

# Can Obama Speak Strongly for Peace?

**Exclusive:** Sen. John McCain is baiting President Obama for making America “look weak” and is demanding more aggressive responses toward Syria, Iran and Russia. Thus, Obama faces a turning-point moment when he must confront neocon warmongering or surrender to it, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

With the neocons again ascendant and with the U.S. news media again failing to describe a foreign crisis honestly Barack Obama faces perhaps the greatest challenge of his presidency, a moment when he needs to find the courage to correct a false narrative that his own administration has spun regarding Ukraine and to explain why it's crucial to cooperate with Russian President Vladimir Putin in the cause of world peace.

In other words, if Obama is to salvage his historical legacy, he must find within himself the strength and eloquence that President John F. Kennedy displayed in possibly his greatest oration, his June 10, 1963 address at American University in Washington, D.C. In that speech, Kennedy outlined the need to collaborate with Soviet leaders to avert dangerous confrontations, like the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962.

Kennedy also declared that it was wrong for America to seek world domination, and he asserted that U.S. foreign policy must be guided by a respect for the understandable interests of adversaries as well as allies. Kennedy said:

“What kind of peace do I mean and what kind of a peace do we seek? Not a Pax Americana enforced on the world by American weapons of war. Not the peace of the grave or the security of the slave. I am talking about genuine peace, the kind of peace that makes life on earth worth living, and the kind that enables men and nations to grow, and to hope, and build a better life for their children, not merely peace for Americans but peace for all men and women, not merely peace in our time but peace in all time.”

Kennedy recognized that his appeal for this serious pursuit of peace would be dismissed by the cynics and the warmongers as unrealistic and even dangerous. The Cold War was near its peak when Kennedy spoke. But he was determined to change the frame of the foreign policy debate, away from the endless bravado of militarism:

“I speak of peace, therefore, as the necessary, rational end of rational men. I realize the pursuit of peace is not as dramatic as the pursuit of war, and frequently the words of the pursuers fall on deaf ears. But we have no more

urgent task.

“Too many of us think it is impossible. Too many think it is unreal. But that is a dangerous, defeatist belief. It leads to the conclusion that war is inevitable, that mankind is doomed, that we are gripped by forces we cannot control. We need not accept that view. Our problems are manmade; therefore, they can be solved by man. And man can be as big as he wants. No problem of human destiny is beyond human beings.”

And then, in arguably the most important words that he ever spoke, Kennedy said, “For in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children’s futures. And we are all mortal.”

Kennedy followed up his AU speech with practical efforts to work with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev to rein in dangers from nuclear weapons and to discuss other ways of reducing international tensions, initiatives that Khrushchev welcomed although many of the hopeful prospects were cut short by Kennedy’s assassination on Nov. 22, 1963.

### **Eisenhower’s Warning**

Kennedy’s AU oration was, in many ways, a follow-up to what turned out to be President Dwight Eisenhower’s most famous speech, his farewell address of Jan. 17, 1961. That’s when Eisenhower ominously warned that “In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes.”

Arguably no modern speeches by American presidents were as important as those two. Without the phony trumpets that often herald what are supposed to be “important” presidential addresses, Eisenhower’s stark warning and Kennedy’s humanistic appeal defined the challenges that Americans have faced in the more than half century since then.

Those two speeches, especially Eisenhower’s phrase “military-industrial complex” and Kennedy’s “we all inhabit this small planet,” resonate to the present because they were rare moments when presidents spoke truthfully to the American people.

Nearly all later “famous” remarks by presidents were either phony self-aggrandizement (Ronald Reagan’s “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down that wall” when the wall wasn’t torn down until George H.W. Bush was president and wasn’t torn down by Mikhail Gorbachev anyway but by the German people). Or they are unintentionally self-revealing (Richard Nixon’s “I am not a crook” or Bill

Clinton's "I did not have sexual relations with that woman.")

Obama has yet to leave behind any memorable quote, despite his undeniable eloquence. There are his slogans, like "hope and change" and some thoughtful speeches about race and income inequality, but nothing of the substance and the magnitude of Eisenhower's "military-industrial complex" and Kennedy's "we all inhabit this small planet."

But now may be the time for Obama to deliver a speech that grapples with the central foreign policy question facing the United States, essentially whether America will continue seeking to be an Empire or return to being a Republic. Obama also needs to confront the crisis in the political/media worlds where propaganda holds sway and the public is misled.

If Obama doesn't meet this challenge head on and explain to the American people why he has sought (mostly behind the scenes) to work with Russian President Putin to reduce tensions over Syria and Iran he can expect that the final years of his presidency will be overwhelmed by neocon demands that he start up a new Cold War.

### **Taunting Obama as Weak**

On the op-ed page of Saturday's New York Times, Sen. John McCain gave Obama a taste of what that will be like. The newspaper version of the op-ed was entitled "Obama Made America Look Weak" with a subhead saying, "Crimea is our chance to restore our country's credibility."

McCain, the neocon/hawkish Republican who lost to Obama in 2008, wrote: "Crimea has exposed the disturbing lack of realism that has characterized our foreign policy under President Obama. It is this worldview, or lack of one, that must change. For five years, Americans have been told that 'the tide of war is receding,' that we can pull back from the world at little cost to our interests and values. This has fed a perception that the United States is weak, and to people like Mr. Putin, weakness is provocative.

"In Afghanistan and Iraq, [Obama's] military decisions have appeared driven more by a desire to withdraw than to succeed. Defense budgets have been slashed based on hope, not strategy. Iran and China have bullied America's allies at no discernible cost."

McCain also restated the old narrative blaming the Syrian government for the Aug. 21 chemical weapons attack near Damascus, even though that case has largely collapsed. McCain wrote: "Perhaps worst of all, Bashar al-Assad crossed President Obama's 'red line' by using chemical weapons in Syria, and nothing happened to him."

The New York Times, which only grudgingly acknowledged its own erroneous reporting on the Syria CW incident, made no effort on Saturday to insist that McCain's accusations were truthful, fitting with how major U.S. news organizations have performed as propaganda vehicles rather than serious journalistic entities in recent decades. [For more on the Syrian dispute, see Consortiumnews.com's "[The Mistaken Guns of Last August.](#)"]

From McCain's op-ed and other neocon writings, it's also clear that the new goal is to go beyond Ukraine and use it as a lever to destabilize and topple Putin himself. McCain wrote: "Eventually, Russians will come for Mr. Putin in the same way and for the same reasons that Ukrainians came for Viktor F. Yanukovich. We must prepare for that day now."

This plan for overthrowing Putin was expressed, too, by neocon Carl Gershman, the longtime president of the U.S.-funded National Endowment for Democracy, a more than \$100 million-a-year slush fund that was founded in 1983 to provide financial support for groups organizing to destabilize governments that Official Washington considered troublesome.

In a Washington Post op-ed last September, Gershman wrote that "Ukraine is the biggest prize," but added that once Ukraine was pried loose from a close association with Russia, the next target would be Putin, who "may find himself on the losing end not just in the near abroad but within Russia itself."

If President Obama doesn't actually believe that the United States should undertake the willful destabilization of nuclear-armed Russia, he might want to tell the American people before these matters get out of hand. He also should describe more honestly the events now overtaking Ukraine.

But it has been Obama's custom to allow his administration's foreign policy to be set by powerful "rivals" who often have profoundly different notions about what needs to be done in the world. Obama then tries to finesse their arguments, more like the moderator of an academic debate than President.

The best documented case of this pattern was how Defense Secretary Robert Gates, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and General David Petraeus maneuvered Obama into what turned out to be a pointless "surge" in Afghanistan in 2009. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Robert Gates Double-Crosses Obama.](#)"]

### **Kerry's Double-Dealing**

But Obama has been undercut, too, by his current Secretary of State John Kerry, who has behaved more like President John McCain's top diplomat than President Obama's. To the surprise of many Democratic friends, Kerry has chosen to take highly belligerent and factually dubious positions on Iran, Syria and now

Ukraine.

For instance, on Aug. 30, 2013, Kerry delivered what sounded like a declaration of war against Syria over what Kerry falsely presented as clear-cut evidence that the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad had launched a major chemical weapons attack on Damascus suburbs. But Kerry never presented any actual evidence to support his charges, and subsequent investigations, including a scientific assessment on the limited range of the one Sarin-laden missile, undercut Kerry's claims.

After Kerry's bombastic speech, President Putin helped President Obama find a face-saving way out of the crisis by getting Assad to agree to eliminate his entire chemical weapons arsenal (though Assad continued denying any role in the attack). Last fall, Putin also assisted Obama in getting Iran to sign an agreement on limiting its nuclear program, though Kerry again nearly scuttled the deal.

As Obama quietly tried to build on his collaboration with Putin, Kerry's State Department undercut the relationship once more when neocon holdover Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland stoked the crisis in Ukraine on Russia's border.

Last December, Nuland, the wife of prominent neocon Robert Kagan, told a group of Ukrainian business leaders that the United States had invested \$5 billion to promote the country's "European aspirations." She also personally encouraged anti-government protesters in Kiev by passing out cookies and discussed in an intercepted phone call who should serve in the new regime once President Yanukovich was gone.

Last month, when snipers opened fire and the violence killed both protesters and police, Kerry's State Department was quick to point the finger of blame at the democratically elected President Yanukovich, although more recent evidence, including an intercepted call involving the Estonian foreign minister, suggests that elements of the opposition shot both protesters and police as a provocation.

Nevertheless, the State Department's rush to judgment blaming Yanukovich and the gullible acceptance of this narrative by the mainstream U.S. news media created a storyline of "white-hat" protesters vs. a "black-hat" government, ignoring the many "brown shirts" of neo-Nazi militias who had moved to the front of the Kiev uprising.

As the crisis worsened, Putin, who was focused on the Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia, appears to have favored some compromise with the protesters, urging

Yanukovich to sign an agreement with the opposition and European nations on Feb. 21 accepting a cutback in his powers and moving up elections that would have removed him from office constitutionally.

But Putin reportedly warned Yanukovich about another element of the deal in which Ukrainian police pulled back. That created an opening for the neo-Nazi militias to seize government buildings by force and to force Yanukovich to flee for his life. Under the watchful eye of these modern-day storm troopers and with pro-Yanukovich officials facing physical threats a rump parliament voted in lock step to go outside the constitution and remove Yanukovich from office. [For a thorough account of the uprising, see "[The Ukrainian Pendulum](#)" by Israeli journalist Israel Shamir.]

### **A Murky Reality**

Despite the many violations of democratic and constitutional procedures, Kerry's State Department immediately recognized the coup government as "legitimate," as did the European Union. In reality, Ukraine had experienced a putsch which ousted the duly elected president whose political support had come from the east and south, whereas the Kiev protesters represented a minority of voters in the west.

Faced with a violent coup on its border, Russia continued to recognize Yanukovich as the legal president and to urge the reinstatement of the Feb. 21 agreement. But the West simply insisted that the coup regime was now the "legitimate" government and demanded that Russia accept the *fait accompli*.

Instead, Russia moved to protect ethnic Russians in Crimea and in the eastern Ukraine. That, in turn, brought charges from Kerry's State Department about Russian "aggression" and threats that a secession vote by the people of Crimea (to leave Ukraine and rejoin Russia) was illegal.

What should now be obvious is that Secretary Kerry and his team have been operating with a self-serving and ever-changing set of rules as to what is legal and what isn't, with the mainstream U.S. press tagging along, conveniently forgetting the many cases when the U.S. government has supported plebiscites on self-determination, including just recently Kosovo and South Sudan, or when the U.S. military has intervened in other countries, including wars supported by Sen. Kerry, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and so forth.)

But another reason why the Ukraine crisis represents a make-or-break moment for Obama's presidency is that he is facing extraordinary attacks from neocons and Republicans accusing him of inviting "Russian aggression" by making deals with international adversaries, rather than making war against them.

So, if Obama hopes to continue cooperating with Putin in efforts to resolve disputes with Iran, Syria and elsewhere, he is going to have to explain bluntly to the American people the real choices they face: continued warfare and costly confrontations as advocated by McCain and the neocons or compromise in the cause of peace, even with difficult adversaries.

At this point, it looks as if Obama will again try to finesse the crisis in Ukraine, embracing Official Washington's false narrative while perhaps holding back a bit on the retaliation against Russia. But that sort of timidity is what put Obama in the corner that he now finds himself.

If Obama hopes to give himself some real maneuvering room and have a lasting influence on how the United States deals with the rest of the world he finally has to speak truth to the American people. He finally has to find his voice as Eisenhower and Kennedy did.

[For more of Consortiumnews.com's exclusive coverage of the Ukraine crisis, see ["Neocons Have Weathered the Storm"](#); ["Crimea's Case for Leaving Ukraine"](#); ["The 'We-Hate-Putin' Group Think"](#); ["Putin or Kerry: Who's Delusional?"](#); ["America's Staggering Hypocrisy"](#); ["What Neocons Want from Ukraine Crisis"](#); ["Ukraine: One 'Regime Change' Too Many?"](#); ["A Shadow US Foreign Policy"](#); ["Cheering a 'Democratic' Coup in Ukraine"](#); ["Neocons and the Ukraine Coup."](#)]

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). For a limited time, you also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America's Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

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## Much Bank Crime, Little Punishment

Wall Street banks made a bundle on securitized subprime mortgages until the bubble began to burst in 2007 inflicting devastating harm on average people around the world. Yet, despite government rhetoric to the contrary, the key culprits have escaped punishment, writes Danny Schechter.

By Danny Schechter

We were all victims of the financial crisis that began in 2007 (not 2008) but some of us suffered more than others. And, hundreds of millions of us are still

living with the painful aftermath as its consequences began to be felt worldwide.

The first order of business in Washington back then was to bail out the victimizers, who have done quite well, thank you very much, in rebuilding their citadels of profit. They were only marginally inconvenienced by some fines that were finally assessed in lieu of jail sentences. That money was paid by the financial institutions and their shareholders, not by the decision-makers who were never held accountable.

We have all read about the outrageous compensation schemes that rewarded offending executives, even as the media has finally discovered the nation's deepening income inequality. The fines that were assessed were written off as a "cost of doing business" just as fraud became a way of doing business.

Many of the people who were hurt the most by the crisis were homeowners conned into taking unaffordable loans. Their numbers are huge as many as 14 million families were dislocated through foreclosures of questionable legality enforced by complicit courts and compromised law enforcement agencies.

These victims have been disproportionately minorities, and not just the mortgage holder that was harmed but their families, neighborhoods and children. This crisis devastated black and Latino communities who were encouraged to buy into the American "dream" of home ownership. But they were hardly the only ones who lost everything as a result of scams and frauds.

The Obama Administration made saving Wall Street its priority through the efforts of pro-business functionaries, such as Larry Summers, Tim Geithner and Peter Orszag, the boy wonder White House Budget Director who is now fighting his ex-wife in divorce court to hide the millions of dollars he's made since slithering from government to CitiBank.

Of course, the "progressive" Obama supporters knew about the millions of people who were forcibly dislocated, some to go homeless, others to live in cars and forests or packed into the overcrowded residences of relatives. Their dispossessions had other costs: their marriages, their kids missing school, and even their voting registration status.

Five years after the crisis 17 months ago Attorney General Eric Holder got around to addressing this deplorable, or should I say, criminal situation. He announced the Distressed Homeowners Initiative in what Bloomberg called a "carefully scripted event." He announced charges against 530 criminal defendants, including 172 executives.

It now turns out that the math was more than a bit dodgy, according to business

writer Jonathan Weil who reported: "The actual number of defendants was 107, or 80 percent less charges against 530 criminal defendants, including 172 executives. The actual number of defendants was 107, or 80 percent less, and the department hadn't tracked how many of them were executives.

"Similarly, Justice originally said the losses to homeowners were \$1 billion. It later cut that figure to \$95 million, while the number of victims was revised to 17,185 from 73,000, and the department hadn't tracked how many of them were executives."

Considering reports that as many as 14 million Americans suffered, this is, on its face, pretty pathetic and perhaps even worse than that. This March, the Inspector General of the Department of Justice's own audit division issued a report. They couldn't make sense of the numbers cited by their own boss and found that rather than leading the charge against mortgage fraud, the Department of Justice was making it worse.

Read this: "The Department's October 9, 2012, press release and the press conference transcript of the Attorney General's remarks, both available on the Department's website, now include disclosures citing the inaccuracy of the originally reported statistics, and the language in each has revised wording and statistics based on the FBI's August 2013 memorandum.

"Despite being aware of the serious flaws in these statistics since at least November 2012, **we found that the Department continued to cite them in mortgage fraud press releases** that it issued in the ensuing 10 months. We believe the Department should not have continued to issue press releases with these statistics once it became aware of the serious flaws."

They found that the stats on criminal fraud were, er, fraudulent and misled the public. It gets worse. What we have also learned is that a government publicly decrying mortgage fraud and saying it had reached "crisis proportions" made eliminating the fraud its lowest priority.

Reports the New York Times, "the F.B.I. considered mortgage fraud to be its lowest-ranked national criminal priority. In several large cities, including New York and Los Angeles, F.B.I. agents either ranked mortgage fraud as a low priority or did not rank it at all." And this, after Congress pumped \$196 million from 2009 to 2011 to fund Holder's vow to "fight back."

The truth of all of this which few cover as well and intensely as the writer Mandelman is that the government's policy to stop foreclosures masks a practice of encouraging foreclosures in a housing market that has not recovered, even as bank profits have.

Mandelman reports: "The government's plan to increase the number of homeowners unable to make their mortgage payments in order to boost the number of foreclosures is about to start working more effectively, as tens of thousands of HAMP modifications that lowered rates to teaser levels in 2009 and 2010, are about to experience payment shock once again.

"The program, known by the acronym HAMP, which stands for 'How About More Problems,' that reduced rates for borrowers to two percent a few years ago, are about to start seeing their rates heading back up to 4 5.4% according to a TARP Inspector General Report. Treasury estimates that 30,126 mortgage payments will reset to higher rates starting this year, so with any luck we should see foreclosures rising again soon."

Talk to me Mr. Holder. Aren't you supposedly and nominally in the business of dispensing or at least insuring justice? You should be ashamed!

Could these discrepancies and deceptions be a possible cause of your recent physical problems? Lying can't be good for your health. Sadly, you and your boss don't seem to care much about the financial crimes you claimed you were determined to put an end to.

Oh, yes, we have all read about the massive fines imposed on the *subcrime* lenders and the big *banksters* they work with, but much of that money went to the Treasury, not the victims, as CEO salaries rose. So, instead of battling these massive crimes, the government has compounded them. Gotcha.

**News Dissector Danny Schechter first exposed subprime lending in his film, "In Debt We Trust," in 2006, warning of the disaster to come. He detailed the problem in his book on financial scams, *The Crime of Our Time* (Disinformation Books) in 2010. Not much has changed. Comments to [dissector@mediachannel.org](mailto:dissector@mediachannel.org)**

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