and equip Ukraine's underfunded army with defensive equipment such as advanced radar.

But the situation changed when Russia began launching ferocious air strikes against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's foes on September 30.

Washington accused Putin of trying to prop up his remaining Middle East ally by targeting Syria's Western-backed rebels instead of extremist groups.

– 'Hold Russia accountable' –

Yet the Islamic State's claim of downing a Russian airliner carrying 224 people over Egypt on October 31 appears to have prompted Moscow to focus more on bombing IS's oil infrastructure and other jihadist targets.

The November 13 Paris attacks the IS also claimed saw France make a push to enlist Russia in a "grand coalition" against the jihadist group alongside the United States and some European and Arab states.

Biden said the latest developments in the Middle East in no way appeased Washington's anger with Putin or slackened its support for Poroshenko's pro-Western team.

"The invasion by Russia of Crimea will not be accepted by us or by the international community. This attempted annexation is contrary to international law, is wrong, and will not be accepted in any circumstance," he said.

Biden also hinted that Russia may face additional US sanctions if its peace commitments were not met.

Washington was in contact with "our fellow leaders around the world... to make sure the international community stands and holds Russia accountable for the actions against Ukraine," **Biden** said after meeting with Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk.

"If they do not meet their obligations, (one must) increase the price Russia has to pay for its illegal actions internationally."

– The 'cancer' of corruption –

Biden also spoke out on the issue of graft in a country where morale is sagging due to Poroshenko's seeming inability to tackle the corruption that has plagued Ukraine for much most of its recent years.

Poroshenko's prosecutor general has been accused of blocking investigations and hiring workers who have since been detained with huge stashes of gold and cash in their flats.

"It's absolutely critical for Ukraine... to root out the cancer of corruption," the US vice president said.

"There's a growing degree of popular frustration about the slow pace of the reforms and the efforts to root out corruption," **Biden** warned.

Poroshenko said he agreed that the 19-month war in which more than 8,000 have died "cannot be used as an excuse for failing to conduct reforms."

The Fight Against Graft Goes Online

By Lydia Tomkiw

International Business Times, December 8, 2015

Natalia Shyrba had never even been to the southwestern Ukrainian city of Odessa when she decided to move there in August to take an unpaid job fighting one of the country's biggest problems: corruption. The 26-year-old, who was born in Ukraine, left behind a comfortable life in Philadelphia to help build an online government platform where people can ask questions and submit complaints about day-to-day issues like damaged roads. The service is supposed to reduce face-to-face government interactions and the potential for corrupt officials to extract bribes from desperate citizens, a pervasive problem in the former Soviet republic.

"Here in Ukraine, the biggest issue is that the government is a roadblock to getting things done whereas the government should really be a service for the citizens," Shyrba said. "If you eliminate the human factor, you can eliminate corruption. You can't bribe a computer."

Two years after Ukraine's Euromaidan revolution swept the streets of Kiev with cries to fight corruption and turn the nation westward toward the European Union, a new generation of government activists is working to fight graft by going online. A network of unpaid volunteers across the country is trying to disrupt a deeply entrenched culture of theft by digitizing government services and documents in

an effort to create transparency and hold politicians accountable. They face significant challenges, with only 7 percent of Ukrainians recently saying the longtime fight against corruption has shown any results.

Ukraine's push against graft comes after the Euromaidan revolution that began in November 2013 when President Viktor Yanukovych refused to sign an association agreement with the EU. His eventual ouster set off a ripple of events, with Russia annexing Crimea in March 2014 and war breaking out in the eastern Donbass region that has left 8,000 dead. Yanukovych's massive estate replete with a zoo and several mansions was turned into a museum highlighting the country's corruption problem after he fled for Russia in February 2014. Documents left behind at the estate showed how public money was spent to enrich Yanukovych, his family and close associates.

But Ukraine's problems go further than corrupt politicians driving expensive cars and building mansions. Average citizens report paying bribes to low-ranking government workers to either receive basic services or ensure preferential treatment. For example, Ukrainians sometimes must pay health workers extra to receive care and they can guarantee their children will receive higher grades in school by opening their wallets. The endemic corruption has led Transparency International, a global anti-corruption nonprofit, to name Ukraine one of the world's most corrupt nations along with Uganda and the Comoros.

The Department of Information Technologies of the Odessa region meets for a planning meeting in late November to discuss an open budget project, e-petitions and e-medical projects.

Department of Information Technologies of the Odessa region

A big part of putting information online is about gaining trust, Shyrba says, and that will require making Ukrainians comfortable with using online resources and reassuring them it's not a gimmick – someone will actually answer their queries. The team is working on numerous projects such as getting administrative services like passport requests online, as well as some not so "glamorous" projects including teaching older civil servants how to use email and introducing online project management tools.

"There is political pushback," said Shyrba, who works with a 15-person team. "We are trying to break a really old and corrupt system."

Hopes were high that with the May 2014 election of Ukraine's current president, Petro Poroshenko, reforms and the fight against theft would begin in earnest, but change has been slow. During a visit to Kiev to discuss the ongoing war, U.S. Vice President Joe **Biden** urged Ukrainians Monday to "root out the cancer of corruption."

"It's the issue of the country's survival," said Daria Kaleniuk, 28, executive director of the Anti-Corruption Action Center, a Ukrainian civil society organization based in Kiev with 15 staff members mainly in their 20s. "If we don't succeed in the this war [against corruption], we risk losing the whole country."

Constructive 'Hackers'

When the prime minister of Ukraine asked Denis Gursky, 30, to join him for a meeting this spring he never expected to walk out of the government building as the leader's open data adviser. The IT professional had been working with other civil society organizations to create an open data law for Ukraine that was passed in April and requires government agencies to publish their data online in machine-readable form and also on a national open data portal. Gursky now envisions a world where any Ukrainian can sit down at their kitchen table and look at online registries to see how a country long plagued by corruption is spending its money.

Ukraine has a growing IT sector and a large talent pool that often makes news for all the wrong reasons with headlines such as "U.S. Identifies Insider Trading Ring With Ukraine Hackers." But as the

government takes steps to implement the open data law by its March 2016 deadline, Gursky said he hopes more of the country's IT professionals will be drawn to working with public officials on projects citizens need and want.

"We have to provide real data to people about finances, budgeting and everything that is possible," Gursky said. He estimates the cost of maintaining the national open data portal will be around $1 million a year.

Some financial information has already been put online, including registries of companies and property the government owns. Journalist Andrii Bashtovyi, 25, co-founder of Hromadske TV, a journalism outlet born during Ukraine's revolution, says his media organization has been able to publish stories about money stolen from the country's war effort because of the open registries.

There are other signs that Ukraine's anti-graft campaign has made strides. Last month, 30-year-old Nazar Kholodnytsky was appointed Ukraine's top anti-corruption prosecutor.

"The job of the [anti-corruption] bureau is to uncover large-scale corruption," said Alexander Motyl, a professor of political science at Rutgers University in Newark, New Jersey, who specializes in Ukraine. "They are supposed to go after the big fry ... there is a lot of hope they will be able to do it."

But open data and e-government initiatives will get Ukraine only so far, experts say. Activists have also called on Ukrainian lawmakers to privatize some of the over 1,800 state corporations that continue to allow oligarchs and politicians to siphon off state funds. Experts estimate that well over 1,000 state corporations could be sold off or eliminated to reduce theft in key sectors including energy and infrastructure.

E-government reforms "won't address billion-dollar kickbacks in the energy sector," Motyl said. "It's relatively small-scale, but on the other hand these are the things that concern most people."

Ukraine is also grappling with crucial financial problems that could slow down efforts to invest in record keeping and online services. The International Monetary Fund has vowed to bail out Ukraine with a multibillion-dollar package and the World Bank has predicted a 12 percent decline in gross domestic product this year.

But advocates of putting more government records online say national lawmakers must prioritize transparency to nurture citizens' faith in Ukraine's future.

"We are moving in slow steps," said Bashtovyi, the investigative journalist. "But we should constantly see progress and constantly see people going to prison if they are stealing money."

Mr. Biden Goes To Ukraine

By Brian Whitmore

Radio Free Europe, December 8, 2015

Washington sends a loud signal that Ukraine remains a priority as U.S. Vice President Joe **Biden** arrived in Kyiv for a two-day visit this week.

The visit – in which **Biden** will deliver a highly anticipated speech to the Ukrainian parliament – comes at a particularly sensitive time.

Kyiv is clearly worried that the Syria conflict and the potential for Western cooperation with Russia will weaken resolve to continue supporting Ukraine.

On this week's Power Vertical Briefing, I discuss what we can expect from **Biden**'s visit with RFE/RL Senior Editor Steve Gutterman.

Enjoy...

Biden Pledges US Support, Seeks Stronger Action On Rule Of Law

By Johannes Wamberg Andersen

Kyiv Post (Ukraine), December 8, 2015

U.S. Vice President Joseph **Biden**'s message to Ukraine remains consistent: The United States will continue to support, but Ukraine's leaders need to do more to fight corruption and create a strong judicial system.

Biden is scheduled speak before the Ukrainian parliament at 11 a.m. on Dec. 8.

After meeting **Biden** upon arrival at Kyiv Boryspil International Airport late on Dec. 6, Kyiv Mayor Vitali Klitschko said that **Biden** stressed that faster reforms were essential to national development, "especially of the justice system."

Later, during a joint public statement with President Petro Poroshenko, **Biden** said he saw signs of progress but that more needs to be done with overhauling the judicial system, which is widely distrusted among Ukrainians as corrupt, politically subservient and ineffective.

He pledged that the U.S. "would stand by your side as you strengthen the rule of law … from top to bottom," pointing to the new patrol police force as something tangible.

Biden also said that "there is no democracy in the world without strong civil society." He met with civil society leaders, members of parliament and some government officials earlier in the day. Some participants described the talks as an intensive discussion over Ukraine's continuing corruption in high places.

Poroshenko, in turn, thanked **Biden** for U.S. support including training assistance to the new police force.

Timothy Ash, an analyst for Nomura International, said "the US is concerned at backsliding from the Poroshenko administration – particularly over the issue of the rule of law."

According to an anonymous Washington top official cited by Western news services, **Biden** was expected to ask Poroshenko to have Prosecutor General Viktor Shokin replaced. Seen as a key obstacle to the pursuit of justice, the powerful Shokin is criticized for stalling high-level cases against former officials.

Poroshenko defended his record, saying that the recent establishment of new anti-corruption bodies showed that the nation is on the right track.

Pledging $190 million in fresh financial U.S. aid to Ukraine, **Biden** hammered the anti-graft message home, saying the U.S. money is earmarked for the fight against corruption, not for defense or other needs. The U.S. has provided a total of $660 million plus $2 billion in loan guarantees since last year, with a third $1 billion possible.

Political analyst Vyacheslav Potapenko said that a number of large state-owned enterprises depended on corrupt deals for their survival.

Kyiv Post staff writer Johannes Wamberg Andersen can be reached at johannes.wa@gmail.com

Signs Of Economic Progress Noticeable In Ukraine

Interfax (UKR), December 8, 2015

U.S. Vice President Joseph **Biden** has said that economic progress is noticeable in Ukraine.

"We with the president discussed the progress that has occurred in Ukraine during this time... We started to notice the signs of economic progress. GDP started rising, industrial production began to grow, and exports of agricultural products have increased. The Ukrainian currency has stabilized," he said at a joint briefing with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko in Kyiv.

Pushkov Called The Union Biden To Poroshenko Barren

Russian Information Network, December 8, 2015

Head of the state Duma on international Affairs Alexei Pushkov explained the message of the Vice-President of the United States Joseph **Biden** about the fact that he more talks with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, than with his own wife.

"the joke **Biden** that he talks with Poroshenko more often than with his wife, is the truth. But it is the result of painfully disappointing. Barren Union ", ? wrote Pushkov in Twitter.

before the first day of the week Vice President Joe **Biden** said that more talks with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, than with his own wife. Before that, **Biden** said that North America provide Ukraine with 190 million dollars in financial aid to conduct reforms. On Sunday, the White house said that **Biden** left on a visit to Ukraine. In November, the White house announced the visit of Joe **Biden** to Ukraine on 7 December. This will be the fifth trip of the Vice-President to Ukraine. On 6 November, Joe **Biden** promised that North America will provide for the battle with illegal activities of officials and the implementation of tax reform in Ukraine the third tranche of $ 1 billion. At the end of October the Head of the U.S. Department of Commerce penny Pritzker stated that the U.S. President Barack Obama is going to take steps to provide the 3rd tranche of macroeconomic aid to Ukraine for reforms in the country in the coming months.

Joe Biden Likely To Bring Harsh Criticism To Ukraine

By Frank Hoffman

Deutsche Welle (DEU), December 8, 2015

It took over a year and a half for Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko to even begin implementing his most important campaign promise: On December 1, a new head of the anti-corruption prosecution agency was finally appointed, and now the office is ready to start working. US officials think this took far too long, and they are losing patience with Ukraine's government, especially since Prosecutor General Viktor Shokin, a Poroshenko confidant, has delayed filling the anti-corruption position. In September of this year, Geoffrey Pyatt, the US ambassador to Kyiv, took an unusual step. He tweeted – albeit in a convoluted, diplomatic manner – his demand for Shokin's dismissal.

But Poroshenko is holding on to Shokin, a man who has been accused of leading an extremely corrupt state apparatus. After Euromaidan, the judiciary holds great emotional significance for Ukrainians. Almost 100 people were killed in the revolt two years ago.

"The entire Prosecutor General's Office must urgently be reformed," a high-ranking US official demanded ahead of Joe **Biden**'s visit to Kyiv, where the US vice president is scheduled to start holding meetings on Monday. Ukraine has a "long history of corruption," the official said, requesting anonymity to speak candidly. **Biden**'s schedule for the visit reflects how low respect for Ukraine's leadership has sunk in the United States: The vice president will speak with representatives of pro-EU civil society groups before holding talks with politicians.

Biden will put pressure on the Ukrainian government, the US official said, and "the recently adopted anti-corruption reforms will be implemented." The vice president will probably urge Ukraine's government to force Shokin to resign. Diplomats in Kyiv are becoming increasingly distraught with regard to the placatory attitude of Ukrainian leaders.

It seems questionable that the required judicial reform will be swiftly implemented. Poroshenko's people are being advised by the European Council in Strasbourg – an institution that is not known for quick reforms. Behind the scenes, a Japanese diplomat insisted that the entire Ukrainian judiciary be

thrown out. In the past, judges often acted as trustees, representing the interests of oligarchs. Japanese officials suggest that the Ukrainian government dismiss all its jurists and then start a "recruitment campaign" to put "judges with integrity" in office. This has already worked for Ukraine's new traffic police, for which Japan has donated about 1,300 cars. Since summer, the hybrid vehicles have zipped around Kyiv, blue lights flashing to give a sense of security. Above all, these actions are meant to say, "We are doing something." Now it turns out that the police patrols just showcase a proclaimed change in politics, but, behind the display, many moldy structures prevail.

This also applies to political structures. It is striking how intricately entangled they are with Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk's milieu. That is why Yatsenuk confidant Mykola Martynenko remains chairman of the energy committee in Ukraine's unicameral parliament, or Rada, although Switzerland has been directing investigations into him for at least half a year. Martynenko is suspected of transferring bribes worth millions to a Swiss account. It is doubtful that the Ukrainian prosecutor general has provided the Swiss with satisfactory support.

Conflict with Russia as an excuse?

The accused just shrug the allegations off. In other European countries, officials would break out in a cold sweat just thinking about the consequences, but German bank managers in Kyiv say Ukrainians cynically sneer at the idea of "honorable gentlemen." Martynenko himself speaks of a Russian conspiracy against him. Last Monday he stated that he would resign from parliament, but his departure has not been voted on yet.

All in all, many Ukrainian leaders use the conflict with Russia as an excuse for their failure to act. Instead of building democratic structures, the country seems to be stabilizing the old system of oligarchy, cronyism and corruption. Russian President Vladimir Putin has thus achieved his goal of halting Ukraine's establishing stronger bonds with the United States and EU. The excesses of the judiciary are reminiscent of the situation in Russia, where prosecutors are involved in shady dealings and act arbitrarily.

Ukrainian authorities are also known for violations of freedom of speech, another similarity the country has with Russia. The critical blogger Ruslan Kozaba has been in custody since February. His crime: He spoke out against the civil war in eastern Ukraine.

Apparently, the blogger was reported to authorities by a volunteer who works for the Security Service of Ukraine. The 31,000-employee SBU appears to serve as the third element in the justice system and is also traditionally a tool of oligarchic interests. But US officials say the days of standing by and watching are over: The grace period has apparently come to an end.

Commentary: What To Expect From Biden's Visit To Ukraine?

By Maksym Beznosiuk

New Eastern Europe, December 8, 2015

US Vice President Joe **Biden** is paying a two day visit to Ukraine which has already been labeled as "historic" by many experts. In spite of the fact it is his fourth visit to post-Maidan Ukraine, **Biden** will be the second American politician from such a high rank to give a speech at the Ukrainian Parliament. Former President George H.W. Bush was the first high-ranking US official who addressed Ukrainian parliamentarians on August 1st, 1991, which occurred only three weeks prior to its declaration of independence.

As part of his visit on December 7th, 2015, Joe **Biden** is expected to participate in roundtable talks with state and civil representatives and bilateral meetings with Ukraine's President Poroshenko and Prime Minister Yatseniyk. The next day, he will give a speech before the Ukrainian Parliament.

Without a doubt, such a visit is of crucial importance and demonstrates US support of Ukrainian sovereignty and closer convergence with the West. This is in light of ongoing Russian attempts to further destabilise Ukraine's situation.

It is expected **Biden**'s message will consist of alarming criticism of persistent corruption and slow progress, mixed with additional assurances of further support and cooperation with Ukraine towards its integration with Europe. Hence, the assessment of the overall Ukrainian political situation will be based on the combination of such crucial factors as securing political stability and enhancing anti-corruption measures' efficiency. Not surprisingly, such an important visit will take place before Ukraine's annual governmental report on its government's activity results, as well as its plans for the next year.

Fight against corruption, economic reforms and financial assistance

According to some predictions, Vice President **Biden** will voice concern over the urgency of more active reforms of structural and institutional aspects of the Ukrainian state apparatus. Notably, the White House has serious concerns regarding the quality and pace of current economic and judicial reforms, especially in relation to prevalent corruption schemes in high echelons of Ukrainian power.

Special attention will be paid to the judicial sector. It should be recalled that during his speech at the Brookings Institution at the end of May, 2015, **Biden** particularly emphasised Ukraine needs to use newly introduced laws and policies to investigate and prosecute corruption on all levels in order for its reforms to succeed. **Biden** also mentioned his frequent communication on a weekly basis, both with the Ukrainian Prime Minister and President. Moreover, US Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt has criticised the General Prosecutor's Office on numerous occasions, by stressing its responsibility in fighting corruption in Ukraine. On September 24th, 2015, Ambassador Pyatt stated during the Odessa Financial Forum the General Prosecutor's Office's inability to fight corruption undermines effective reform implementation in Ukraine.

For a long time, the White House has tried to convey a powerful and clear message to Ukraine's leaders concerning the need to undertake more active efforts against corruption. In light of this heightened concern over high corruption levels and the Ukrainian authorities' lack of action, many Ukrainian experts have assumed the General Prosecutor's, Prime Minister's and several other high ranking Ukrainian officials' political futures could be seriously questioned.

Most importantly, the question of stable US financial assistance to Ukraine is closely tied to progress in conducting anti-corruption reforms within Ukraine's state institutions. In June, Ukrainian Prime Minister Yatseniuk met with US Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew to discuss an additional tranche of 1 billion dollars to support Ukrainian reforms in order to increase Ukraine's investment attractiveness and lay foundations for its economic growth. At the end of October, 2015, US Secretary of Commerce Penny Pritzker stated the readiness of US President Barack Obama to take necessary steps towards granting a third tranche of macroeconomic assistance to Ukraine to implement its reforms. During her recent meeting with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, she emphasised that visible and steady Ukrainian progress in implementing anti-corruption measures were a prerequisite for new financial assistance in the near future.

Last month, Joe **Biden** confirmed the US' readiness to grant Ukraine a third tranche of credit guarantees of 1 billion dollars. However, he emphasised Ukraine's government should fight corruption more actively, including conducing tax reforms in compliance with the IMF. Possible US assistance in reaching an agreement on the Ukraine's debt restructuring will also be predicated on these conditions.

Security and military cooperation

US presidential administration officials stated Joe **Biden** would underline US support of Ukraine's territorial integrity in his speech at the Ukrainian Parliament. He will reiterate the US' position concerning

Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and its current involvement in desabilizing eastern Ukraine. In this regard, it is also expected he will reassure Ukrainian leaders that any US communication with Russia over Syria's situation will not impact its position concerning Ukraine. Additionally, a diplomatic strategy to keep sanctions against Russia will be discussed with Ukrainian counterparts.

Ukraine's army requires serious investment, specialised military experience and modernisation assistance . In 2015, thanks to **Biden**'s active involvement, the US provided Ukraine security and military assistance totaling $265 million. Earlier this year, the US committed to training Ukrainian troops, a mission conducted by 300 US soldiers at a compound in western Ukraine. The US also provided specialised military equipment which was transferred to the country's eastern battle zone. According to the National Defense Authorisation Act for the 2016 Fiscal Year, approved by the US Senate, it could be possible to increase assistance to $300 million. However, it is not clear if **Biden** will touch upon possible additional military assistance to Ukraine during his visit early next week.

Based on this, Vice President **Biden**'s visit is expected to reaffirm the US' support of Ukraine on its path towards democratisation and its struggle against Russian hostile activities in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. Simultaneously, the US will emphasise that further comprehensive support of Ukraine will depend on the tempo and quality of a broad range of reforms within Ukraine's state apparatus.

Maksym Beznosiuk is an international relations specialist from Kyiv, Ukraine.

NEW YORK TIMES AND WASHINGTON POST OP-EDS

The Big Hole In Obama's Islamic State Strategy

By David Ignatius

Washington Post, December 7, 2015

At the center of President Obama's strategy for dealing with the Islamic State is an empty space. It's supposed be filled by a hypothetical "Sunni ground force," but after more than a year of effort, it's still not there. Unless this gap is filled, Obama's plan won't work.

Otherwise, Obama made a reasonable case in his speech to the nation Sunday night. He's right to argue for patience and persistence in fighting the Muslim terrorists, rather than "tough talk." He's correct that the United States shouldn't feed the jihadists' fantasies with "a long and costly ground war." And especially right that we'll be safer at home and abroad if most Muslims are allies against the extremists.

But there was a mysterious black box in the middle of Obama's speech. Here's how he tried to explain it: "The strategy that we are using now — airstrikes, special forces and working with local forces who are fighting to regain control of their own country — that is how we'll achieve a more sustainable victory."

What "local forces" is Obama talking about? If he means Kurdish fighters in Iraq and Syria, yes, they've performed admirably. In Kurdish areas. They don't want to clear and hold the Sunni heartland of the Islamic State, nor should they. If Obama is talking about the Shiite-led Iraqi military, their performance is still just barely adequate, even backed by American air power, and they're disdained and mistrusted by the Sunnis of Ramadi, Fallujah and Mosul. If he's talking about the Islamist brigades in Syria armed by Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar, it's still not entirely clear whether they're friend or foe.

The disturbing fact is that a strong, reliable, indigenous Sunni ground force doesn't exist yet in Iraq or Syria. The United States has been trying to fix this problem since the fall of Mosul in June 2014, with very little success. We're like the joke about the starving economist who needs to open a can of beans on a desert island and posits: "Assume we had a can opener!"

Consider the false hopes and missed connections over the past year: In Iraq, U.S. trainers were dispatched to Al Asad and Al Taqaddum air bases in Anbar province to train thousands of Sunni tribal fighters. The tribesmen mostly didn't show up, and no wonder: The Shiite-led government in Baghdad still refuses to approve a Sunni "national guard" with real power. In Syria, Congress authorized a $500 million plan to train and equip a largely Sunni force to fight the Islamic State. Only a few hundred signed up, instead of the expected 5,000, and the first wave of fighters walked into a trap and was savaged by jihadists in northern Syria.

Why have these efforts gone so badly, and what needs to be fixed? Basically, I'd argue that Sunnis don't trust an America that turned their world upside down in the 2003 invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein. Tribal leaders have been our default Sunni strategy ever since: We're trying now to use them as mercenaries against the Islamic State. But it's a corrupt bargain on both sides.

The Sunni no-show problem illustrates a deeper trauma. Across the Middle East, Sunnis are experiencing a kind of vertigo. The Sunni powerhouses — Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Libya — are in ruins. The people feel dispossessed and disillusioned, disgusted with the autocrats who ruled them before and the religious fanatics who want to rule them today.

Filling this Sunni vacuum with new self-confidence will be the work of a generation, but it must start now, for it's an essential part of defeating the jihadists. The West's best think tanks should be working on this problem; the Arab world's brightest young activists should be making plans for governance and economic development. Global institutions such as the United Nations, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund should be developing plans for trusteeship, reconstruction and governance.

It's 1944 in the Arab world: Defeating the jihadists demands the creation of a healthy Sunni body politic.

What would a revived Sunni heartland in Iraq and Syria look like? Well, you can get a pretty good idea by examining Iraqi Kurdistan. It flowered under a U.S. no-fly zone known as " Operation Provide Comfort" that started in 1991. Under this protective cover, investment, security and political stability came together in a virtuous cycle.

When we think about the future of Iraq and Syria, we should have in mind vibrant Sunni provinces that, like Kurdistan, are part of a loose federal state. In building a strategy for defeating the Islamic State, creating this "Sunnistan" will be the long pole in the tent.

Republicans Ignore The Lessons Of World War II

By Dana Milbank

Washington Post, December 7, 2015

Dec. 7, 2015: A date which will live in immaturity.

President Obama addressed the nation Sunday night from the Oval Office, a rare use of the sacred symbols of the presidency to reassure Americans about their security while steeling them for a long and complex struggle against the Islamic State.

And the loyal opposition answered his rallying cry over the next day with a patriotic display of carping and dyspepsia.

Donald Trump answered Obama's call for tolerance by declaring that no Muslims should be permitted to enter the United States: "We need a new president — FAST!"

Marco Rubio proclaimed a "growing sense we have a president who is completely overwhelmed."

From Republicans on Capitol Hill came a profusion of insults and epithets. "Repackaged half measures . . . Tone deaf . . . sales pitch for the status quo . . . President Obama is riding the bench at T-ball today."

It was tiresome. There's a real case to be made that Obama's minimalist strategy isn't working. But the only thing this reflexive complaining does is divide the country further and make a coherent response to Islamic State more difficult.

Rather than cover this National Day of Carping, I went to the World War II Memorial on the Mall, where 20 veterans of that war were observing the 74th anniversary of the Pearl Harbor attack. There, I met Dale "Red" Robinson, a Pearl Harbor survivor and a staff sergeant in the infantry who was later part of the Normandy landing. He recalled the national unity of that war and lamented the divisions that make fighting this one so difficult.

"We were gung-ho. Everybody was," said Robinson, who is almost 94 but whose blue eyes are as clear as his mind. "Nothing like this, these days. It's sad, kind of sad, my friend."

Robinson said he feels "sorry for all of the soldiers" serving today, let down by their political leaders. And he sees little chance of these leaders finding their way. "How could you change this bunch now?"

One thing we can do is admonish them to follow, or at least remember, the example of Robinson's generation. That's what Monday afternoon's ceremony was about. A sailor rang a bell at 1:57 p.m. Eastern time, the moment 74 years earlier when Japanese planes struck, and 2,400 Americans were soon lost with much of the Pacific Fleet.

A military band played the national anthem and, in the front row, the able-bodied veterans stood, some rising from their wheelchairs, and snapped salutes or put hands to hearts. Later, while the band played "America the Beautiful," the veterans, some wheeled, some walking with support, made a slow procession around the memorial's pool to place wreaths, and to hear the sounding of taps.

Rear Adm. Craig Faller addressed the old men. "We live all of us today with the prosperity and the security built on the shoulders of these heroes," he said. "Our challenge as we face the uncertainty and complexity associated with today's threats is to live up to the example of our World War II veterans."

That's our challenge — and we're failing.

One of the vets, Laura Mays, told me he finds it "very scary" that the nation is so divided in confronting Islamic State. "The difference is the uncertainty of today, and it's a big difference," said Mays, who was a fireman on the USS Oconto and saw action in the Pacific. "Back then we knew we were strong and . . . we felt that we were supported."

Mays, from Texas, said he thinks political leaders aren't as patriotic as those who sent him to war. "I thought they were more loyal, more concerned about the nation than their position," he said. Now, "it just seems like everything they do, right or wrong — and mostly wrong — is [because] it'll get them somewhere." Mays complained about the sharp partisan divisions in Congress. "How can we bring unity when you have that?"

Mays and his contemporaries, facing a common enemy, mobilized and sacrificed, regardless of political ideology. Now, our representatives can't even manage to come up with a resolution authorizing the use of military force against the Islamic State — and they've been at it for a year. "I think it's time for Congress to vote to demonstrate that the American people are united and committed to this fight," Obama said Sunday night.

House Speaker Paul D. Ryan responded to this call to unite by deriding Obama's speech as "just a half-hearted attempt to defend and distract from a failing policy." Ryan said we are "one step behind our enemy."

It does sometimes feel that way. But the opposition has yet to propose a constructive alternative — and the constant sniping at each other does nothing to defeat the Islamic State. As those old soldiers on the Mall taught us, victory comes from unity.

Twitter: @Milbank

In Fighting Terrorism, Patience Is Not A Virtue

By Michael Gerson

Washington Post, December 8, 2015

In his address to the nation on terrorism, President Obama warned against "tough talk." On this, at least, no one can accuse him of hypocrisy.

In the aftermath of recent attacks, Obama perfunctorily ticked off a series of inputs: airstrikes, arming and training Iraqi and Syrian forces, cooperating with allies on counterterrorism and pursuing a cease-fire in the Syrian conflict. And then he issued this directive: "I've ordered the Departments of State and Homeland Security to review the visa-waiver program." Who at the White House thought it would be helpful for the commander in chief, after a terrorist attack on the U.S. homeland, to order an interdepartmental review process?

Obama gave a speech of reassurance for a policy that appears to be collapsing. The Islamic State has solidified control of vast territory and is displaying many of the characteristics of an actual nation. It has attracted jihadists from around the world to the conflict in Syria and Iraq, many of whom will return home with deadly skills. With the Paris attacks, the Islamic State has demonstrated the strategic capacity to strike in Western capitals. It counts affiliates in about a dozen nations, including a particularly successful Libyan branch operation. And it has become a rallying point for self-radicalization, as close as a Facebook pledge of allegiance.

Before the events of the past few weeks, it might have been possible to argue that Obama's anaconda plan of slow strangulation could work in, say, five years. But is the threat revealed in Paris and elsewhere acceptable for five years? In this case, patience is a dangerous course.

In his speech, Obama talked of a 65-nation coalition fighting the Islamic State and claimed that France, Germany and the United Kingdom "have ramped up their contributions to our military campaign." But when France decided to take action after the Paris attacks, it invoked an obscure passage of the European Union treaty to avoid a NATO commitment that might offend Russia and imply U.S. leadership. Germany has tested the boundaries of its constitution to make a small military contribution (up to six planes and 1,200 soldiers) in solidarity with France, not the United States. And our country has generally rejected the Eisenhower role of supreme commander in a coalition of the willing — constrained by political commitments (" no boots on the ground") and highly restrictive rules of engagement.

Obama's strategy has many elements that any future president, Republican or Democrat, would adopt. The only things missing are urgency and leadership. The president should convene his security team and ask: What would it take to degrade the Islamic State's capabilities to strike in the West within one year? And to defeat it completely in two? Then the president should assemble a coalition sufficient to that task, composed of forces from European allies, boots on the ground from Sunni nations and a more aggressive U.S. support role (much larger Special Operations forces to assist on the front lines, forward air controllers, relaxed rules of engagement).

Obama is correct that a parallel political track is essential. Syria will require a Lebanon-esque peace, in which minorities (including the Alawites) are granted protection and power. It will be necessary to somehow re-convince the Sunni tribal leaders in Iraq that, if they fight the Islamic State, they will find protection and fair treatment in a unified country, instead of living under Shiite despotism.

The complexity of this military and diplomatic task would challenge any president. It is pretty much inconceivable that the "ender of wars" would suddenly assume this role in his seventh year in office. Obama has consistently done the minimal amount necessary to avoid the charge of fecklessness.

Obama's call for tolerance of the Islamic faith is more than minimal; it is essential. But even this is put at risk by the broader crisis. "A continued failure to recognize the scale of the challenge and to construct the means necessary to meet it," says former British prime minister Tony Blair, "will result in terrorist attacks potentially worse than those in Paris, producing a backlash which then stigmatizes the majority of decent, law-abiding Muslims and puts the very alliance so necessary at risk, creating a further cycle of chaos and violence."

This is the challenge of the United States' involvement in the Middle East. Because it is politically unpopular, there is a natural temptation to disengage. But after attacks, engagement will come — with more anger, on worse terms.

Obama's Brave Admission About Terrorism

By Eugene Robinson

Washington Post, December 7, 2015

"A cancer that has no immediate cure" was not the most soothing metaphor President Obama could have chosen, but it was the most honest. He has no idea how to prevent another terrorist attack like the one in San Bernardino — and neither does anyone else, including his Republican critics.

The president used that somber phrase in his Oval Office address Sunday to describe what "many Americans are asking." The answer was implicit: Yes, that is indeed what we face, and the cure for the disease will take time.

The specific actions Obama demanded from Congress are no-brainers. Yes, individuals on terrorism watch lists should be prohibited from buying guns. Yes, the sale of military-style assault rifles should be banned. Yes, there should be better screening of foreigners who enter the country without a visa.

But none of these measures would have stopped the barbaric assault in San Bernardino, Calif., that killed 14 and injured 21. That's no reason to reject the president's initiatives — the steps he proposed might well stop some future attack or at least reduce the carnage — but it means we must all be realistic about the "new phase" of the terrorist threat that the president so soberly described.

"As we've become better at preventing complex, multifaceted attacks like 9/11," Obama said, "terrorists turned to less complicated acts of violence like the mass shootings that are all too common in our society."

We saw this new pattern at Fort Hood, Tex., in 2009, when Army Maj. Nidal Malik Hasan fatally shot 13 people and wounded 32 others; in Chattanooga, Tenn., in July of this year, when Mohammad Youssef Abdulazeez killed five people at an Armed Forces Career Center and a U.S. Navy Reserve center; and last week in San Bernardino, when Syed Rizwan Farook and his wife, Tashfeen Malik, raked a county health department holiday party with gunfire before dying in a last-stand shootout with police.

There is no indication that any of these attacks was organized and directed by the Islamic State, al-Qaeda or any other known terrorist organization. Rather, they appear to be instances of do-it-yourself terrorism, inspired by events overseas but resulting from a process that authorities cannot reliably detect in advance: self-radicalization.

In a free society with more guns than people, there was no way to see any of these terrorist acts coming — any more than there was a way to know beforehand that a young white supremacist named Dylann Roof would allegedly show up at a prayer meeting at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, S.C., and kill nine innocent black worshipers.

The Republican candidates for president, obviously, have no answers. Sen. Marco Rubio (Fla.) scoffed that "I don't hear anybody talking about bomb control," noting that Farook and Malik apparently

put together an arsenal of pipe bombs. But none of those devices was successfully detonated. It's hard to build a bomb and even harder to make it explode when and where you choose. The San Bernardino victims all died from gunshots; the assailants were armed with semiautomatic assault rifles that had been modified to make them more lethal.

So would common-sense gun control measures make a difference? I've argued repeatedly that they might, but let's be realistic. There are so many guns already in circulation that anyone who wants one can get one. California has an assault-weapons ban, theoretically, but there is a loophole that made the weapons used in San Bernardino — clearly military-style assault rifles — legal for sale and purchase.

What methods remain of possibly preventing attacks? Donald Trump wants increased surveillance of mosques, but aside from the constitutional questions about such action, there is no indication it would have made a difference in San Bernardino. The National Security Agency program to log all domestic phone calls — which ended last week — apparently failed, over the years, to uncover a single terrorist plot; reinstating it would be useless.

Tougher visa rules might conceivably have raised questions about Malik, who was born in Pakistan and got a visa to enter the United States as Farook's fiancee. But Farook was a U.S. citizen, born in Chicago.

The truth is that self-radicalization is by definition an interior process. It requires no telltale communications with known terrorist suspects and can take place with no outward signs of any change.

The existence of the Islamic State "caliphate" is obviously an inspiration to potential terrorists; if it were gone, presumably the threat would eventually subside. Obama's plan to "destroy" the group is cautious, slow and uncertain. But the one thing I haven't heard from his critics is a better idea.

Look At What You've Done, Wayne LaPierre

By Richard Cohen

Washington Post, December 7, 2015

Years ago, I rushed up the stairs to the Tobacco Institute in Washington and confronted the people working there: How could you? How could you lie to us about the dangers of smoking? Everyone there was smoking, I remember that, and I either referred to a mound of bodies outside the door or wanted to. Now I want to do something similar — rush to the National Rifle Association and confront Wayne LaPierre, its chief executive, and yell, "LaPierre, look what you've done."

The "done" refers to San Bernardino. It refers to Planned Parenthood and Columbine and Sandy Hook. It refers to Roseburg and Chattanooga, Charleston, Fort Hood and every place of mass killing, where some crazy person, some lunatic, someone who thinks he's got the thumbs-up from God, had the legal right to get a gun, often an assault rifle, a weapon of war, and then just shoot away — rat-a-tat-tat. Bodies everywhere. You did this, LaPierre. You and your NRA.

Oh, I know: Don't personalize this, Cohen. If LaPierre weren't the head of the NRA, someone else would be. Someone else would warn us about what would happen if assault weapons were banned — "jack-booted government thugs" would "break in our doors, seize our guns, destroy our property and even injure or kill us," LaPierre once said.

Even if the NRA didn't exist, we would still be a nation just moony over guns. If we did away with assault weapons, the day-to-day threat would still be the handgun. You can't shove a .223- caliber assault rifle in your pocket or put it into the glove compartment of your car. Still, it was two assault rifles that were used to murder 14 people in San Bernardino. Two otherwise ordinary individuals, dressed as soldiers, went to war.

The United States' inability to control guns has made it dizzy with incoherence. The president draped the august Oval Office around himself to give a speech in which he said nothing. Looking like a man in need of some Zoloft, Obama said he would respond to the murders in California by increasing the pressure on the Islamic State in Syria. He also mentioned that there's no evidence that the shooters had been in touch with the Islamic State, so bombing it, while always a good idea, in this case is just beside the point.

The Republicans have an even worse idea. Realizing that they have to come up with something, the GOP is considering putting more money into mental-health programs. More money for mental health is always welcome, but just how it relates to mass murders is beyond me. Should the government troll the streets looking for people who talk to themselves? Did House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy (Calif.) — "mental health . . . seems to be a core problem" — notice that there was nothing untoward in the behavior of Syed Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik? Farook had a job. The couple just had a child. They were normal, until they were not. (McCarthy, cure thyself.)

We cannot predict a homicidal act. The shooter is almost always described as a loner. Is being alone a crime? Shall we criminalize shyness? Will Donald Trump let us use his guys to round up the introverted while sweeping for Mexicans? (How's that for synergy, Donald?)

The one thing we can do — the thing we and every other nation know how to do — is restrict gun ownership. In the past, that was not considered either un-American or unfeasible. In 1969, Milton S. Eisenhower, the former president of Johns Hopkins University, the brother of an ex-president and the very personification of a stolid Republican, recommended the confiscation of handguns. As far as I know, no one considered Eisenhower a left-wing kook.

The solution to the menace of domestic terrorism is staring us in the face. It is some sort of gun control. We cannot close down the Internet so that the Islamic State's siren call cannot reach the susceptible. We cannot cull our population for the potentially homicidal. We cannot — we must not — monitor or surveil Muslims in general. Instead, we must look at all these incidents and see what they have in common: guns.

So, excuse me if I do personalize this crisis. It's about guns and the NRA and chicken politicians who know right from wrong but vote wrong. It's about common sense and taking responsibility for your actions. It's about LaPierre and the NRA. Open the door, Wayne. See what you've done. See the bodies.

Millennials' Mysterious Support For Permissive Gun Laws

By Catherine Rampell

Washington Post, December 8, 2015

When I was in middle and high school, there were spirited public debates about whether the proliferation of grisly movies, gore-glorifying song lyrics and shoot-'em-up video games might desensitize my peers and me to violence.

While I'm reluctant to pin any of this on pop culture, it's true that my generation appears somewhat inured to violence — at least violence involving firearms.

A decade or two post-adolescence — as our own preschool-age children now practice "active shooter" drills in which they're coached to cower in the closet or throw toys at a tactical-gear-outfitted maniac — millennials seem to have neither the desire nor the willpower to pressure our political leaders to do much to prevent such tragedies. If anything, we may be slightly more blasé about them than our elders.

Which does not bode well for liberals hoping that the arc of history will eventually bend toward greater gun control.

Poll data about views of gun control and specific gun-control measures are mixed, and responses vary depending how questions are asked. But statements about protecting gun rights generally elicit at least as much support from younger Americans as from older ones.

Gallup regularly asks, for example, whether "laws covering the sale of firearms should be made more strict, less strict, or kept as they are now." Over the past two years, about 49 percent of American adults under 35 have said they support "more strict" gun laws, compared with 56 percent of those 55 and older.

Two other recent surveys, from the Pew Research Center and The Post/ABC News, also asked about the relative importance of protecting gun rights versus other objectives, such as controlling gun ownership or reducing gun violence. Both found that about half of Americans young and old believe gun rights should take priority.

This is a bit puzzling, given that younger Americans are less Republican in their political leanings than older people are and are also less likely to own a gun — two factors that are usually strong predictors of opposition to gun restrictions. These survey data suggest, then, that younger people might be especially predisposed to oppose gun-control measures, after controlling for these variables.

The survey questions I've cited so far are of course relatively abstract. What about nitty-gritty, concrete policy proposals?

Again, for the most part, young people reveal themselves to be at least as pro-gun-rights as their elders, if not more so.

Pew found that younger and older Americans are about equally likely to favor background checks for gun shows (with more than 8 in 10 saying this) and to support laws barring mentally ill people from owning guns (also about 8 in 10).

The General Social Survey likewise shows that about 7 in 10 Americans across all age groups favor a law "which would require a person to obtain a police permit before he or she could buy a gun," according to calculations from my Post colleague Scott Clement.

On proposed bans of "assault-style weapons ," though, older people are considerably more supportive, with 63 percent of those 65 and older believing these are appropriate, compared with only 49 percent of people under 30, according to Pew .

YouGov similarly finds that older people are more likely to back bans on semiautomatic weapons, bans on selling magazine clips for semiautomatic weapons that hold 10 or more rounds and a five-day waiting period for purchasing a handgun.

The only gun-control policy proposal for which I've been able to find generally higher support among younger than older people is some sort of gun sale database or gun-owner registry.

According to YouGov, about half of those under 30 support a federal gun-owner registry, versus about a third of those over 65. But it's possible that young people have become more comfortable with bulk data collection than their elders are, whether or not such data are connected to a hot-button issue such as firearms.

You may have noticed that sizable shares — sometimes healthy majorities — of Americans of all ages express support for tighter controls on gun ownership, both in the abstract and the specific. Despite such public support, of course, nothing has happened, presumably because politicians are more fearful of the gun lobby than their own constituents' views on gun control. (Shocker, I know, that legislation doesn't necessarily reflect the democratic will of the people.)

Given the ambivalence of today's young people — who are tomorrow's high-voter-turnout middle-aged and older people — I wouldn't expect that balance of power to shift anytime soon.

Obama Tries To Re-gift His Failed Terror Strategy

By Marc A. Thiessen

Washington Post, December 8, 2015

Usually when a president delivers a prime-time address to the nation, he has something new to announce — like, say, a new military strategy. Not President Obama. Like a notorious Christmas "re-gifter," Obama did nothing more Sunday night than repackage his old, failing strategy in the shiny wrapping of tougher language.

With a new CNN/ORC poll showing that 64 percent of Americans disapprove of the president's handling of the Islamic State and 68 percent say his military response to the terrorist group is not aggressive enough, Obama decided to ratchet up the rhetoric — acknowledging that we are "at war with terrorists" and promising to "destroy ISIL and any other organization that tries to harm us."

But rip away the rhetorical bows and paper, and the substance of what Obama offered is unchanged from his petulant news conference after the Paris attacks where he insisted against all evidence that "the strategy that we are pursuing is the right one."

Nothing has changed. After declaring the Islamic State "contained" a day before the Paris attacks and assuring Americans a day before the San Bernadino, Calif., massacre that the United States was safe from a Paris-style attack, Obama is "staying the course."

To fend off growing displeasure with his strategy, Obama once again resorted to tearing down straw men. He promised that he would "not be drawn once more into a long and costly ground war in Iraq or Syria," because "if we occupy foreign lands, [our enemies] can maintain insurgencies for years, killing thousands of our troops, draining our resources, and using our presence to draw new recruits."

This is ridiculous — and revealing. Obama fails to understand that it was not the U.S. presence in Iraq that allowed the Islamic State to rebuild its insurgency; it was the U.S. withdrawal. It was his glib dismissal of the Islamic State as "JV" terrorists who did not pose "a direct threat to us" that allowed the group's insurgency to grow. And it was his continuing refusal to take the steps necessary to re-defeat the group that is today allowing the Islamic State to grow and "maintain" its insurgency "for years."

Obama declared he would not send "a new generation of Americans overseas to fight and die for another decade on foreign soil." No one is proposing that. Retired Gen. Jack Keane, the author of the successful 2007 surge in Iraq, has laid out a strategy to defeat the Islamic State that requires a minimum of about 10,000 U.S. troops, including advisers, trainers and forward air controllers, as well as Apache helicopters and AC-130 gunships. Keane's strategy would unleash our Special Operations forces "not just to target leaders or conduct hostage rescue but to conduct large-scale in/out raids to target ISIS critical nodes and functions." And it would lift the restrictive rules of engagement that result in 75 percent of U.S. air missions returning without dropping their bombs.

Most Americans support this. The CNN/ORC poll finds that a 53 percent majority say the United States should send ground troops to Iraq or Syria to fight the Islamic State. The American people understand: We don't need another invasion; we need another surge.

We also need to understand what inspires terrorists like Tashfeen Malik and Syed Farook to join the global jihad and carry out attacks like the one in California. Obama said Sunday that groups like the Islamic State are "using our presence to draw new recruits." This is wrong. They are using the perception of American weakness. In August 2014, Obama promised to destroy the Islamic State, but after more than a year of bombing, the group still controls territory in Iraq and Syria the size of the United Kingdom and has expanded its area of operations to include Europe and now quite possibly the United States. Its

leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, has boasted: "The crusaders' airstrikes and constant bombardment — day and night — upon the Islamic State have not prevented its advance or weakened its resolve."

Obama does not get it. But Americans do. And they are not interested in a policy of weakness wrapped in a new package from our re-gifter-in-chief.

Mr. Obama Makes His Pitch On The Islamic State

By Editorial Board

Washington Post, December 7, 2015

THE HEART of President Obama's address to the country Sunday concerned what he does not want to do in response to terrorism. After reviewing steps he has already taken or proposed to fight the Islamic State and prevent attacks inside the homeland, the president delivered what sounded like his main appeal: "Our success won't depend on tough talk, or abandoning our values or giving into fear." He went on to explain — again — why he opposes "a long and costly ground war in Iraq or Syria," and why "we cannot turn against one another by letting this fight be defined as a war between America and Islam."

Mr. Obama had good reasons to make this pitch. The San Bernardino, Calif., shooting, following closely on the Paris attacks, has understandably raised anxiety among Americans, who wonder, as the president put it, "whether we are confronted by a cancer that has no immediate cure." It has also prompted irresponsible and bigoted rhetoric on the presidential campaign trail, where GOP candidates are promising to "carpet bomb them into oblivion" (Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas) or a "total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States" (Donald Trump).

While no one — with the partial exception of Sen. Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.) — has propped up Mr. Obama's straw man of launching another U.S. ground war, some are pretending that quick and facile military solutions exist. More seriously, there is a real danger that the rhetoric of Republicans will poison one of America's greatest strengths in this fight, which is the vast majority of American Muslims' relatively strong integration and loyalty to the country. Mr. Obama got it right in saying that while Muslims must confront the extremist ideology that has spread within some of their communities, for Americans to turn on that minority as a whole is exactly what the jihadists hope for.

Mr. Obama also was correct in saying that he has stepped up the war in Iraq and Syria since the Paris attacks, taking measures that critics (including us) have recommended for a year or more. Bombing has increased, and Special Operations forces will be deployed in both countries to help coordinate offensives by local troops — though it appears the U.S. boots may not arrive on the ground for months.

The new measures give the lie to Mr. Obama's claim a month ago that the only alternative to his military strategy was putting "large numbers of U.S. troops on the ground." Unfortunately, he still is not doing what is needed to "destroy" the Islamic State, as the president defined the goal on Sunday. That destruction would require a Sunni ground force, made up of Syrians, Iraqis and perhaps foreign troops from the Persian Gulf and Turkey, with substantial U.S. support.

But no such force will go after the Islamic State as long as Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad and his Iranian and Russian allies are waging their barbaric war on Sunnis in Syria. Though Secretary of State John F. Kerry is pushing a diplomatic process that he hopes could lead to a cease-fire, he's unlikely to succeed until anti-Assad rebels are substantially strengthened on the ground. That remains the missing piece of Mr. Obama's strategy.

Voters And Non-voters Should Count In Legislative Districts

By Editorial Board

Washington Post, December 8, 2015

IN TUESDAY'S oral arguments in Evenwel v. Abbott , the Supreme Court will consider a Texas state Senate map that put equal numbers of people — rather than equal numbers of eligible voters — in each legislative district. In fact, drawing districts with equal numbers of people is the American norm. But the challengers in this case are essentially asking: Why should non-voters count?

The constitutionality of counting people, not voters, would seem to have been settled in the 18th century — and again in the 19th. The Constitution infamously required enslaved African Americans to each count as three-fifths of a person for the purposes of drawing House of Representatives district boundaries, though they certainly were not allowed to vote. The 14th Amendment thankfully scrapped the three-fifths provision but maintained the principle that congressional boundaries should reflect equal distributions of people, including aliens, not just eligible voters.

Texas's opponents attempt to explain away these provisions by arguing that they really concern the distribution of congressional seats among the states, not how districts are drawn within each state. The Framers had good reasons to structure things this way — in particular, so that states would not game their voter eligibility rules in order to get more representation in the House — that do not apply within states. The challengers further point out that the court rejected an analogy between federal and state electoral procedures in a previous ruling that struck down Alabama's scheme to assign each county a state senator, roughly in the style of the U.S. Senate.

That is all true. But it is not enough to show that the Constitution explicitly requires drawing legislative districts according to total population in one context but implicitly prohibits it in another.

As New York University's Richard H. Pildes points out, "the House was designed to be the most democratic element of the national government, and its structure was based on 'the fundamental principle of representative government' of 'equal representation for equal numbers of people.' " Drawing legislative lines according to total population, then, is an active, constitutionally valid method of apportioning popular representation.

So the Constitution clearly allows districting based on total population. That doesn't necessarily mean that states must draw legislative lines this way. But there are good policy reasons to do so. First, the census counts people, not voters; any redistricting based on voter numbers would become more complicated and probably less reliable. And second, non-voters — children, for example, or green-card holders — deserve representation too. We think the Founding Fathers had the right idea here.

A Perfect Storm Of Deceit In Chicago

By Editorial Board

Washington Post, December 8, 2015

THE JUSTICE Department investigation of Chicago's trigger-happy police department, announced Monday by Attorney General Loretta E. Lynch, is welcome. It is also long overdue.

For years, watchdogs, lawyers and journalists have documented instances of police misconduct, including violent episodes caught on video and then subjected to the same silent treatment that nearly buried the death of black teenager Laquan McDonald, who was shot to death by a white Chicago police officer in October 2014.

What distinguished the McDonald case, which has now triggered the federal investigation, is that the officer's actions appear so outrageous, the city's coverup so blatant and the official line so thoroughly

discredited by the release of a video , which Mayor Rahm Emanuel's (D) administration tried so hard to keep under wraps. In the face of that perfect storm, the Justice Department had to act. (The officer, Jason Van Dyke, has pleaded not guilty, and his lawyer says he will be exonerated at trial.)

It is critical that the Justice Department now examine not only the police force, where a culture of impunity and a code of silence are deeply ingrained, but also Chicago's entire system. That includes the Independent Police Review Authority, which examined 409 cases of police-involved shootings in the eight years ending Sept. 30 — and found just two unjustified. (Both involved off-duty police.) It includes the prosecutor's office, headed by Cook County State's Attorney Anita Alvarez, which seems to blanch at the prospect of indicting abusive officers, perhaps for fear of losing police cooperation in criminal investigations.

And it includes legal protections enshrined in union contracts as well as a state law known as the law enforcement officers' "bill of rights." The effect of those protections is to erect formidable barriers to discipline, let alone prosecution, in the event of police misconduct. For example: Officers involved in a shooting are afforded a 24-hour grace period before they must speak to investigators — a privilege that may be used to ensure their accounts jibe with those of their colleagues. In the McDonald killing, at least seven other officers were on the scene and five of them corroborated the allegedly mendacious account of Mr. Van Dyke, who said Mr. McDonald was menacing him with a knife. In fact, the video shows the victim heading away from the officers.

The problems in Chicago are complex and decades in the making; cleaning up the police force will require investigators to use a wide aperture. While Mr. Emanuel has promised cooperation, there is likely to be a good deal of institutional resistance to the federal probe. But the payoff, in terms of building the case for real reform, could be enormous.

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TODAY'S EDITION

Biden In The News

Joe Biden Says U.S. Is Still Backing Ukraine (NYT) 1
Biden Announces More US Aid For Ukraine (AP) 3
Ukraine Still Has Work To Do On Reforms, U.S. VP Biden Says (REU) 4
Ongoing Violence Threatens Ukraine Cease-fire (USAT) 4
Biden Says 'Illegal' Russian Occupation Of Crimea Must End (BLOOMPOL) 5
Biden Gives Ukraine 'one More Chance' To Reform (POLITICEU) 7
Ukrainians See Conflict In Biden's Anticorruption Message (WSJ) 7
Ukraine's Decisive Moment (COFOREL) 7
Joe Biden Is Visiting Ukraine (VICE) 9
Biden Presses Russia On Ukraine Peace Deal, Return Of Crimea (AFP) 10
The Fight Against Graft Goes Online (INTLBIZ) 11
Mr. Biden Goes To Ukraine (RADEUR) 13
Biden Pledges US Support, Seeks Stronger Action On Rule Of Law (KYIVPOST) 14
Signs Of Economic Progress Noticeable In Ukraine (NTRFXUKR) 14
Pushkov Called The Union Biden To Poroshenko Barren (RIN) 15
Joe Biden Likely To Bring Harsh Criticism To Ukraine (DEUTSCW) 15
Commentary: What To Expect From Biden's Visit To Ukraine? (NEE) 16

New York Times and Washington Post Op-Eds

The Big Hole In Obama's Islamic State Strategy (WP) 18
Republicans Ignore The Lessons Of World War II (WP) 19
In Fighting Terrorism, Patience Is Not A Virtue (WP) 21
Obama's Brave Admission About Terrorism (WP) 22
Look At What You've Done, Wayne LaPierre (WP) 23
Millennials' Mysterious Support For Permissive Gun Laws (WP)25
Obama Tries To Re-gift His Failed Terror Strategy (WP) 26
Mr. Obama Makes His Pitch On The Islamic State (WP) 27
Voters And Non-voters Should Count In Legislative Districts (WP) 28
A Perfect Storm Of Deceit In Chicago (WP) 29

Online Version

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BIDEN IN THE NEWS

Joe Biden Says U.S. Is Still Backing Ukraine

By Peter Baker

New York Times, December 8, 2015

KIEV, Ukraine — The United States will not sacrifice Ukraine in pursuit of Russian cooperation in Syria, Vice President Joseph R. **Biden** Jr. assured Ukrainian leaders on Monday, even as the Obama administration tries to manage complicated diplomacy with Moscow.

Opening a two-day visit, Mr. **Biden** told the Ukrainians that the United States still supported them in their conflict with pro-Russian separatists, and accused President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia of violating a cease-fire agreement reached in Minsk, Belarus. To reinforce American backing, Mr. **Biden** promised another $190 million in aid.

"The United States stands firmly with the people of Ukraine in the face of continued — and I emphasize continued — aggression from Russia and Russian-backed separatists," he said. "Minsk

cannot succeed if Russia does not fulfill its commitment and President Putin fails to live up to the promises he has repeatedly made to my president, to you and to the international community."

Ukrainian officials have been nervous about what Russia's renewed interest in the Middle East would mean for their country. American officials interpret Russia's intervention in Syria as an attempt by Mr. Putin to distract world attention from the Ukrainian conflict, break out of the isolation the West has tried to impose on Moscow and weaken international resolve to maintain sanctions.

President Obama has insisted that the situations in Ukraine and Syria are separate, and he sent Mr. **Biden** to drive that point home. Even if Washington and Moscow cooperate to settle the Syrian civil war and battle the Islamic State, Mr. Obama has said, it would not stop the West from maintaining pressure on Russia over Ukraine. The European Union likewise appears poised to renew sanctions on Russia next week.

Michael A. McFaul, Mr. Obama's former ambassador to Russia, said the Ukrainians should be reassured. "Vice President **Biden**'s trip to Kiev sends a clear message that the United States is not willing to trade Ukraine for Russian cooperation on Syria," he said in an email. "That kind of linkage never works," Mr. McFaul said.

Mr. **Biden** also used his trip to press President Petro O. Poroshenko and Prime Minister Arseniy P. Yatsenyuk to put aside their differences and do more to battle corruption, arguing that the country has an opportunity to get its own house in order while Russia is focused on the Middle East.

Mr. Poroshenko was elected in 2014 after a pro-Moscow government was driven from office by mass protests that were met with violence. But he has yet to break the system of control wielded by powerful magnates over Ukrainian politics and economics.

While he has taken some steps, including the creation of a new police force and a move to install independent management of the state-owned energy company, critics said he has so far failed to make enough structural change. The president is fighting with Parliament over the prosecutor general, whom some lawmakers see as unwilling to tackle corruption.

Moreover, friction has grown between Mr. Poroshenko and Mr. Yatsenyuk, who hail from different parties and are struggling in a constitutional system that makes the division of power between their offices sometimes unclear. While American officials view both men as reformers, each has his own clan to protect and neither has been willing to abandon that as long as the other does not. Western officials believe the two may need to overhaul the cabinet to make a fresh start.

"Unfortunately the current cabinet is one of the most corrupt in the history of Ukraine," former Prime Minister Yulia V. Tymoshenko, an advocate of reform who has turned increasingly populist lately, said in an interview. "Preservation of the bad status quo is what's losing Ukraine as a viable state."

Without taking sides, Mr. **Biden** met separately with Mr. Poroshenko and Mr. Yatsenyuk to press them to work together. American officials said the vice president warned them that the Ukrainian public was growing frustrated at the pace of reform and warned them "don't squander this opportunity," as one official put it.

"Future generations of Ukrainians will look back at this moment," Mr. **Biden** later told reporters, with Mr. Yatsenyuk at his side. They will ask about their leaders, Mr. **Biden** said, " 'Did they deliver for us? Did they fundamentally change the nature of my country or did they not?' History will be a very, very harsh judge."

Mr. Yatsenyuk assured Mr. **Biden** that he got the message and cited various reforms he wanted to push through, including privatizing state enterprises and fighting corruption. "We understand our responsibilities, our obligations," he said.

Mr. **Biden** underlined his point by meeting with what his office called a "reformers' round table" of government officials, lawmakers and advocacy group leaders, and he will make some of the same points again on Tuesday when he addresses Parliament.

"Vice President **Biden**'s most important challenge in Ukraine is to keep the president and prime minister on a common, unequivocal path of reform that shows Ukraine is helping itself and merits the world's support," said Carlos Pascual, a former American ambassador to Ukraine. "With Russia recapturing a leadership role in the Middle East, Ukraine cannot give the world an excuse to forget Ukraine."

Oksana Syroyid, the deputy speaker of Parliament, said Mr. Poroshenko should listen to the vice president's point. "We do hope that the message will be heard and that the prosecutor general will step down from his position and allow us to further move the reform of the prosecutor general," she said.

During his travels around Kiev on Monday, Mr. **Biden** visited a monument to people who were killed during the pro-Western demonstrations in Maidan Square that led to the ouster of President Viktor F. Yanukovych. Mr. **Biden** tried to visit the monument last year, but had to cancel at the last minute when an unruly group of protesters unnerved his security detail.

Somber-faced and coatless on a brisk day, Mr. **Biden** viewed a display of about 100 photographs of slain protesters, along with candles, bouquets of flowers and banners with tributes to the victims.

"Imagine what it was like," Geoffrey R. Pyatt, the American ambassador, could be heard telling Mr. **Biden**. He pointed to surrounding buildings. "Snipers up on the buildings there."

Mr. **Biden** left a commemorative vice-presidential coin at the base of an elaborately carved wooden cross at the monument.

Biden Announces More US Aid For Ukraine

Associated Press, December 8, 2015

KIEV, Ukraine (AP) — U.S. Vice President Joe **Biden** assured Ukraine Monday of continuing U.S. support and announced the release of an additional $190 million in U.S. aid to help support reforms.

Biden, speaking Monday on a trip to the Ukrainian capital, also emphasized the need for Russia to fully meet its obligations under February's Minsk agreement that was intended to end the fighting in eastern Ukraine.

"The United States stands firmly with the people of Ukraine in the face of continued — I emphasize, continued — aggression from Russia and Russian-backed separatists," **Biden** said after his talks with Ukraine's President Petro Poroshenko.

Ukraine and the West have accused Russia of backing the rebels in eastern Ukraine with troops and weapons, accusations Moscow has denied.

Fighting between Ukrainian forces and Russia-backed separatists has abated significantly since early September, after killing some 8,000 people since April 2014, but tensions remain high because of unresolved questions about the final political status of the rebel regions in the east.

"Moscow has to fully implement the Minsk agreement and work constructively with Ukraine to create the conditions for free, fair and safe local elections to occur in Donbass," **Biden** said, referring to the collective name for the two rebel regions.

Biden also underlined that the U.S. will never accept Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula. "Moscow eventually has to end its occupation of Ukraine's sovereign territory," he said.

After a separate meeting with Ukraine's Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, **Biden** pledged that Washington will talk to its allies to make sure that Russia pays an increased price if it fails to meet its obligations under the Minsk agreement, but he emphasized that Ukraine has to fulfill its end of the deal.

"The Russians haven't kept their part of their bargain, but you can't, and the prime minister knows this, you can't fail to keep your part, otherwise there are people in Europe (who) will say: 'well, they're both the same,'" he said.

Biden also stressed the need for Ukraine to ramp up the fight against corruption and undertake critical reforms.

"It's absolutely critical for Ukraine in order to be stable and prosperous and part of a secure Europe to definitely, thoroughly, completely root out the cancer of corruption," he said.

Biden added that the additional roughly $190 million in U.S. assistance will help fight corruption in Ukraine's law-enforcement and reform the justice sector, helping attract more investment by streamlining regulations and privatizing state-owned enterprises in a transparent way.

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Ukraine Still Has Work To Do On Reforms, U.S. VP Biden Says

By Alessandra Prentice

Reuters, December 8, 2015

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Ongoing Violence Threatens Ukraine Cease-fire

By Oren Dorell

USA Today, December 7, 2015

Fighting between Ukraine's military and separatist forces in the east has escalated with scant notice this fall as world attention is focused on increased terrorism and a refugee crisis caused by the conflicts in Syria and Iraq.

Fighting that dropped off dramatically in September after Ukraine and Russian-backed separatists agreed to a new cease-fire plan picked up again in November, causing multiple deaths and injuries to Ukrainian troops, according to Ukrainian military spokesman Col. Andriy Lysenko.

Vice President **Biden**, who announced a $190 million aid package for Ukraine during a visit to the capital, Kiev, on Monday, said Russia holds the key to peace. "The United States continues to stand with the people of Ukraine in the face of continued ...aggression from Russia and Russian-backed separatists," **Biden** said.

Together with a failure by Russia-backed separatists to implement measures of the cease-fire agreement reached in the Belarussian capital, Minsk, the ongoing fighting means it is unlikely the two sides will meet a self-imposed year-end deadline to end the conflict, NATO Supreme Allied Commander Philip Breedlove said last week.

NATO's General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg warned of renewed war after a meeting about Ukraine with foreign ministers of the U.S.-led alliance last week. "Russian-backed separatists have not yet withdrawn their troops and equipment. Illegal groups in Eastern Ukraine have not been disarmed. And Ukraine has not been able to re-establish control over its border," Stoltenberg said.

The fighting in Ukraine will be a factor when the European Union decides in January whether to continue economic sanctions against Russia for its role in the conflict, which has resulted in 8,000 deaths since it began in April 2014, according to the United Nations.

The fighting subsided in September after ramping up during the summer. The lull coincided with Russia's preparations for its air campaign in Syria, and as Russia sought overflight rights from eastern European nations for Russian aircraft transporting personnel and supplies to Syria.

The low point in fighting came during October, when Russia lobbied for international acceptance of Russia's air campaign in Syria.

When fighting picked up in mid-November, it was "too large and coordinated to be random," said Phillip Karber, president of the Potomac Foundation, a military consultancy that has advised eastern European countries preparing to join NATO.

Karber, who has traveled more than a dozen times to assess Ukrainian military performance since 2014, attributes the cease-fire violations to shooting that began on the separatist side. The repeated violations of the peace-keeping agreement has contributed to "Ukrainian jitters and declining faith in Western negotiated cease-fires," he said.

Despite evidence from journalists, NATO and U.S. leaders of Russian military involvement in the Ukrainian conflict, Moscow denies it has given any military backing to the separatists.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which has a monitoring mission in Ukraine staffed by European, Ukrainian and Russian personnel, says it's impossible to verify who's at fault.

Since the beginning of November, OSCE monitors registered an increase in fighting, mostly around what's left of the airport in Donetsk, a separatist stronghold, Alexander Hug, the principal deputy chief monitor of the OSCE's Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine, told USA TODAY.

Most violations involved exchanges of small arms fire, and some have escalated to artillery and multiple rocket launchers, Hug said.

"It's an exchange of fire," he said. "It's difficult, if not impossible, to find in which direction (it begins). The fact remains both sides do not respect the cease-fire all the time and everywhere."

The OSCE and the Ukrainian government have yet to gain full access to 250 miles of the Ukraine-Russia border that is not controlled by the Government, he said.

In places, where fighting has been ongoing for many months, the OSCE has seen civilians who lack access to running water, reconstruction material for shelter, heat, electricity or medicine, Hug said. Civilians, relief agencies and international monitors have all been hampered by restricted freedom of movement in areas not controlled by the Ukrainian government, he added.

John Herbst, a former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine who's now at the Atlantic Council, a think tank in Washington, said the level of violence in Ukraine is up to Russia, while Russia is preoccupied with Syria.

"Moscow has the ability to get these guys largely under control," Herbst said. "There's no question they are concerned with Syria and not with Ukraine at the moment."

Biden Says 'Illegal' Russian Occupation Of Crimea Must End

By Margaret Talev

Bloomberg Politics, December 7, 2015

Vice President Joe **Biden** called Russia's annexation of Crimea "illegal" in a demonstration of solidarity with Ukraine's government that signaled the U.S. won't bargain away its support for the country to win Russian cooperation in the fight against Islamic State in Syria.

"The United States stands firmly with the people of Ukraine in the face of continued – and I emphasize continued – aggression from Russia and Russian-backed separatists," **Biden** said in Kiev on Monday, following a meeting with Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko.

Biden announced $190 million in new aid for Ukraine contingent on the government continuing to make progress rooting out corruption. That brings direct U.S. assistance to nearly $760 million since the formation of a new government in 2014, including more than $260 million for security. The latest funds is for helping law enforcement fight corruption, reforming the justice sector, and streamlining regulations and privatization of state-owned enterprises, **Biden** said.

Biden's two-day visit to Ukraine is intended to deliver reassurance that the U.S. won't budge in its commitment to Ukraine at a time when attention has shifted to Syria and fighting the Islamic State. That includes keeping in place sanctions on Russia to pressure President Vladimir Putin's government to fully implement the Minsk agreements that outline a path to end nearly two years of conflict.Minsk Accords

The separatists, Ukraine and Russia must continue to respect a cease-fire signed earlier this year in Minsk, Belarus, **Biden** said. "Both sides need to hold up that bargain," he said, echoing the position of U.S. allies in Europe.

"The fact that we are not talking as much every single day about Crimea does not mean in any way we have forgotten" what happened, **Biden** said, calling Russia's move to annex Crimea in 2014 an "illegal invasion" that "will not be accepted" by the U.S. or international community. "We will not accept it under any circumstance, and Moscow eventually has to end its occupation of Ukraine's sovereign territory" including Crimea.

Tensions rose recently after power lines to Crimea were cut by Ukrainian saboteurs. Russia and the U.S. remain at loggerheads over both Ukraine and Syria, where a Russian military intervention has complicated that country's civil war.Syria Conflict

Putin says his military is attacking Islamic State in Syria. The U.S. says Putin's forces have targeted relatively few Islamic State-held areas, and instead is attempting to reinforce Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, a close ally, by bombing rebels backed by the U.S. and Persian Gulf states.

Poroshenko, through a translator, told reporters that he pledged to **Biden** that Ukraine is ready to provide "maximum support" to U.S.-led coalition forces in Syria, though he did not say what such support might entail.

"Ukraine is no stranger to terrorist threats," he said. "We cannot be frightened by the terrorist threat."

As Russia has turned its attention to Syria, Ukraine sees signs for hope and concern. While clashes between separatists and Ukrainian forces have eased since September, eastern Ukraine's status remains unsettled. Insurgent tanks were spotted in Horlivka northeast of Donetsk, and rebels continued provocations with mortars, rifles, machine guns and grenade launchers, officials said Sunday.

Ukraine is seeking assurances from the U.S. and European Union that it will not become a bargaining chip in efforts to coordinate with Russia on attacking Islamic State targets.

Biden earlier Monday held a closed-door roundtable discussion on political and government reforms with about a dozen Ukrainian officials and members of civil society. He also visited the Heavenly Hundred memorial, an unofficial memorial with a wooden cross and framed photos of those killed in the Maidan protests of February 2014.

"We are starting to see real signs of economic progress" in Ukraine, **Biden** said, including "stabilized" currency.

Biden is to meet with Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk later Monday. He will address Ukraine's parliament on Tuesday.

Biden Gives Ukraine 'one More Chance' To Reform

By Paul Dallison

Politico Europe, December 7, 2015

The United States pledged an extra $190 million in aid to Ukraine Monday, but Vice President Joe **Biden** warned that Kiev has just "one more chance" to root out corruption or lose the funding.

Biden held talks with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, pledging support for Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression and urging the country's leaders to continue on the path to reform.

"The Ukrainian people cannot once again have their hopes dashed based on corruption," **Biden** said.

"One more chance. It's absolutely critical for Ukraine in order to be stable and prosperous and part of a secure Europe to definitely, thoroughly, completely root out the cancer of corruption. The people need to see that the ways of the past are permanently gone, they no longer exist. That means hard decisions. That means ramping up the pace of reforms, avoidance of past practices, advancing good governance, increasing transparency across the board at every level of the government and strengthening the rule of law. It means everybody playing by the same rules, from the folks at the bottom to the folks at the very top."

The $190 million in funding brings the total American assistance in recent years to $760 million.

Biden made it clear that the U.S. "stands firmly with the people of Ukraine in the face of continued – and I emphasize continued – aggression from Russia and Russian-backed separatists."

"We continue to believe that the best way to end the conflict in Donbas is through a diplomatic framework that was laid out in the Minsk agreement. But both sides need to hold up that bargain. Minsk cannot succeed if Russia does not fulfill its commitment and President Putin fails to live up to the promises he has repeatedly made to my president, to you and to the international community."

He added: "The fact that we are not talking as much every single day about Crimea does not mean in any way we have forgotten that the illegal invasion — and it's an invasion — by Russia of Crimea will not be accepted by us or the international community.

Poroshenko said that there had been a reduction in the violence in the east of the country, but "unfortunately the war is still raging." He added that the government has made progress in reforms, including the selection of an anti-corruption prosecutor.

Ukrainians See Conflict In Biden's Anticorruption Message

Vice president's son serves on board of closely held Ukrainian oil firm

By Paul Sonne And Laura Mills

Wall Street Journal, December 8, 2015

Full-text stories from the Wall Street Journal are available to Journal subscribers by clicking the link.

Ukraine's Decisive Moment

By Robert Kahn

Council On Foreign Relations, December 7, 2015

Budget debates are often dry affairs, but not so in Kiev. By the end of this month, the Ukrainian parliament (Verkhovna Rada) must decide on a budget that will have profound effects on the future course of the government. The Ministry of Finance has proposed a budget that sets most tax rates at 20 percent, while closing loopholes and holding the deficit to an estimated 3.7 percent of GDP. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has endorsed the plan, and the passage of the bill, or something close

to it, is essential to completing the IMF review and keeping the government's adjustment program on track.

An alternative plan, which is supported by the opposition and, disappointingly, by elements of President Poroshenko's own party, involves a massive tax cut that would reduce rates to a flat rate of 10 percent, causing the deficit to soar to over 10 percent of GDP. A continued IMF role would be ruled out. Following a deep recession from which Ukraine is just starting to recover, populist fiscal policy promising quick fixes understandably is attractive, and opponents of the government may well believe that the government can do it alone without foreign financing (and, importantly, without the rule of law reforms that form the core of the government's IMF-backed program). But it would be a tremendous mistake.

It's important to remember how much has been achieved by this government on the economic front. Against the backdrop of war and a historic political transition, the economic team has carried forward a difficult and ambitious adjustment program. After a fall of GDP of around 20 percent, the economy has stabilized, fiscal deficits have been slashed to levels consistent with available domestic and external financing, and a deep restructuring of the banking sector has been launched. Perhaps more importantly, significant structural reforms have been enacted including hikes in energy prices and a comprehensive rewriting of the legal framework underpinning the economy.

Recently, a broad debt restructuring was completed that provides over $15 billion in cash flow relief over the next three years, as well as a modest reduction in principal. Russia refused to participate and restructure a $3 billion bond due in December, but later this week the IMF Board will meet and agree to a policy change that will allow Ukraine's IMF program to proceed even if the bond is not paid.

Unfortunately, the program has faltered in some important aspects. The move against corruption has stalled in recent months, raising serious concerns among Ukraine's allies whether vested interests were reasserting themselves. Rule of law reforms are central to the IMF program and critical to any effort to break from the past decades of corruption and poor economic performance. But the implementation of these reforms (including paying adequate salaries) is costly. Further, without a sound macroeconomic framework, it will be increasingly hard to sustain popular support for this reform effort. A sound budget is a gateway test for any serious reform effort.

Vice President **Biden** is in Kiev and will speak to the Rada tomorrow. He is expected to deliver a tough measure on the need for Ukraine to jumpstart the reform process, particularly the anti-corruption agenda, and will also promise additional U.S. assistance. This message, which was foreshadowed and endorsed by my colleague Stephen Sestanovich, includes a strong case for an attack on corruption but there also needs to be a stepping up of financial support for the government to allow for a budget that can support the reform effort and enhance security.

A grand bargain is urgently needed. The Ukraine government needs to jumpstart the implementation of rule of law, judiciary and civil service reforms and take on vested interests. President Poroshenko must come out and fully endorse the Ministry of Finance proposal (and his finance minister Natalie Jaresko), and then whip the votes needed to get it passed. And Western governments must provide more bilateral assistance so that Ukrainians can have confidence that the program can succeed and restore growth. Ukraine should not go back.

Joe Biden Is Visiting Ukraine

By Simon Ostrovsky

Vice, December 8, 2015

It's a diplomat's job to stay all smiles and keep the business of international relations chugging along, no matter how bad things look. But sometimes, even diplomats lose their cool.

This week, US Vice President Joe **Biden** is visiting Kiev to tell Ukrainians they still have Washington's support in their fight against Russia and Russia-backed separatists in the country's east. But his message may be overshadowed by the US ambassador to Kiev, who hasn't been acting very diplomatically lately.

At the end of September, Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt got up in front of a group of businessmen and investors at a conference in the city of Odessa and told them that Ukrainian prosecutors were protecting the corrupt owner of an energy company that employs **Biden**'s son, Hunter, instead of prosecuting him.

"We have learned that there have been times when the Prosecutor General's Office not only did not support investigations into corruption, but rather undermined prosecutors working on legitimate corruption cases," Pyatt said in Ukraine's main port city.

Related: The Priest, the Pianist, a Cat, and a DIY Sauna: One Week in Ukraine's Forgotten War

He then pointed specifically to a case involving former Ukrainian Ecology Minister Mykola Zlochevsky, owner of the Burisma Holdings energy firm, which hired Hunter **Biden** to its board of directors shortly after the Euromaidan revolution overthrew Zlochevsky's former boss Viktor Yanukovych.

Burisma likely hired **Biden**'s son in the hopes that some of the family prestige would rub off on the company in the uncertain times that followed the revolution, Daria Kaleniuk, director of Ukraine's Anti-Corruption Action Center, told VICE News.

"They want there to be less suspicion that they're involved in corrupt under-the-table dealings and are instead seen as operating in line with international standards," Kaleniuk said, adding that Burisma received gas production licenses in questionable circumstances under the former regime.

Watch the VICE News dispatch The War May Be Over: Russian Roulette:

Burisma insists it hired the vice president's son to its board because he is an experienced lawyer. "This is totally based on merit," the company's chairman, Alan Apter said when the younger **Biden** was hired.

According to the US ambassador, Hunter **Biden**'s boss Zlochevsky stole $23 million from the Ukrainian people. But when a British court seized the money and asked Ukrainian prosecutors to send documents to confirm the funds were illicit, they stalled, forcing the court to release the assets back to the former ecology minister.

Related: Did the Islamic State Go Shopping For Weapons in Ukraine?

The elder **Biden** arrives in Ukraine at a time when there is no bigger issue than corruption. With the war in the east stabilized for the time being, the media have nominated graft as the country's number one enemy — not Russia.

The vice president also lands after months of acrimony between reformers and Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko over the prosecutor general, who Poroshenko has refused to dismiss despite numerous allegations about abuse of authority.

But the White House wants the focus of **Biden**'s visit to be Ukraine's close alliance with the US. One senior administration official, who asked not to be named, said a major goal was to remind people that Ukraine was not forgotten despite the fact that attention has shifted toward Russia's involvement in

Syria.'That's going to be a major theme of the trip — that nothing that's going on in the Middle East has changed one iota of our commitment to the Ukrainian people.'

"That's going to be a major theme of the trip — that nothing that's going on in the Middle East has changed one iota of our commitment to the Ukrainian people and to their security," the official said in a briefing for journalists.

The official also acknowledged that the administration has had to fall into line with the ambassador's now public views.

"The Office of the Prosecutor General itself is in desperate need of reform," the official said. "And so [**Biden**] has made this very clear to President Poroshenko in previous conversations… So I think we are largely in line with Ambassador Pyatt's sense that much more needs to be done."

Related: Russia Is Freaking Out Its Northern Neighbors

But **Biden**'s meeting with Poroshenko may be a bit awkward, given that the US backs Ukraine on the presumption that it wants to have a Western-style democratic system with checks and balances — not a Russian-style autocracy where anyone who is friends with top officials gets a free pass.

Ukrainian reformers will be watching closely to hear what **Biden** tells the president.

"We have been very happy with the criticism the embassy has been bringing against the prosecutor's office," said Kaleniuk. "It has been very direct. So if **Biden** continues in the same vein and highlights the activities of the prosecutor's office in defending people associated with Burisma, then it will be clear that he is doing his job fairly and is not beholden to narrow family interests."

Follow Simon Ostrovsky on Twitter: @SimonOstrovsky

Biden Presses Russia On Ukraine Peace Deal, Return Of Crimea

By Olga Shylenko And Dmytro Gorshkov

AFP, December 8, 2015

Kiev (AFP) – US Vice President Joe **Biden** said Monday that Washington remained determined to see Russia adhere to a shaky Ukrainian peace agreement and hand back Crimea to Kiev.

Biden's visit is his fourth to Kiev since Russia annexed Ukraine's Black Sea peninsula in March 2014 and then watched with approval as pro-Kremlin fighters carved out their own region in the eastern industrial heart of the ex-Soviet state.

The war-scarred nation now fears slipping off the global radar due to recent international efforts to enlist Moscow in a joint fight against the Islamic State (IS) group in Syria and Iraq.

But **Biden** brought a message of reassurance to Kiev.

"The US stands firmly with the people of Ukraine in the face of continued – I emphasise continued – aggression from Russia and Russian-backed separatists," he told Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko.

Washington's EU allies support Ukraine's view of Russia orchestrating and backing the separatist revolt in reprisal for the February 2014 ouster of a Moscow-backed president – an assertion the Kremlin denies.

Both Washington and Brussels have slapped stiff economic sanctions on Russian President Vladimir Putin's inner circle and have helped train and equip Ukraine's underfunded army with defensive equipment such as advanced radar.

But the situation changed when Russia began launching ferocious air strikes against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's foes on September 30.

Washington accused Putin of trying to prop up his remaining Middle East ally by targeting Syria's Western-backed rebels instead of extremist groups.

– 'Hold Russia accountable' –

Yet the Islamic State's claim of downing a Russian airliner carrying 224 people over Egypt on October 31 appears to have prompted Moscow to focus more on bombing IS's oil infrastructure and other jihadist targets.

The November 13 Paris attacks the IS also claimed saw France make a push to enlist Russia in a "grand coalition" against the jihadist group alongside the United States and some European and Arab states.

Biden said the latest developments in the Middle East in no way appeased Washington's anger with Putin or slackened its support for Poroshenko's pro-Western team.

"The invasion by Russia of Crimea will not be accepted by us or by the international community. This attempted annexation is contrary to international law, is wrong, and will not be accepted in any circumstance," he said.

Biden also hinted that Russia may face additional US sanctions if its peace commitments were not met.

Washington was in contact with "our fellow leaders around the world... to make sure the international community stands and holds Russia accountable for the actions against Ukraine," **Biden** said after meeting with Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk.

"If they do not meet their obligations, (one must) increase the price Russia has to pay for its illegal actions internationally."

– The 'cancer' of corruption –

Biden also spoke out on the issue of graft in a country where morale is sagging due to Poroshenko's seeming inability to tackle the corruption that has plagued Ukraine for much most of its recent years.

Poroshenko's prosecutor general has been accused of blocking investigations and hiring workers who have since been detained with huge stashes of gold and cash in their flats.

"It's absolutely critical for Ukraine... to root out the cancer of corruption," the US vice president said.

"There's a growing degree of popular frustration about the slow pace of the reforms and the efforts to root out corruption," **Biden** warned.

Poroshenko said he agreed that the 19-month war in which more than 8,000 have died "cannot be used as an excuse for failing to conduct reforms."

The Fight Against Graft Goes Online

By Lydia Tomkiw

International Business Times, December 8, 2015

Natalia Shyrba had never even been to the southwestern Ukrainian city of Odessa when she decided to move there in August to take an unpaid job fighting one of the country's biggest problems: corruption. The 26-year-old, who was born in Ukraine, left behind a comfortable life in Philadelphia to help build an online government platform where people can ask questions and submit complaints about day-to-day issues like damaged roads. The service is supposed to reduce face-to-face government interactions and the potential for corrupt officials to extract bribes from desperate citizens, a pervasive problem in the former Soviet republic.

"Here in Ukraine, the biggest issue is that the government is a roadblock to getting things done whereas the government should really be a service for the citizens," Shyrba said. "If you eliminate the human factor, you can eliminate corruption. You can't bribe a computer."

Two years after Ukraine's Euromaidan revolution swept the streets of Kiev with cries to fight corruption and turn the nation westward toward the European Union, a new generation of government activists is working to fight graft by going online. A network of unpaid volunteers across the country is trying to disrupt a deeply entrenched culture of theft by digitizing government services and documents in an effort to create transparency and hold politicians accountable. They face significant challenges, with only 7 percent of Ukrainians recently saying the longtime fight against corruption has shown any results.

Ukraine's push against graft comes after the Euromaidan revolution that began in November 2013 when President Viktor Yanukovych refused to sign an association agreement with the EU. His eventual ouster set off a ripple of events, with Russia annexing Crimea in March 2014 and war breaking out in the eastern Donbass region that has left 8,000 dead. Yanukovych's massive estate replete with a zoo and several mansions was turned into a museum highlighting the country's corruption problem after he fled for Russia in February 2014. Documents left behind at the estate showed how public money was spent to enrich Yanukovych, his family and close associates.

But Ukraine's problems go further than corrupt politicians driving expensive cars and building mansions. Average citizens report paying bribes to low-ranking government workers to either receive basic services or ensure preferential treatment. For example, Ukrainians sometimes must pay health workers extra to receive care and they can guarantee their children will receive higher grades in school by opening their wallets. The endemic corruption has led Transparency International, a global anti-corruption nonprofit, to name Ukraine one of the world's most corrupt nations along with Uganda and the Comoros.

The Department of Information Technologies of the Odessa region meets for a planning meeting in late November to discuss an open budget project, e-petitions and e-medical projects.

Department of Information Technologies of the Odessa region

A big part of putting information online is about gaining trust, Shyrba says, and that will require making Ukrainians comfortable with using online resources and reassuring them it's not a gimmick – someone will actually answer their queries. The team is working on numerous projects such as getting administrative services like passport requests online, as well as some not so "glamorous" projects including teaching older civil servants how to use email and introducing online project management tools.

"There is political pushback," said Shyrba, who works with a 15-person team. "We are trying to break a really old and corrupt system."

Hopes were high that with the May 2014 election of Ukraine's current president, Petro Poroshenko, reforms and the fight against theft would begin in earnest, but change has been slow. During a visit to Kiev to discuss the ongoing war, U.S. Vice President Joe **Biden** urged Ukrainians Monday to "root out the cancer of corruption."

"It's the issue of the country's survival," said Daria Kaleniuk, 28, executive director of the Anti-Corruption Action Center, a Ukrainian civil society organization based in Kiev with 15 staff members mainly in their 20s. "If we don't succeed in the this war [against corruption], we risk losing the whole country."

Constructive 'Hackers'

When the prime minister of Ukraine asked Denis Gursky, 30, to join him for a meeting this spring he never expected to walk out of the government building as the leader's open data adviser. The IT professional had been working with other civil society organizations to create an open data law for Ukraine that was passed in April and requires government agencies to publish their data online in machine-readable form and also on a national open data portal. Gursky now envisions a world where any

Ukrainian can sit down at their kitchen table and look at online registries to see how a country long plagued by corruption is spending its money.

Ukraine has a growing IT sector and a large talent pool that often makes news for all the wrong reasons with headlines such as "U.S. Identifies Insider Trading Ring With Ukraine Hackers." But as the government takes steps to implement the open data law by its March 2016 deadline, Gursky said he hopes more of the country's IT professionals will be drawn to working with public officials on projects citizens need and want.

"We have to provide real data to people about finances, budgeting and everything that is possible," Gursky said. He estimates the cost of maintaining the national open data portal will be around $1 million a year.

Some financial information has already been put online, including registries of companies and property the government owns. Journalist Andrii Bashtovyi, 25, co-founder of Hromadske TV, a journalism outlet born during Ukraine's revolution, says his media organization has been able to publish stories about money stolen from the country's war effort because of the open registries.

There are other signs that Ukraine's anti-graft campaign has made strides. Last month, 30-year-old Nazar Kholodnytsky was appointed Ukraine's top anti-corruption prosecutor.

"The job of the [anti-corruption] bureau is to uncover large-scale corruption," said Alexander Motyl, a professor of political science at Rutgers University in Newark, New Jersey, who specializes in Ukraine. "They are supposed to go after the big fry ... there is a lot of hope they will be able to do it."

But open data and e-government initiatives will get Ukraine only so far, experts say. Activists have also called on Ukrainian lawmakers to privatize some of the over 1,800 state corporations that continue to allow oligarchs and politicians to siphon off state funds. Experts estimate that well over 1,000 state corporations could be sold off or eliminated to reduce theft in key sectors including energy and infrastructure.

E-government reforms "won't address billion-dollar kickbacks in the energy sector," Motyl said. "It's relatively small-scale, but on the other hand these are the things that concern most people."

Ukraine is also grappling with crucial financial problems that could slow down efforts to invest in record keeping and online services. The International Monetary Fund has vowed to bail out Ukraine with a multibillion-dollar package and the World Bank has predicted a 12 percent decline in gross domestic product this year.

But advocates of putting more government records online say national lawmakers must prioritize transparency to nurture citizens' faith in Ukraine's future.

"We are moving in slow steps," said Bashtovyi, the investigative journalist. "But we should constantly see progress and constantly see people going to prison if they are stealing money."

Mr. Biden Goes To Ukraine

By Brian Whitmore

Radio Free Europe, December 8, 2015

Washington sends a loud signal that Ukraine remains a priority as U.S. Vice President Joe **Biden** arrived in Kyiv for a two-day visit this week.

The visit – in which **Biden** will deliver a highly anticipated speech to the Ukrainian parliament – comes at a particularly sensitive time.

Kyiv is clearly worried that the Syria conflict and the potential for Western cooperation with Russia will weaken resolve to continue supporting Ukraine.

On this week's Power Vertical Briefing, I discuss what we can expect from **Biden**'s visit with RFE/RL Senior Editor Steve Gutterman.

Enjoy...

Biden Pledges US Support, Seeks Stronger Action On Rule Of Law

By Johannes Wamberg Andersen

Kyiv Post (Ukraine), December 8, 2015

U.S. Vice President Joseph **Biden**'s message to Ukraine remains consistent: The United States will continue to support, but Ukraine's leaders need to do more to fight corruption and create a strong judicial system.

Biden is scheduled speak before the Ukrainian parliament at 11 a.m. on Dec. 8.

After meeting **Biden** upon arrival at Kyiv Boryspil International Airport late on Dec. 6, Kyiv Mayor Vitali Klitschko said that **Biden** stressed that faster reforms were essential to national development, "especially of the justice system."

Later, during a joint public statement with President Petro Poroshenko, **Biden** said he saw signs of progress but that more needs to be done with overhauling the judicial system, which is widely distrusted among Ukrainians as corrupt, politically subservient and ineffective.

He pledged that the U.S. "would stand by your side as you strengthen the rule of law … from top to bottom," pointing to the new patrol police force as something tangible.

Biden also said that "there is no democracy in the world without strong civil society." He met with civil society leaders, members of parliament and some government officials earlier in the day. Some participants described the talks as an intensive discussion over Ukraine's continuing corruption in high places.

Poroshenko, in turn, thanked **Biden** for U.S. support including training assistance to the new police force.

Timothy Ash, an analyst for Nomura International, said "the US is concerned at backsliding from the Poroshenko administration – particularly over the issue of the rule of law."

According to an anonymous Washington top official cited by Western news services, **Biden** was expected to ask Poroshenko to have Prosecutor General Viktor Shokin replaced. Seen as a key obstacle to the pursuit of justice, the powerful Shokin is criticized for stalling high-level cases against former officials.

Poroshenko defended his record, saying that the recent establishment of new anti-corruption bodies showed that the nation is on the right track.

Pledging $190 million in fresh financial U.S. aid to Ukraine, **Biden** hammered the anti-graft message home, saying the U.S. money is earmarked for the fight against corruption, not for defense or other needs. The U.S. has provided a total of $660 million plus $2 billion in loan guarantees since last year, with a third $1 billion possible.

Political analyst Vyacheslav Potapenko said that a number of large state-owned enterprises depended on corrupt deals for their survival.

Kyiv Post staff writer Johannes Wamberg Andersen can be reached at johannes.wa@gmail.com

Signs Of Economic Progress Noticeable In Ukraine

Interfax (UKR), December 8, 2015

U.S. Vice President Joseph **Biden** has said that economic progress is noticeable in Ukraine.

"We with the president discussed the progress that has occurred in Ukraine during this time... We started to notice the signs of economic progress. GDP started rising, industrial production began to grow, and exports of agricultural products have increased. The Ukrainian currency has stabilized," he said at a joint briefing with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko in Kyiv.

Pushkov Called The Union Biden To Poroshenko Barren

Russian Information Network, December 8, 2015

Head of the state Duma on international Affairs Alexei Pushkov explained the message of the Vice-President of the United States Joseph **Biden** about the fact that he more talks with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, than with his own wife.

"the joke **Biden** that he talks with Poroshenko more often than with his wife, is the truth. But it is the result of painfully disappointing. Barren Union ", ? wrote Pushkov in Twitter.

before the first day of the week Vice President Joe **Biden** said that more talks with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, than with his own wife. Before that, **Biden** said that North America provide Ukraine with 190 million dollars in financial aid to conduct reforms. On Sunday, the White house said that **Biden** left on a visit to Ukraine. In November, the White house announced the visit of Joe **Biden** to Ukraine on 7 December. This will be the fifth trip of the Vice-President to Ukraine. On 6 November, Joe **Biden** promised that North America will provide for the battle with illegal activities of officials and the implementation of tax reform in Ukraine the third tranche of $ 1 billion. At the end of October the Head of the U.S. Department of Commerce penny Pritzker stated that the U.S. President Barack Obama is going to take steps to provide the 3rd tranche of macroeconomic aid to Ukraine for reforms in the country in the coming months.

Joe Biden Likely To Bring Harsh Criticism To Ukraine

By Frank Hoffman

Deutsche Welle (DEU), December 8, 2015

It took over a year and a half for Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko to even begin implementing his most important campaign promise: On December 1, a new head of the anti-corruption prosecution agency was finally appointed, and now the office is ready to start working. US officials think this took far too long, and they are losing patience with Ukraine's government, especially since Prosecutor General Viktor Shokin, a Poroshenko confidant, has delayed filling the anti-corruption position. In September of this year, Geoffrey Pyatt, the US ambassador to Kyiv, took an unusual step. He tweeted – albeit in a convoluted, diplomatic manner – his demand for Shokin's dismissal.

But Poroshenko is holding on to Shokin, a man who has been accused of leading an extremely corrupt state apparatus. After Euromaidan, the judiciary holds great emotional significance for Ukrainians. Almost 100 people were killed in the revolt two years ago.

"The entire Prosecutor General's Office must urgently be reformed," a high-ranking US official demanded ahead of Joe **Biden**'s visit to Kyiv, where the US vice president is scheduled to start holding meetings on Monday. Ukraine has a "long history of corruption," the official said, requesting anonymity to speak candidly. **Biden**'s schedule for the visit reflects how low respect for Ukraine's leadership has sunk in the United States: The vice president will speak with representatives of pro-EU civil society groups before holding talks with politicians.

Biden will put pressure on the Ukrainian government, the US official said, and "the recently adopted anti-corruption reforms will be implemented." The vice president will probably urge Ukraine's government

to force Shokin to resign. Diplomats in Kyiv are becoming increasingly distraught with regard to the placatory attitude of Ukrainian leaders.

It seems questionable that the required judicial reform will be swiftly implemented. Poroshenko's people are being advised by the European Council in Strasbourg – an institution that is not known for quick reforms. Behind the scenes, a Japanese diplomat insisted that the entire Ukrainian judiciary be thrown out. In the past, judges often acted as trustees, representing the interests of oligarchs. Japanese officials suggest that the Ukrainian government dismiss all its jurists and then start a "recruitment campaign" to put "judges with integrity" in office. This has already worked for Ukraine's new traffic police, for which Japan has donated about 1,300 cars. Since summer, the hybrid vehicles have zipped around Kyiv, blue lights flashing to give a sense of security. Above all, these actions are meant to say, "We are doing something." Now it turns out that the police patrols just showcase a proclaimed change in politics, but, behind the display, many moldy structures prevail.

This also applies to political structures. It is striking how intricately entangled they are with Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk's milieu. That is why Yatsenuk confidant Mykola Martynenko remains chairman of the energy committee in Ukraine's unicameral parliament, or Rada, although Switzerland has been directing investigations into him for at least half a year. Martynenko is suspected of transferring bribes worth millions to a Swiss account. It is doubtful that the Ukrainian prosecutor general has provided the Swiss with satisfactory support.

Conflict with Russia as an excuse?

The accused just shrug the allegations off. In other European countries, officials would break out in a cold sweat just thinking about the consequences, but German bank managers in Kyiv say Ukrainians cynically sneer at the idea of "honorable gentlemen." Martynenko himself speaks of a Russian conspiracy against him. Last Monday he stated that he would resign from parliament, but his departure has not been voted on yet.

All in all, many Ukrainian leaders use the conflict with Russia as an excuse for their failure to act. Instead of building democratic structures, the country seems to be stabilizing the old system of oligarchy, cronyism and corruption. Russian President Vladimir Putin has thus achieved his goal of halting Ukraine's establishing stronger bonds with the United States and EU. The excesses of the judiciary are reminiscent of the situation in Russia, where prosecutors are involved in shady dealings and act arbitrarily.

Ukrainian authorities are also known for violations of freedom of speech, another similarity the country has with Russia. The critical blogger Ruslan Kozaba has been in custody since February. His crime: He spoke out against the civil war in eastern Ukraine.

Apparently, the blogger was reported to authorities by a volunteer who works for the Security Service of Ukraine. The 31,000-employee SBU appears to serve as the third element in the justice system and is also traditionally a tool of oligarchic interests. But US officials say the days of standing by and watching are over: The grace period has apparently come to an end.

Commentary: What To Expect From Biden's Visit To Ukraine?

By Maksym Beznosiuk

New Eastern Europe, December 8, 2015

US Vice President Joe **Biden** is paying a two day visit to Ukraine which has already been labeled as "historic" by many experts. In spite of the fact it is his fourth visit to post-Maidan Ukraine, **Biden** will be the second American politician from such a high rank to give a speech at the Ukrainian Parliament. Former President George H.W. Bush was the first high-ranking US official who addressed Ukrainian

parliamentarians on August 1st, 1991, which occurred only three weeks prior to its declaration of independence.

As part of his visit on December 7th, 2015, Joe **Biden** is expected to participate in roundtable talks with state and civil representatives and bilateral meetings with Ukraine's President Poroshenko and Prime Minister Yatseniyk. The next day, he will give a speech before the Ukrainian Parliament.

Without a doubt, such a visit is of crucial importance and demonstrates US support of Ukrainian sovereignty and closer convergence with the West. This is in light of ongoing Russian attempts to further destabilise Ukraine's situation.

It is expected **Biden**'s message will consist of alarming criticism of persistent corruption and slow progress, mixed with additional assurances of further support and cooperation with Ukraine towards its integration with Europe. Hence, the assessment of the overall Ukrainian political situation will be based on the combination of such crucial factors as securing political stability and enhancing anti-corruption measures' efficiency. Not surprisingly, such an important visit will take place before Ukraine's annual governmental report on its government's activity results, as well as its plans for the next year.

Fight against corruption, economic reforms and financial assistance

According to some predictions, Vice President **Biden** will voice concern over the urgency of more active reforms of structural and institutional aspects of the Ukrainian state apparatus. Notably, the White House has serious concerns regarding the quality and pace of current economic and judicial reforms, especially in relation to prevalent corruption schemes in high echelons of Ukrainian power.

Special attention will be paid to the judicial sector. It should be recalled that during his speech at the Brookings Institution at the end of May, 2015, **Biden** particularly emphasised Ukraine needs to use newly introduced laws and policies to investigate and prosecute corruption on all levels in order for its reforms to succeed. **Biden** also mentioned his frequent communication on a weekly basis, both with the Ukrainian Prime Minister and President. Moreover, US Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt has criticised the General Prosecutor's Office on numerous occasions, by stressing its responsibility in fighting corruption in Ukraine. On September 24th, 2015, Ambassador Pyatt stated during the Odessa Financial Forum the General Prosecutor's Office's inability to fight corruption undermines effective reform implementation in Ukraine.

For a long time, the White House has tried to convey a powerful and clear message to Ukraine's leaders concerning the need to undertake more active efforts against corruption. In light of this heightened concern over high corruption levels and the Ukrainian authorities' lack of action, many Ukrainian experts have assumed the General Prosecutor's, Prime Minister's and several other high ranking Ukrainian officials' political futures could be seriously questioned.

Most importantly, the question of stable US financial assistance to Ukraine is closely tied to progress in conducting anti-corruption reforms within Ukraine's state institutions. In June, Ukrainian Prime Minister Yatseniuk met with US Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew to discuss an additional tranche of 1 billion dollars to support Ukrainian reforms in order to increase Ukraine's investment attractiveness and lay foundations for its economic growth. At the end of October, 2015, US Secretary of Commerce Penny Pritzker stated the readiness of US President Barack Obama to take necessary steps towards granting a third tranche of macroeconomic assistance to Ukraine to implement its reforms. During her recent meeting with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, she emphasised that visible and steady Ukrainian progress in implementing anti-corruption measures were a prerequisite for new financial assistance in the near future.

Last month, Joe **Biden** confirmed the US' readiness to grant Ukraine a third tranche of credit guarantees of 1 billion dollars. However, he emphasised Ukraine's government should fight corruption

more actively, including conducing tax reforms in compliance with the IMF. Possible US assistance in reaching an agreement on the Ukraine's debt restructuring will also be predicated on these conditions.

Security and military cooperation

US presidential administration officials stated Joe **Biden** would underline US support of Ukraine's territorial integrity in his speech at the Ukrainian Parliament. He will reiterate the US' position concerning Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and its current involvement in desabilizing eastern Ukraine. In this regard, it is also expected he will reassure Ukrainian leaders that any US communication with Russia over Syria's situation will not impact its position concerning Ukraine. Additionally, a diplomatic strategy to keep sanctions against Russia will be discussed with Ukrainian counterparts.

Ukraine's army requires serious investment, specialised military experience and modernisation assistance . In 2015, thanks to **Biden**'s active involvement, the US provided Ukraine security and military assistance totaling $265 million. Earlier this year, the US committed to training Ukrainian troops, a mission conducted by 300 US soldiers at a compound in western Ukraine. The US also provided specialised military equipment which was transferred to the country's eastern battle zone. According to the National Defense Authorisation Act for the 2016 Fiscal Year, approved by the US Senate, it could be possible to increase assistance to $300 million. However, it is not clear if **Biden** will touch upon possible additional military assistance to Ukraine during his visit early next week.

Based on this, Vice President **Biden**'s visit is expected to reaffirm the US' support of Ukraine on its path towards democratisation and its struggle against Russian hostile activities in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. Simultaneously, the US will emphasise that further comprehensive support of Ukraine will depend on the tempo and quality of a broad range of reforms within Ukraine's state apparatus.

Maksym Beznosiuk is an international relations specialist from Kyiv, Ukraine.

NEW YORK TIMES AND WASHINGTON POST OP-EDS

The Big Hole In Obama's Islamic State Strategy

By David Ignatius

Washington Post, December 7, 2015

At the center of President Obama's strategy for dealing with the Islamic State is an empty space. It's supposed be filled by a hypothetical "Sunni ground force," but after more than a year of effort, it's still not there. Unless this gap is filled, Obama's plan won't work.

Otherwise, Obama made a reasonable case in his speech to the nation Sunday night. He's right to argue for patience and persistence in fighting the Muslim terrorists, rather than "tough talk." He's correct that the United States shouldn't feed the jihadists' fantasies with "a long and costly ground war." And especially right that we'll be safer at home and abroad if most Muslims are allies against the extremists.

But there was a mysterious black box in the middle of Obama's speech. Here's how he tried to explain it: "The strategy that we are using now — airstrikes, special forces and working with local forces who are fighting to regain control of their own country — that is how we'll achieve a more sustainable victory."

What "local forces" is Obama talking about? If he means Kurdish fighters in Iraq and Syria, yes, they've performed admirably. In Kurdish areas. They don't want to clear and hold the Sunni heartland of the Islamic State, nor should they. If Obama is talking about the Shiite-led Iraqi military, their performance is still just barely adequate, even backed by American air power, and they're disdained and mistrusted by

the Sunnis of Ramadi, Fallujah and Mosul. If he's talking about the Islamist brigades in Syria armed by Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar, it's still not entirely clear whether they're friend or foe.

The disturbing fact is that a strong, reliable, indigenous Sunni ground force doesn't exist yet in Iraq or Syria. The United States has been trying to fix this problem since the fall of Mosul in June 2014, with very little success. We're like the joke about the starving economist who needs to open a can of beans on a desert island and posits: "Assume we had a can opener!"

Consider the false hopes and missed connections over the past year: In Iraq, U.S. trainers were dispatched to Al Asad and Al Taqaddum air bases in Anbar province to train thousands of Sunni tribal fighters. The tribesmen mostly didn't show up, and no wonder: The Shiite-led government in Baghdad still refuses to approve a Sunni "national guard" with real power. In Syria, Congress authorized a $500 million plan to train and equip a largely Sunni force to fight the Islamic State. Only a few hundred signed up, instead of the expected 5,000, and the first wave of fighters walked into a trap and was savaged by jihadists in northern Syria.

Why have these efforts gone so badly, and what needs to be fixed? Basically, I'd argue that Sunnis don't trust an America that turned their world upside down in the 2003 invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein. Tribal leaders have been our default Sunni strategy ever since: We're trying now to use them as mercenaries against the Islamic State. But it's a corrupt bargain on both sides.

The Sunni no-show problem illustrates a deeper trauma. Across the Middle East, Sunnis are experiencing a kind of vertigo. The Sunni powerhouses — Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Libya — are in ruins. The people feel dispossessed and disillusioned, disgusted with the autocrats who ruled them before and the religious fanatics who want to rule them today.

Filling this Sunni vacuum with new self-confidence will be the work of a generation, but it must start now, for it's an essential part of defeating the jihadists. The West's best think tanks should be working on this problem; the Arab world's brightest young activists should be making plans for governance and economic development. Global institutions such as the United Nations, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund should be developing plans for trusteeship, reconstruction and governance.

It's 1944 in the Arab world: Defeating the jihadists demands the creation of a healthy Sunni body politic.

What would a revived Sunni heartland in Iraq and Syria look like? Well, you can get a pretty good idea by examining Iraqi Kurdistan. It flowered under a U.S. no-fly zone known as " Operation Provide Comfort" that started in 1991. Under this protective cover, investment, security and political stability came together in a virtuous cycle.

When we think about the future of Iraq and Syria, we should have in mind vibrant Sunni provinces that, like Kurdistan, are part of a loose federal state. In building a strategy for defeating the Islamic State, creating this "Sunnistan" will be the long pole in the tent.

Republicans Ignore The Lessons Of World War II

By Dana Milbank

Washington Post, December 7, 2015

Dec. 7, 2015: A date which will live in immaturity.

President Obama addressed the nation Sunday night from the Oval Office, a rare use of the sacred symbols of the presidency to reassure Americans about their security while steeling them for a long and complex struggle against the Islamic State.

And the loyal opposition answered his rallying cry over the next day with a patriotic display of carping and dyspepsia.

Donald Trump answered Obama's call for tolerance by declaring that no Muslims should be permitted to enter the United States: "We need a new president — FAST!"

Marco Rubio proclaimed a "growing sense we have a president who is completely overwhelmed."

From Republicans on Capitol Hill came a profusion of insults and epithets. "Repackaged half measures . . . Tone deaf . . . sales pitch for the status quo . . . President Obama is riding the bench at T-ball today."

It was tiresome. There's a real case to be made that Obama's minimalist strategy isn't working. But the only thing this reflexive complaining does is divide the country further and make a coherent response to Islamic State more difficult.

Rather than cover this National Day of Carping, I went to the World War II Memorial on the Mall, where 20 veterans of that war were observing the 74th anniversary of the Pearl Harbor attack. There, I met Dale "Red" Robinson, a Pearl Harbor survivor and a staff sergeant in the infantry who was later part of the Normandy landing. He recalled the national unity of that war and lamented the divisions that make fighting this one so difficult.

"We were gung-ho. Everybody was," said Robinson, who is almost 94 but whose blue eyes are as clear as his mind. "Nothing like this, these days. It's sad, kind of sad, my friend."

Robinson said he feels "sorry for all of the soldiers" serving today, let down by their political leaders. And he sees little chance of these leaders finding their way. "How could you change this bunch now?"

One thing we can do is admonish them to follow, or at least remember, the example of Robinson's generation. That's what Monday afternoon's ceremony was about. A sailor rang a bell at 1:57 p.m. Eastern time, the moment 74 years earlier when Japanese planes struck, and 2,400 Americans were soon lost with much of the Pacific Fleet.

A military band played the national anthem and, in the front row, the able-bodied veterans stood, some rising from their wheelchairs, and snapped salutes or put hands to hearts. Later, while the band played "America the Beautiful," the veterans, some wheeled, some walking with support, made a slow procession around the memorial's pool to place wreaths, and to hear the sounding of taps.

Rear Adm. Craig Faller addressed the old men. "We live all of us today with the prosperity and the security built on the shoulders of these heroes," he said. "Our challenge as we face the uncertainty and complexity associated with today's threats is to live up to the example of our World War II veterans."

That's our challenge — and we're failing.

One of the vets, Laura Mays, told me he finds it "very scary" that the nation is so divided in confronting Islamic State. "The difference is the uncertainty of today, and it's a big difference," said Mays, who was a fireman on the USS Oconto and saw action in the Pacific. "Back then we knew we were strong and . . . we felt that we were supported."

Mays, from Texas, said he thinks political leaders aren't as patriotic as those who sent him to war. "I thought they were more loyal, more concerned about the nation than their position," he said. Now, "it just seems like everything they do, right or wrong — and mostly wrong — is [because] it'll get them somewhere." Mays complained about the sharp partisan divisions in Congress. "How can we bring unity when you have that?"

Mays and his contemporaries, facing a common enemy, mobilized and sacrificed, regardless of political ideology. Now, our representatives can't even manage to come up with a resolution authorizing the use of military force against the Islamic State — and they've been at it for a year. "I think it's time for

Congress to vote to demonstrate that the American people are united and committed to this fight," Obama said Sunday night.

House Speaker Paul D. Ryan responded to this call to unite by deriding Obama's speech as "just a half-hearted attempt to defend and distract from a failing policy." Ryan said we are "one step behind our enemy."

It does sometimes feel that way. But the opposition has yet to propose a constructive alternative — and the constant sniping at each other does nothing to defeat the Islamic State. As those old soldiers on the Mall taught us, victory comes from unity.

Twitter: @Milbank

In Fighting Terrorism, Patience Is Not A Virtue

By Michael Gerson

Washington Post, December 8, 2015

In his address to the nation on terrorism, President Obama warned against "tough talk." On this, at least, no one can accuse him of hypocrisy.

In the aftermath of recent attacks, Obama perfunctorily ticked off a series of inputs: airstrikes, arming and training Iraqi and Syrian forces, cooperating with allies on counterterrorism and pursuing a cease-fire in the Syrian conflict. And then he issued this directive: "I've ordered the Departments of State and Homeland Security to review the visa-waiver program." Who at the White House thought it would be helpful for the commander in chief, after a terrorist attack on the U.S. homeland, to order an interdepartmental review process?

Obama gave a speech of reassurance for a policy that appears to be collapsing. The Islamic State has solidified control of vast territory and is displaying many of the characteristics of an actual nation. It has attracted jihadists from around the world to the conflict in Syria and Iraq, many of whom will return home with deadly skills. With the Paris attacks, the Islamic State has demonstrated the strategic capacity to strike in Western capitals. It counts affiliates in about a dozen nations, including a particularly successful Libyan branch operation. And it has become a rallying point for self-radicalization, as close as a Facebook pledge of allegiance.

Before the events of the past few weeks, it might have been possible to argue that Obama's anaconda plan of slow strangulation could work in, say, five years. But is the threat revealed in Paris and elsewhere acceptable for five years? In this case, patience is a dangerous course.

In his speech, Obama talked of a 65-nation coalition fighting the Islamic State and claimed that France, Germany and the United Kingdom "have ramped up their contributions to our military campaign." But when France decided to take action after the Paris attacks, it invoked an obscure passage of the European Union treaty to avoid a NATO commitment that might offend Russia and imply U.S. leadership. Germany has tested the boundaries of its constitution to make a small military contribution (up to six planes and 1,200 soldiers) in solidarity with France, not the United States. And our country has generally rejected the Eisenhower role of supreme commander in a coalition of the willing — constrained by political commitments (" no boots on the ground") and highly restrictive rules of engagement.

Obama's strategy has many elements that any future president, Republican or Democrat, would adopt. The only things missing are urgency and leadership. The president should convene his security team and ask: What would it take to degrade the Islamic State's capabilities to strike in the West within one year? And to defeat it completely in two? Then the president should assemble a coalition sufficient to that task, composed of forces from European allies, boots on the ground from Sunni nations and a more

aggressive U.S. support role (much larger Special Operations forces to assist on the front lines, forward air controllers, relaxed rules of engagement).

Obama is correct that a parallel political track is essential. Syria will require a Lebanon-esque peace, in which minorities (including the Alawites) are granted protection and power. It will be necessary to somehow re-convince the Sunni tribal leaders in Iraq that, if they fight the Islamic State, they will find protection and fair treatment in a unified country, instead of living under Shiite despotism.

The complexity of this military and diplomatic task would challenge any president. It is pretty much inconceivable that the "ender of wars" would suddenly assume this role in his seventh year in office. Obama has consistently done the minimal amount necessary to avoid the charge of fecklessness.

Obama's call for tolerance of the Islamic faith is more than minimal; it is essential. But even this is put at risk by the broader crisis. "A continued failure to recognize the scale of the challenge and to construct the means necessary to meet it," says former British prime minister Tony Blair, "will result in terrorist attacks potentially worse than those in Paris, producing a backlash which then stigmatizes the majority of decent, law-abiding Muslims and puts the very alliance so necessary at risk, creating a further cycle of chaos and violence."

This is the challenge of the United States' involvement in the Middle East. Because it is politically unpopular, there is a natural temptation to disengage. But after attacks, engagement will come — with more anger, on worse terms.

Obama's Brave Admission About Terrorism

By Eugene Robinson

Washington Post, December 7, 2015

"A cancer that has no immediate cure" was not the most soothing metaphor President Obama could have chosen, but it was the most honest. He has no idea how to prevent another terrorist attack like the one in San Bernardino — and neither does anyone else, including his Republican critics.

The president used that somber phrase in his Oval Office address Sunday to describe what "many Americans are asking." The answer was implicit: Yes, that is indeed what we face, and the cure for the disease will take time.

The specific actions Obama demanded from Congress are no-brainers. Yes, individuals on terrorism watch lists should be prohibited from buying guns. Yes, the sale of military-style assault rifles should be banned. Yes, there should be better screening of foreigners who enter the country without a visa.

But none of these measures would have stopped the barbaric assault in San Bernardino, Calif., that killed 14 and injured 21. That's no reason to reject the president's initiatives — the steps he proposed might well stop some future attack or at least reduce the carnage — but it means we must all be realistic about the "new phase" of the terrorist threat that the president so soberly described.

"As we've become better at preventing complex, multifaceted attacks like 9/11," Obama said, "terrorists turned to less complicated acts of violence like the mass shootings that are all too common in our society."

We saw this new pattern at Fort Hood, Tex., in 2009, when Army Maj. Nidal Malik Hasan fatally shot 13 people and wounded 32 others; in Chattanooga, Tenn., in July of this year, when Mohammad Youssef Abdulazeez killed five people at an Armed Forces Career Center and a U.S. Navy Reserve center; and last week in San Bernardino, when Syed Rizwan Farook and his wife, Tashfeen Malik, raked a county health department holiday party with gunfire before dying in a last-stand shootout with police.

There is no indication that any of these attacks was organized and directed by the Islamic State, al-Qaeda or any other known terrorist organization. Rather, they appear to be instances of do-it-yourself terrorism, inspired by events overseas but resulting from a process that authorities cannot reliably detect in advance: self-radicalization.

In a free society with more guns than people, there was no way to see any of these terrorist acts coming — any more than there was a way to know beforehand that a young white supremacist named Dylann Roof would allegedly show up at a prayer meeting at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, S.C., and kill nine innocent black worshipers.

The Republican candidates for president, obviously, have no answers. Sen. Marco Rubio (Fla.) scoffed that "I don't hear anybody talking about bomb control," noting that Farook and Malik apparently put together an arsenal of pipe bombs. But none of those devices was successfully detonated. It's hard to build a bomb and even harder to make it explode when and where you choose. The San Bernardino victims all died from gunshots; the assailants were armed with semiautomatic assault rifles that had been modified to make them more lethal.

So would common-sense gun control measures make a difference? I've argued repeatedly that they might, but let's be realistic. There are so many guns already in circulation that anyone who wants one can get one. California has an assault-weapons ban, theoretically, but there is a loophole that made the weapons used in San Bernardino — clearly military-style assault rifles — legal for sale and purchase.

What methods remain of possibly preventing attacks? Donald Trump wants increased surveillance of mosques, but aside from the constitutional questions about such action, there is no indication it would have made a difference in San Bernardino. The National Security Agency program to log all domestic phone calls — which ended last week — apparently failed, over the years, to uncover a single terrorist plot; reinstating it would be useless.

Tougher visa rules might conceivably have raised questions about Malik, who was born in Pakistan and got a visa to enter the United States as Farook's fiancee. But Farook was a U.S. citizen, born in Chicago.

The truth is that self-radicalization is by definition an interior process. It requires no telltale communications with known terrorist suspects and can take place with no outward signs of any change.

The existence of the Islamic State "caliphate" is obviously an inspiration to potential terrorists; if it were gone, presumably the threat would eventually subside. Obama's plan to "destroy" the group is cautious, slow and uncertain. But the one thing I haven't heard from his critics is a better idea.

Look At What You've Done, Wayne LaPierre

By Richard Cohen

Washington Post, December 7, 2015

Years ago, I rushed up the stairs to the Tobacco Institute in Washington and confronted the people working there: How could you? How could you lie to us about the dangers of smoking? Everyone there was smoking, I remember that, and I either referred to a mound of bodies outside the door or wanted to. Now I want to do something similar — rush to the National Rifle Association and confront Wayne LaPierre, its chief executive, and yell, "LaPierre, look what you've done."

The "done" refers to San Bernardino. It refers to Planned Parenthood and Columbine and Sandy Hook. It refers to Roseburg and Chattanooga, Charleston, Fort Hood and every place of mass killing, where some crazy person, some lunatic, someone who thinks he's got the thumbs-up from God, had the

legal right to get a gun, often an assault rifle, a weapon of war, and then just shoot away — rat-a-tat-tat. Bodies everywhere. You did this, LaPierre. You and your NRA.

Oh, I know: Don't personalize this, Cohen. If LaPierre weren't the head of the NRA, someone else would be. Someone else would warn us about what would happen if assault weapons were banned — "jack-booted government thugs" would "break in our doors, seize our guns, destroy our property and even injure or kill us," LaPierre once said.

Even if the NRA didn't exist, we would still be a nation just moony over guns. If we did away with assault weapons, the day-to-day threat would still be the handgun. You can't shove a .223- caliber assault rifle in your pocket or put it into the glove compartment of your car. Still, it was two assault rifles that were used to murder 14 people in San Bernardino. Two otherwise ordinary individuals, dressed as soldiers, went to war.

The United States' inability to control guns has made it dizzy with incoherence. The president draped the august Oval Office around himself to give a speech in which he said nothing. Looking like a man in need of some Zoloft, Obama said he would respond to the murders in California by increasing the pressure on the Islamic State in Syria. He also mentioned that there's no evidence that the shooters had been in touch with the Islamic State, so bombing it, while always a good idea, in this case is just beside the point.

The Republicans have an even worse idea. Realizing that they have to come up with something, the GOP is considering putting more money into mental-health programs. More money for mental health is always welcome, but just how it relates to mass murders is beyond me. Should the government troll the streets looking for people who talk to themselves? Did House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy (Calif.) — "mental health . . . seems to be a core problem" — notice that there was nothing untoward in the behavior of Syed Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik? Farook had a job. The couple just had a child. They were normal, until they were not. (McCarthy, cure thyself.)

We cannot predict a homicidal act. The shooter is almost always described as a loner. Is being alone a crime? Shall we criminalize shyness? Will Donald Trump let us use his guys to round up the introverted while sweeping for Mexicans? (How's that for synergy, Donald?)

The one thing we can do — the thing we and every other nation know how to do — is restrict gun ownership. In the past, that was not considered either un-American or unfeasible. In 1969, Milton S. Eisenhower, the former president of Johns Hopkins University, the brother of an ex-president and the very personification of a stolid Republican, recommended the confiscation of handguns. As far as I know, no one considered Eisenhower a left-wing kook.

The solution to the menace of domestic terrorism is staring us in the face. It is some sort of gun control. We cannot close down the Internet so that the Islamic State's siren call cannot reach the susceptible. We cannot cull our population for the potentially homicidal. We cannot — we must not — monitor or surveil Muslims in general. Instead, we must look at all these incidents and see what they have in common: guns.

So, excuse me if I do personalize this crisis. It's about guns and the NRA and chicken politicians who know right from wrong but vote wrong. It's about common sense and taking responsibility for your actions. It's about LaPierre and the NRA. Open the door, Wayne. See what you've done. See the bodies.

Millennials' Mysterious Support For Permissive Gun Laws

By Catherine Rampell

Washington Post, December 8, 2015

When I was in middle and high school, there were spirited public debates about whether the proliferation of grisly movies, gore-glorifying song lyrics and shoot-'em-up video games might desensitize my peers and me to violence.

While I'm reluctant to pin any of this on pop culture, it's true that my generation appears somewhat inured to violence — at least violence involving firearms.

A decade or two post-adolescence — as our own preschool-age children now practice "active shooter" drills in which they're coached to cower in the closet or throw toys at a tactical-gear-outfitted maniac — millennials seem to have neither the desire nor the willpower to pressure our political leaders to do much to prevent such tragedies. If anything, we may be slightly more blasé about them than our elders.

Which does not bode well for liberals hoping that the arc of history will eventually bend toward greater gun control.

Poll data about views of gun control and specific gun-control measures are mixed, and responses vary depending how questions are asked. But statements about protecting gun rights generally elicit at least as much support from younger Americans as from older ones.

Gallup regularly asks, for example, whether "laws covering the sale of firearms should be made more strict, less strict, or kept as they are now." Over the past two years, about 49 percent of American adults under 35 have said they support "more strict" gun laws, compared with 56 percent of those 55 and older.

Two other recent surveys, from the Pew Research Center and The Post/ABC News, also asked about the relative importance of protecting gun rights versus other objectives, such as controlling gun ownership or reducing gun violence. Both found that about half of Americans young and old believe gun rights should take priority.

This is a bit puzzling, given that younger Americans are less Republican in their political leanings than older people are and are also less likely to own a gun — two factors that are usually strong predictors of opposition to gun restrictions. These survey data suggest, then, that younger people might be especially predisposed to oppose gun-control measures, after controlling for these variables.

The survey questions I've cited so far are of course relatively abstract. What about nitty-gritty, concrete policy proposals?

Again, for the most part, young people reveal themselves to be at least as pro-gun-rights as their elders, if not more so.

Pew found that younger and older Americans are about equally likely to favor background checks for gun shows (with more than 8 in 10 saying this) and to support laws barring mentally ill people from owning guns (also about 8 in 10).

The General Social Survey likewise shows that about 7 in 10 Americans across all age groups favor a law "which would require a person to obtain a police permit before he or she could buy a gun," according to calculations from my Post colleague Scott Clement.

On proposed bans of "assault-style weapons ," though, older people are considerably more supportive, with 63 percent of those 65 and older believing these are appropriate, compared with only 49 percent of people under 30, according to Pew .

YouGov similarly finds that older people are more likely to back bans on semiautomatic weapons, bans on selling magazine clips for semiautomatic weapons that hold 10 or more rounds and a five-day waiting period for purchasing a handgun.

The only gun-control policy proposal for which I've been able to find generally higher support among younger than older people is some sort of gun sale database or gun-owner registry.

According to YouGov, about half of those under 30 support a federal gun-owner registry, versus about a third of those over 65. But it's possible that young people have become more comfortable with bulk data collection than their elders are, whether or not such data are connected to a hot-button issue such as firearms.

You may have noticed that sizable shares — sometimes healthy majorities — of Americans of all ages express support for tighter controls on gun ownership, both in the abstract and the specific. Despite such public support, of course, nothing has happened, presumably because politicians are more fearful of the gun lobby than their own constituents' views on gun control. (Shocker, I know, that legislation doesn't necessarily reflect the democratic will of the people.)

Given the ambivalence of today's young people — who are tomorrow's high-voter-turnout middle-aged and older people — I wouldn't expect that balance of power to shift anytime soon.

Obama Tries To Re-gift His Failed Terror Strategy

By Marc A. Thiessen

Washington Post, December 8, 2015

Usually when a president delivers a prime-time address to the nation, he has something new to announce — like, say, a new military strategy. Not President Obama. Like a notorious Christmas "re-gifter," Obama did nothing more Sunday night than repackage his old, failing strategy in the shiny wrapping of tougher language.

With a new CNN/ORC poll showing that 64 percent of Americans disapprove of the president's handling of the Islamic State and 68 percent say his military response to the terrorist group is not aggressive enough, Obama decided to ratchet up the rhetoric — acknowledging that we are "at war with terrorists" and promising to "destroy ISIL and any other organization that tries to harm us."

But rip away the rhetorical bows and paper, and the substance of what Obama offered is unchanged from his petulant news conference after the Paris attacks where he insisted against all evidence that "the strategy that we are pursuing is the right one."

Nothing has changed. After declaring the Islamic State "contained" a day before the Paris attacks and assuring Americans a day before the San Bernadino, Calif., massacre that the United States was safe from a Paris-style attack, Obama is "staying the course."

To fend off growing displeasure with his strategy, Obama once again resorted to tearing down straw men. He promised that he would "not be drawn once more into a long and costly ground war in Iraq or Syria," because "if we occupy foreign lands, [our enemies] can maintain insurgencies for years, killing thousands of our troops, draining our resources, and using our presence to draw new recruits."

This is ridiculous — and revealing. Obama fails to understand that it was not the U.S. presence in Iraq that allowed the Islamic State to rebuild its insurgency; it was the U.S. withdrawal. It was his glib dismissal of the Islamic State as "JV" terrorists who did not pose "a direct threat to us" that allowed the group's insurgency to grow. And it was his continuing refusal to take the steps necessary to re-defeat the group that is today allowing the Islamic State to grow and "maintain" its insurgency "for years."

Obama declared he would not send "a new generation of Americans overseas to fight and die for another decade on foreign soil." No one is proposing that. Retired Gen. Jack Keane, the author of the successful 2007 surge in Iraq, has laid out a strategy to defeat the Islamic State that requires a minimum of about 10,000 U.S. troops, including advisers, trainers and forward air controllers, as well as Apache helicopters and AC-130 gunships. Keane's strategy would unleash our Special Operations forces "not just to target leaders or conduct hostage rescue but to conduct large-scale in/out raids to target ISIS critical nodes and functions." And it would lift the restrictive rules of engagement that result in 75 percent of U.S. air missions returning without dropping their bombs.

Most Americans support this. The CNN/ORC poll finds that a 53 percent majority say the United States should send ground troops to Iraq or Syria to fight the Islamic State. The American people understand: We don't need another invasion; we need another surge.

We also need to understand what inspires terrorists like Tashfeen Malik and Syed Farook to join the global jihad and carry out attacks like the one in California. Obama said Sunday that groups like the Islamic State are "using our presence to draw new recruits." This is wrong. They are using the perception of American weakness. In August 2014, Obama promised to destroy the Islamic State, but after more than a year of bombing, the group still controls territory in Iraq and Syria the size of the United Kingdom and has expanded its area of operations to include Europe and now quite possibly the United States. Its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, has boasted: "The crusaders' airstrikes and constant bombardment — day and night — upon the Islamic State have not prevented its advance or weakened its resolve."

Obama does not get it. But Americans do. And they are not interested in a policy of weakness wrapped in a new package from our re-gifter-in-chief.

Mr. Obama Makes His Pitch On The Islamic State

By Editorial Board

Washington Post, December 7, 2015

THE HEART of President Obama's address to the country Sunday concerned what he does not want to do in response to terrorism. After reviewing steps he has already taken or proposed to fight the Islamic State and prevent attacks inside the homeland, the president delivered what sounded like his main appeal: "Our success won't depend on tough talk, or abandoning our values or giving into fear." He went on to explain — again — why he opposes "a long and costly ground war in Iraq or Syria," and why "we cannot turn against one another by letting this fight be defined as a war between America and Islam."

Mr. Obama had good reasons to make this pitch. The San Bernardino, Calif., shooting, following closely on the Paris attacks, has understandably raised anxiety among Americans, who wonder, as the president put it, "whether we are confronted by a cancer that has no immediate cure." It has also prompted irresponsible and bigoted rhetoric on the presidential campaign trail, where GOP candidates are promising to "carpet bomb them into oblivion" (Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas) or a "total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States" (Donald Trump).

While no one — with the partial exception of Sen. Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.) — has propped up Mr. Obama's straw man of launching another U.S. ground war, some are pretending that quick and facile military solutions exist. More seriously, there is a real danger that the rhetoric of Republicans will poison one of America's greatest strengths in this fight, which is the vast majority of American Muslims' relatively strong integration and loyalty to the country. Mr. Obama got it right in saying that while Muslims must confront the extremist ideology that has spread within some of their communities, for Americans to turn on that minority as a whole is exactly what the jihadists hope for.

Mr. Obama also was correct in saying that he has stepped up the war in Iraq and Syria since the Paris attacks, taking measures that critics (including us) have recommended for a year or more. Bombing has increased, and Special Operations forces will be deployed in both countries to help coordinate offensives by local troops — though it appears the U.S. boots may not arrive on the ground for months.

The new measures give the lie to Mr. Obama's claim a month ago that the only alternative to his military strategy was putting "large numbers of U.S. troops on the ground." Unfortunately, he still is not doing what is needed to "destroy" the Islamic State, as the president defined the goal on Sunday. That destruction would require a Sunni ground force, made up of Syrians, Iraqis and perhaps foreign troops from the Persian Gulf and Turkey, with substantial U.S. support.

But no such force will go after the Islamic State as long as Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad and his Iranian and Russian allies are waging their barbaric war on Sunnis in Syria. Though Secretary of State John F. Kerry is pushing a diplomatic process that he hopes could lead to a cease-fire, he's unlikely to succeed until anti-Assad rebels are substantially strengthened on the ground. That remains the missing piece of Mr. Obama's strategy.

Voters And Non-voters Should Count In Legislative Districts

By Editorial Board

Washington Post, December 8, 2015

IN TUESDAY'S oral arguments in Evenwel v. Abbott , the Supreme Court will consider a Texas state Senate map that put equal numbers of people — rather than equal numbers of eligible voters — in each legislative district. In fact, drawing districts with equal numbers of people is the American norm. But the challengers in this case are essentially asking: Why should non-voters count?

The constitutionality of counting people, not voters, would seem to have been settled in the 18th century — and again in the 19th. The Constitution infamously required enslaved African Americans to each count as three-fifths of a person for the purposes of drawing House of Representatives district boundaries, though they certainly were not allowed to vote. The 14th Amendment thankfully scrapped the three-fifths provision but maintained the principle that congressional boundaries should reflect equal distributions of people, including aliens, not just eligible voters.

Texas's opponents attempt to explain away these provisions by arguing that they really concern the distribution of congressional seats among the states, not how districts are drawn within each state. The Framers had good reasons to structure things this way — in particular, so that states would not game their voter eligibility rules in order to get more representation in the House — that do not apply within states. The challengers further point out that the court rejected an analogy between federal and state electoral procedures in a previous ruling that struck down Alabama's scheme to assign each county a state senator, roughly in the style of the U.S. Senate.

That is all true. But it is not enough to show that the Constitution explicitly requires drawing legislative districts according to total population in one context but implicitly prohibits it in another.

As New York University's Richard H. Pildes points out, "the House was designed to be the most democratic element of the national government, and its structure was based on 'the fundamental principle of representative government' of 'equal representation for equal numbers of people.' " Drawing legislative lines according to total population, then, is an active, constitutionally valid method of apportioning popular representation.

So the Constitution clearly allows districting based on total population. That doesn't necessarily mean that states must draw legislative lines this way. But there are good policy reasons to do so. First,

the census counts people, not voters; any redistricting based on voter numbers would become more complicated and probably less reliable. And second, non-voters — children, for example, or green-card holders — deserve representation too. We think the Founding Fathers had the right idea here.

A Perfect Storm Of Deceit In Chicago

By Editorial Board

Washington Post, December 8, 2015

THE JUSTICE Department investigation of Chicago's trigger-happy police department, announced Monday by Attorney General Loretta E. Lynch, is welcome. It is also long overdue.

For years, watchdogs, lawyers and journalists have documented instances of police misconduct, including violent episodes caught on video and then subjected to the same silent treatment that nearly buried the death of black teenager Laquan McDonald, who was shot to death by a white Chicago police officer in October 2014.

What distinguished the McDonald case, which has now triggered the federal investigation, is that the officer's actions appear so outrageous, the city's coverup so blatant and the official line so thoroughly discredited by the release of a video , which Mayor Rahm Emanuel's (D) administration tried so hard to keep under wraps. In the face of that perfect storm, the Justice Department had to act. (The officer, Jason Van Dyke, has pleaded not guilty, and his lawyer says he will be exonerated at trial.)

It is critical that the Justice Department now examine not only the police force, where a culture of impunity and a code of silence are deeply ingrained, but also Chicago's entire system. That includes the Independent Police Review Authority, which examined 409 cases of police-involved shootings in the eight years ending Sept. 30 — and found just two unjustified. (Both involved off-duty police.) It includes the prosecutor's office, headed by Cook County State's Attorney Anita Alvarez, which seems to blanch at the prospect of indicting abusive officers, perhaps for fear of losing police cooperation in criminal investigations.

And it includes legal protections enshrined in union contracts as well as a state law known as the law enforcement officers' "bill of rights." The effect of those protections is to erect formidable barriers to discipline, let alone prosecution, in the event of police misconduct. For example: Officers involved in a shooting are afforded a 24-hour grace period before they must speak to investigators — a privilege that may be used to ensure their accounts jibe with those of their colleagues. In the McDonald killing, at least seven other officers were on the scene and five of them corroborated the allegedly mendacious account of Mr. Van Dyke, who said Mr. McDonald was menacing him with a knife. In fact, the video shows the victim heading away from the officers.

The problems in Chicago are complex and decades in the making; cleaning up the police force will require investigators to use a wide aperture. While Mr. Emanuel has promised cooperation, there is likely to be a good deal of institutional resistance to the federal probe. But the payoff, in terms of building the case for real reform, could be enormous.