

Blocked persons and letters of marque

Jul 2022

Article I, Section 8, Clause 11 of the US Constitution reads:

The Congress shall have Power to declare War, grant Letters of Marque and Reprisal, and make Rules concerning Captures on Land and Water;

What are these *Letters of Marque and Reprisal*?

Essentially: Permission for private citizens to carry out acts of war. If you could convince the government to write one for you, then you were a “privateer” and you could go searching the seas for plunder.

The last time these letters were used was during the War of 1812 wherein the [Prince de Neufchatel](#)—that’s an American Ship, not a French vampire—was authorized to hunt British vessels. The last time they were *considered* was during Andrew Jackson’s administration of 1829-1837.

Surprisingly enough, this practice led to abuses, like people getting letters from the governments on both sides in a war, or pirates bribing corrupt governments to give their activities a veneer of legitimacy. Thus, the practice was mostly banned by the [Paris Declaration of 1856](#).

The US refused to sign that declaration on the grounds that it had a puny formal navy. This position caused some difficulty during the Civil War of 1861-1865. While the Union had

This put Lincoln in a difficult position: He could have issued his own letters, but this would have angered Britain, which Lincoln hoped to get help from. He tried to belatedly join the Paris Declaration, but Europe felt that this was tantamount to taking a side in the conflict. In the end, the Union had to abstain from using letters of marque while the Confederacy did use them.

Legally, the Union did not regard the Confederacy as a legitimate party in a war. Thus, they tried captured privateers as ordinary pirates, under the theory that Confederate letters of marque were meaningless. This would have subjected those privateers to the [death penalty](#). After Confederate President Jefferson Davis promised to execute captured Union officers in response, the Union backtracked.

To this day, the US has not formally agreed to the declaration, though it announced after the war that it would abide by it. So though it could *in theory* bring letters of marque back and this would *in theory* not violate any treaties, it would in practice be a big break with tradition and some people claim it would violate international law (if you believe international law exists).

Anyway, [with](#) 11 aircraft carriers, 72 destroyers, 22 cruisers, 22 littoral combat ships, 49 attack submarines, 14 ballistic missile submarines, etc., I'm thinking that the original motivation for using privateers doesn't apply these days.

That being said, Rep. Gooden has proposed [a bill](#) that would allow the president to issue letters of marque to people who could then go and seize the yachts, planes, or other assets of any Russian citizen on the List of Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons. That would be exciting.

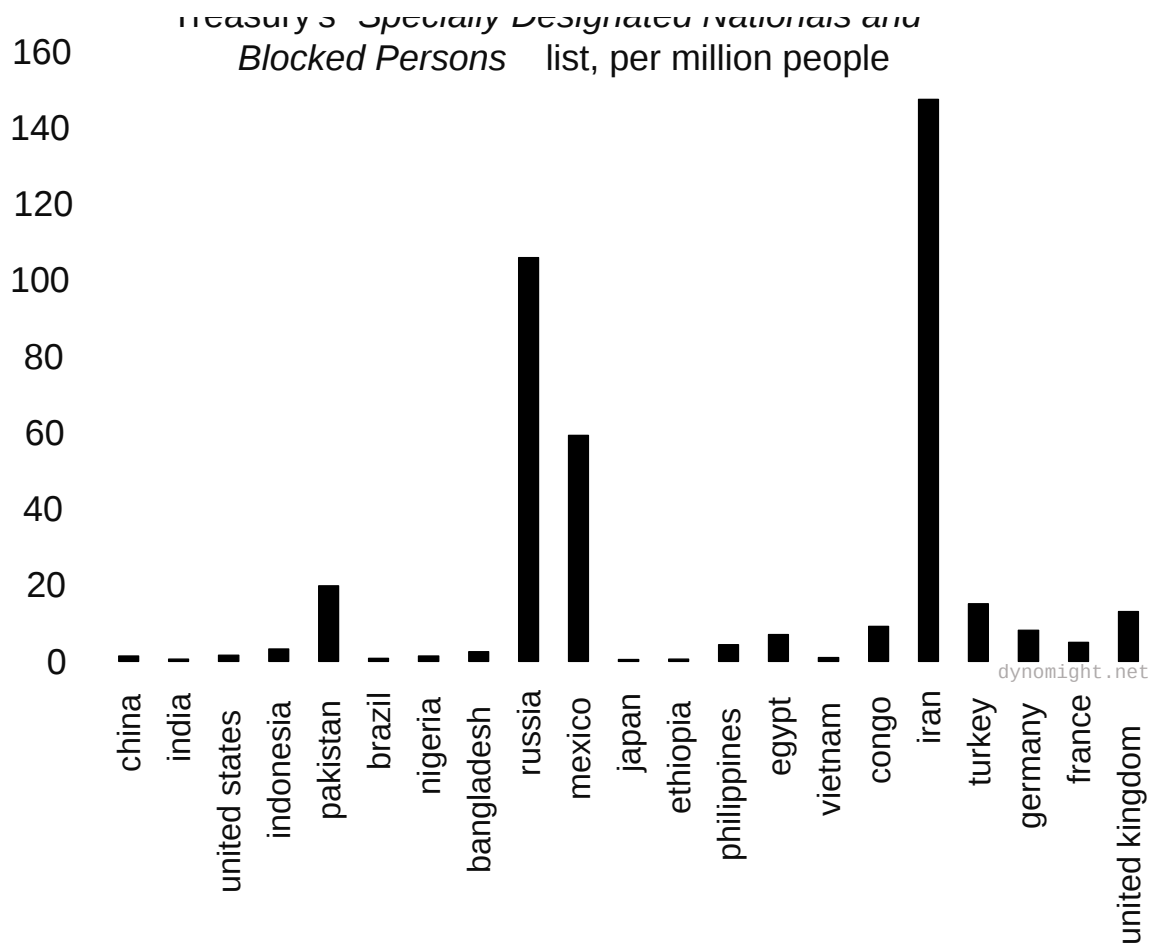
Blocked persons

But hold on a second—there's a List of Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons? Yes, it's maintained by the Department of Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control. As I write this, it is [1,495,887 words long](#).

I wondered what was on this list, so I decided to check how often some different strings occur.

Countries

First, I checked how often the names of the most populous countries in the world occur, normalized by population size.



Apparently, USA ❤️ Japan which at 0.47 slightly beats India (0.55) and Ethiopia (0.56) for the fewest mentions per capita. (*Edit: I corrected an earlier miscalculation due to a really embarrassing misspelling.*)

Digital currencies

Next, I searched for Digital Currency Address - X for various values of X:

XBT	bitcoin	349
ETH	ethereum	61
USDT	tether	10
LTC	litecoin	9
BCH	bitcoin cash	8
DOGE	DOGE	0

Genders

Here are the counts of gender X for different values of X (There were no mentions of non-binary, etc.):

male 4854

Year of birth

I first got the counts for `DOB year`; for different values of year, but then realized that doesn't work. To see why, here's an entry from line 138357:

```
PUTIN, Vladimir (a.k.a. PUTIN, Vladimir Vladimirovich), Kremlin, Moscow, Russia; Novo-Ogaryevo, Moscow Region, Russia; Bocharov Ruchey, Sochi, Russia; Valdai, Novgorod Region, Russia; DOB 07 Oct 1952; POB Leningrad, Russia; nationality Russia; citizen Russia; Gender Male; President of the Russian Federation (individual) [RUSSIA-E014024].
```

And here's one from line 83844:

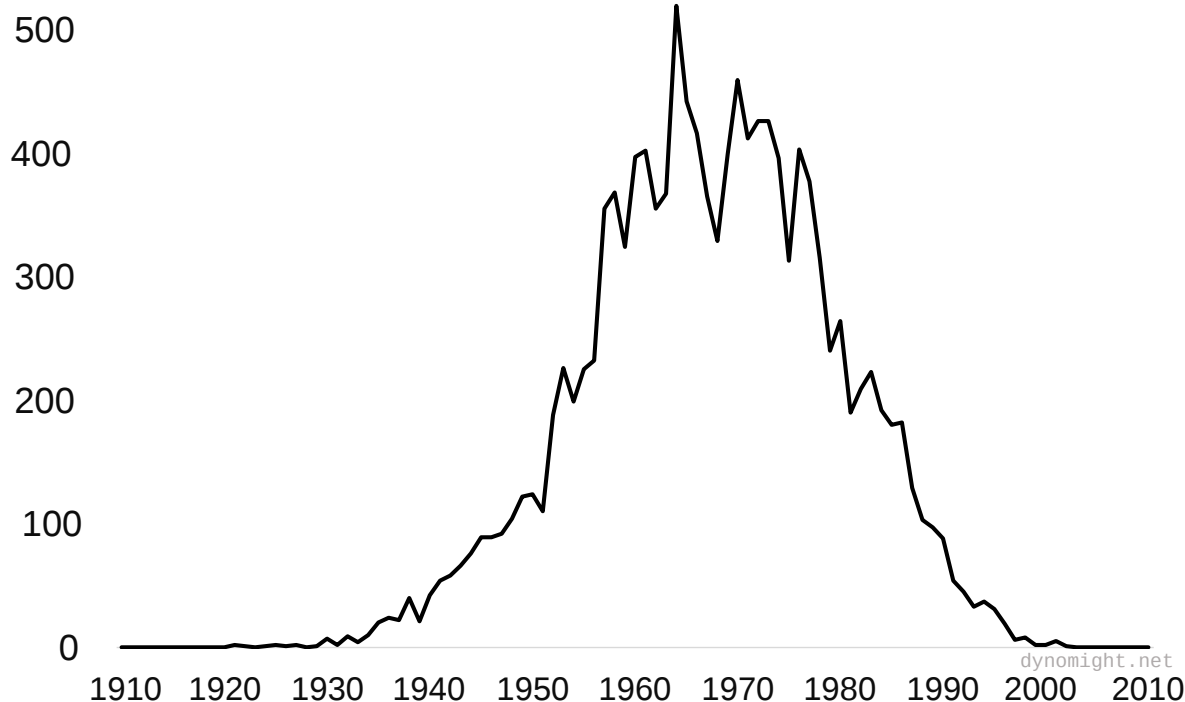
```
IZZ-AL-DIN, Hasan (a.k.a. SALWWAN, Samir; a.k.a. "GARBAYA, AHMED"; a.k.a. "SA-ID"), Lebanon; DOB 1963; POB Lebanon; citizen Lebanon; Additional Sanctions Information - Subject to Secondary Sanctions Pursuant to the Hizballah Financial Sanctions Regulations (individual) [SDGT].
```

Sometimes it's the exact date and sometimes it's just the year. How to get the counts for years in both of these formats? After a lot of trepidation, I remembered hearing about these things called *regular expression* and *bash scripts* and after a lot of terror and shrieking it's "actually really easy":

```
for i in {1910..2010}
do
    c=$(grep "DOB .\{0,7\}$i;" sdnlist.txt | wc -l)
    echo $i, $c
done
```

Plotting those numbers, we get this graph:

Treasury's "Specialty Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons" list, by birth year.



Get to it, zoomers.

Comments at [reddit](#), [substack](#).

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Also about [obsessive investigation](#)

A modest proposal: For preventing the heat in bathwater in Britain

Europe is in an energy crisis. There are lots of things that might be done, but most are slow or expensive or painful or don't accomplish much. But here's a little daydream: 1. We use lots of energy to heat our homes. 2. We use lots of energy to heat...

How much does a CT scan affect life expectancy?

You're probably aware that if you get a CT scan, that exposes you to a fair of radiation. But I've always wondered—how much should I care about that? So here's an attempt at a rough estimate. As always, I think the right way to quantify things is in terms of...

Aspartame: Once more unto the breach

Look, I get it. Diet Coke tastes sweet because it has aspartame in it. Aspartame is a weird synthetic molecule that's 200 times sweeter than sucrose. Half of the world's aspartame is made by Ajinomoto of Tokyo—the same company that first brought us MSG back in 1909.

Diet Coke probably isn't a cognitive performance enhancer

"Very ambitious and successful and competitive and rich person loves Diet Coke" has been in the news recently, and friend of the blog Aaron Bergman proposes a theory as to why. Spelled out in more detail, it goes like this: 1. There are nine essential amino acids, one of which...

uranium-235 created a chain reaction of atoms splitting into lighter atoms, releasing energy and neutrons. While such weapons are very destructive, they are “inefficient” in that as the bomb starts to explode,...

So you want to invent a nuclear weapon

1. You're in the mood for destruction. One day, you hear about this phenomenon of “radiation” where matter gives off energy. You think—perhaps you can harness this property of nature to make a big boom. Apparently matter is made of discrete objects called atoms, which have nuclei made up of...

A breakdown of the data on the homeless crisis across the U.S.

Is the US in the midst of a homelessness crisis? Many people think so, but that's largely based on based on anecdotes. What does the data say? At a glance, this doesn't look very crisisy. Since 2015, things have gone up by less than three percent. Still, I think there...

The main thing about P2P meth is that there's so much of it

Sam Quinones was recently on EconTalk and in the Atlantic talking about methamphetamines and homelessness. He points out that “old” meth was made from ephedrine and that “new” meth is made from a chemical called Phenylacetone or P2P. He suggests that new meth might be chemically different in a way...

Two conspiracy theories about cola

Our first conspiracy theory has all the best qualities: 1. It sounds insane. 2. At first, the facts seem to support it. 3. Later, the facts lead to disquieting reevaluations of the medical system. So here's the conspiracy: "Cola has so much sugar in it that you'd throw up from..."

The big alcohol study that didn't happen: My primal scream of rage

What does drinking do to your health? We can say two things with confidence: 1. Drinking is associated with lots of health problems. 2. Heavy drinking is bad for you. Here's a graph of some associations. Someone who averages 10 drinks per day is 50x more likely to get cirrhosis...

A review of early split-brain experiments

What happens if you cut your cortex in half? When this was first tried on animals, the answer seemed to be not much. But starting in the late 1950s, a series of experiments found that very weird things happen under careful testing. These experiments are fascinating for their implications into...

Alcohol, health, and the ruthless logic of the Asian flush

Say you're an evil scientist. One day at work you discover a protein that crosses the blood-brain barrier and causes crippling migraine headaches if someone's attention drifts while driving. Despite being evil, you're a loving parent with a kid learning to drive. Like everyone else, your kid is completely addicted...

Napoleon's failure in Russia as an analogy for T-cell based viral immunity

In June of 1812 Napoleon assembled the largest European army in history and invaded Russia. After months of bloody fighting, the French finally arrived in Moscow in September, surprised to find the city mostly abandoned. That night, remaining Russians set fires across the city, eventually burning most of it to...

asked repeatedly on the web, with with many answers smugly stating that even tiny amounts of acetone will instantly kill you, you idiot. But they provide no evidence. Fact #1: Acetone bottles...