

Play Musical Chairs at the US Senate. Senators Bob Menendez and Ben Cardin

One arch interventionist replaces another to lead the Senate Foreign Relations Committee

By [Philip Girdali](#)

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Many Americans have come to accept that corruption and lying is the name of the game in Washington and, increasingly, at both state and local levels of government, in part because lying and stealing by those who run the country has become virtually consequence free.

To cite only one example, the current ruinously expensive war against Russia began when the US and other NATO powers lied to Mikhael Gorbachev about their intentions regarding expansion of the "defensive" alliance into Eastern Europe. They then lied again in 2014 with the Minsk Accords, which were supposed to give some measure of autonomy to the Russian ethnic regions of Ukraine in the Donbas, an apparent concession that served as cover for arming and training the Ukrainian Army. Finally, the US and its friends arranged for regime change in Ukraine in 2014 to replace the friendly-to-Russia President Viktor Yanukovich with a pro-western candidate selected by the fanatical State Department neocon Victoria Nuland, who boasted how Washington had spent \$5 billion to bring about the flip in government. That move warned Russian President Vladimir Putin regarding what was going on so he quickly annexed Russian ethnic majority Crimea, where the Russian Black Sea Fleet is based.

Driving all the US-led aggression against Russia is the neocon foreign policy embraced by most of the two major political parties which demands that the United States have military superiority over all competitors everywhere around the world where it has interests or allies. That has meant by one count something like 1,000 foreign military bases. By way of comparison, Russia has only one overseas base, in Syria. And the maintenance of all those bases as well as the network of installations inside the US costs lots of money which fattens defense contractors and also winds up in the pockets of aspiring politicians while increasing the national debt to unsustainable levels. And it is no surprise to learn that when generals and admirals retire from active service, 80% of them wind up [employed by contractors](#) to

lobby their former colleagues on the latest weapons systems that are so urgently required to maintain supremacy.



The recent exposure of Senator Bob Menendez of New Jersey's apparent tendency to accept bribes in exchange for various kinds of favorable treatment and protection was a particularly lurid tale in part because [much of the loot](#) consisted of \$480,000 in cash stuffed into jacket pockets, closets and in a safe, along with 13 gold bars, two of them marked as 1 Kilogram in weight to the value of more than \$100,000. In the garage was an upscale \$60,000 Mercedes-Benz convertible that was [a gift](#) to Menendez's then girlfriend, who had wrecked her own vehicle in an accident in which she had struck and killed a pedestrian. The car came from one of the New Jersey businessmen currently involved in the corruption and bribery investigation and no one can quite explain how an accident in which someone had died was never properly investigated by police. Menendez had allegedly helped the businessman by arranging to block a criminal investigation into his company's activities.

Menendez is indeed a powerful senator even though there is more than a whiff of suspicion surrounding him and his activities. A Cuban American who is prominent in the Hispanic caucus, he was regarded as a political hardliner from his bully pulpit as Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. In 2015, Menendez was indicted on federal corruption charges but the jury was [unable to reach a verdict](#), and the case was dropped in 2018. In April 2018, the [United States Senate Select Committee on Ethics](#) "severely admonished" Menendez for accepting gifts from donor Salomon Melgen without obtaining committee approval, for failing to disclose certain gifts, and for using his position as a senator to advance Melgen's interests. This time around, however, the evidence for wrongdoing is much more compelling and it even involves a foreign country, Egypt, so he has resigned his chairmanship but has refused to leave the Senate. He claims he is innocent, of course and continues to promote Biden's view of the world, to include identifying the "core American foreign policy values" as "democracy, human rights, and the rule of law" even though it does not apply to him. And, of course, as a Cuban that worldview includes perpetual hostility to Havana and all its works, including its links to Russia.

Bob Menendez is up for reelection in 2024, but opinion polls taken just after the reports of his corruption surfaced indicate that he has no chance of winning against several Democrats who will challenge him. He will certainly receive some favorable press and significant campaign donations as he long been linked to Jewish lobbying groups like AIPAC and is closely aligned with Israel on foreign policy issues to include opposing in 2015 the President Barack Obama [nuclear deal with Iran](#), asserting falsely that Iran is already working on a nuclear weapon. In March 2017, Menendez co-sponsored the [Israel Anti-Boycott Act](#) (S.270), which sought to make it "a federal crime, punishable by a maximum sentence of 20 years imprisonment, for Americans to encourage or participate in boycotts against Israel and Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories." More important perhaps,

Menendez has twice advanced legislation through his committee supporting Ukraine in its war with Russia, so the White House will presumably do everything it can to protect him, but only up to a certain point.



Menendez has been replaced by Senator Ben Cardin of Maryland, who will not be running for re-election in 2024. Cardin, who is Jewish, is a strong and consistent supporter of Israel, like Menendez, and an outspoken critic of Vladimir Putin of Russia. He was a co-sponsor of a Senate resolution expressing objection to the [UN Security Council Resolution 2334](#), which condemned Israeli settlement building in the occupied Palestinian territories as a violation of international law. Cardin warned that “Congress will take action against efforts at the UN, or beyond, that use Resolution 2334 to target Israel.” Cardin also voted with Republicans to support President Donald Trump’s decision to [recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital](#). He declared that the time that “Jerusalem is the capital of the State of Israel and the location of the US Embassy should reflect this fact.” Cardin and Senator Rob Portman of Ohio, like Menendez, were strong supporters of the proposed Israel Anti-Boycott Act in late 2018, described above, and they also called for a sanctions mechanism to punish international organizations that seek to boycott Israel or its illegal settlements.

Oddly, Cardin has sometimes been credited with being a “human rights advocate,” a label which the Palestinians and others might object to. The claim is based on his authorship of US legislation referred to as the Magnitsky Act. According to Cardin and his allies in Washington, Sergei Magnitsky was a Russian lawyer hired by Bill Browder head of Hermitage Capital Management Fund, an Anglo-American investment fund operating in Moscow, to investigate the apparent diversion of as much as \$230 million in taxes due to the Russian government. Hermitage was a hedge fund that was focused on “investing” in Russia, taking advantage initially of the extremely corrupt [loans-for-shares](#) scheme under Boris Yeltsin, and then continuing to profit greatly during the early years of Vladimir Putin’s ascendancy. The loans-for-shares scheme that made Browder his initial fortune has been correctly characterized as the epitome of corruption, an arrangement whereby foreign investors worked with local oligarchs to strip the former Soviet economy of its assets paying pennies on each dollar of value. Along the way, Browder [was reportedly involved in](#) making false representations on official documents and bribery. Nevertheless, by 2005 Hermitage was the largest foreign investor in Russia.

Magnitsky allegedly became a whistleblower after discovering that the missing money had been stolen by the police, organized crime figures and other government officials. After he went to the authorities to complain he was unjustly imprisoned for eleven months. When he refused to recant he was both beaten and denied medical treatment to coerce him into cooperating, resulting in his death in jail at age 37 in November 2009. He has become

something of a hero for those who have decried official corruption in Russia.

The Magnitsky case is of particular importance because both the European Union and the United States have initiated sanctions against the Russian officials and entities that were allegedly involved. In the Magnitsky Act, sponsored by a Russia-phobic Cardin and signed by President Barack Obama in 2012, the US asserted its willingness to punish foreign governments for violations of human rights. Russia reacted angrily, noting that the actions taken by its government internally, notably the operation of its domestic judiciary, were being subjected to outside interference. It reciprocated with sanctions against US officials as well as by increasing pressure on foreign non-governmental pro-democracy groups operating in Russia. Tension between Moscow and Washington increased considerably as a result and Congress subsequently passed the so-called Global Magnitsky Act as part of the defense appropriation bill in 2016. It was signed into law by President Barack Obama in December. It expanded the use of sanctions and other punitive measures against regimes guilty of egregious human rights abuses though it has never been applied to US friends like Saudi Arabia and Israel. It has been used to punish China and Cuba. It was also sponsored by Senator Cardin and was clearly primarily intended to intimidate Russia.

The tit-for-tat that has severely damaged relations with Russia is based on the standard narrative embraced by many regarding who Magnitsky was and what he did, but is it true? Many now believe that there was indeed a huge fraud related to Russian taxes but that it was not carried out by corrupt officials. Instead, it was deliberately ordered and engineered by Browder with Magnitsky, who was an accountant not a lawyer, personally developing and implementing the scheme used to carry out the deception.

To be sure, Browder and his international legal team have presented what they regard as evidence in the case. But while it might be that Browder and Magnitsky have been the victims of a corrupt and venal state, it just might be the other way around. To cite only once example, much of the case against the Russian authorities is derived from English language translations of relevant documents provided by Browder himself. The actual documents in Russian sometimes say something quite different.

So there we go again. As the wheel turns in Washington nothing really changes. Benjamin Cardin as Chairman of the Senate Foreign Affairs will promote the same policies of unrelenting hostility towards countries like Russia and China as did his recently resigned predecessor Bob Menendez. And as fighting between Israel and Gaza has just broken out, you can count on how the United States will line up even as hundreds of Palestinian children die as a powerful Israel pummels and pounds and largely civilian population in Gaza. Those are the sorts of things that American citizens can count on these days, unfortunately.

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Philip M. Giraldi, Ph.D., is Executive Director of the Council for the National Interest, a 501(c)3 tax deductible educational foundation (Federal ID Number #52-1739023) that seeks a more interests-based U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. Website is

councilforthenationalinterest.org, address is P.O. Box 2157, Purcellville VA 20134 and its email is inform@cnionline.org.

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