

# NYT's One-Sided Ukraine Narrative

**Exclusive:** The U.S. press coverage of the Ukraine crisis has been stunningly biased and one-sided, placing virtually all the blame on Russian President Putin. One of the worst offenders in this journalistic travesty has been the New York Times, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

As part of the New York Times' sorry descent into becoming a propaganda sheet for the U.S. State Department, the Times' front-page story on the Ukrainian presidential election offered a near perfect distillation of Official Washington's false narrative on the crisis.

"The special election was called by Parliament to replace Viktor F. Yanukovich, who fled Kiev on Feb. 21 after a failed but bloody attempt to suppress a civic uprising, and whose toppling as president set off Russia's invasion and annexation of Crimea," wrote David M. Herszenhorn, one of the most consistently biased reporters on Ukraine.

Very little about the Times' summary is either accurate or balanced. It is at best a one-sided account of the tumultuous events over the past several months in Ukraine and leaves out context that would enable a Times' reader to get a more accurate understanding of the crisis.

Indeed, that false narrative, which has now become engrained as American conventional wisdom, has itself become a threat to U.S. interests because, if you believe the preferred storyline, you would tend to support aggressive counter-measures that could have dangerous and counter-productive consequences.

Beyond that, there is the broader risk to U.S. democracy when major news organizations routinely engage in this sort of propaganda. Just in recent years, the U.S. government has launched wars under such fake pretenses, inflicting casualties in faraway lands, engendering profound hatred of the United States, depleting the U.S. Treasury, and maiming and killing American soldiers.

That is why it's important for journalists and news outlets to do all they can to get these kinds of stories right and not just pander to the powers-that-be.

## Ukraine's Real Narrative

Regarding Ukraine, the real narrative is much more complex and nuanced than the New York Times described. The origins of the immediate crisis date back to last year when the European Union rashly offered an association agreement to Ukraine,

a proposal that elected President Yanukovich considered.

However, when the International Monetary Fund insisted on a harsh austerity plan that would have made the hard lives of the Ukrainian people even harder and when Russian President Vladimir Putin offered a more generous aid package of \$15 billion Yanukovich turned away from the EU-IMF deal.

That provoked demonstrations in Kiev from Ukrainians, many from the west, who favored closer ties to Europe and who were tired of the endemic corruption that has plagued Ukraine since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and since the “shock therapy” capitalism that saw a handful of oligarchs plunder the nation’s wealth and resources.

Though most protesters appeared motivated by a desire for better governance and a hope that an association with Europe would improve their economic prospects, a significant percentage of the crowd on the Maidan came from neo-Nazi and other far-right movements that despised Yanukovich and his ethnic Russian political base for their own reasons, dating back to Ukraine’s split in World War II between pro-Nazi and pro-Soviet forces.

The increasingly disruptive protests on the Maidan were also egged on by U.S. officials and pushed by U.S.-funded non-governmental organizations, some subsidized by the National Endowment for Democracy, whose neocon president Carl Gershman last September had termed Ukraine “the biggest prize” and a key step in undermining Putin inside Russia.

Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland, a neocon who had been an adviser to Vice President Dick Cheney, personally urged on the demonstrators, even passing out cookies at the Maidan. In one speech, she told Ukrainian business leaders that the United States had invested \$5 billion in their “European aspirations.”

Nuland also was caught in an intercepted phone conversation with U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt explaining whom she wanted to see running the government once Yanukovich was gone. Her choice was Arseniy Yatsenyuk or “Yats.”

Sen. John McCain, another prominent neocon, rallied the Maidan protesters while standing near a Svoboda party banner honoring Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera, whose radical paramilitary force had helped the Nazis expel and exterminate tens of thousands of Poles and Jews during World War II.

### **The Putsch**

Contrary to Herszenhorn’s boilerplate paragraph, the violence was not entirely from the embattled government. Neo-Nazi militias, which had secured weapons and

organized themselves into 100-man brigades, launched repeated attacks on the police, including burning some policemen with firebombs.

On Feb. 20, as the violence worsened, mysterious snipers opened fire on both demonstrators and police, killing some 20 people and escalating the confrontation dangerously. Though the Western press jumped to the conclusion that Yanukovich was to blame, he denied ordering the shootings and EU officials later came to suspect that the attacks were done by the opposition as a provocation.

“So there is a stronger and stronger understanding that behind snipers it was not Yanukovich, it was somebody from the new coalition,” Estonia’s Foreign Minister Urmas Paet told European Union foreign affairs chief Catherine Ashton, as reported by the UK Guardian.

On Feb. 21, Yanukovich sought to tamp down the violence by signing an agreement with representatives of Germany, France and Poland in which he accepted early elections (so he could be voted out of office) and agreed to reduced presidential powers. He also pulled back the police.

However, when the police were withdrawn, the neo-Nazi militias completed their putsch on Feb. 22, seizing control of government buildings and forcing Yanukovich and his officials to flee for their lives. In effect, the storm troopers controlled the Ukrainian government.

I was told by an international diplomat who was on the ground in Kiev that the Western countries felt there was no choice but to immediately work with the shaken Parliament to put together an interim government, otherwise the “thugs” would remain in charge.

So, Yanukovich was hastily impeached through an illegal process that circumvented the Ukrainian constitution, and the Parliament picked a new government which ceded four ministries, including national security, to the neo-Nazis in recognition of their crucial role in the coup.

To head up this interim government, Yatsenyuk was named prime minister and one of his first orders of business was to enact the IMF austerity plan that Yanukovich had rejected. The intimidated Parliament also approved a ban on Russian as an official language, although that scheme was later dropped.

In other words, the Times misleads its readers when it summarizes the events by simply saying Yanukovich “fled Kiev on Feb. 21 after a failed but bloody attempt to suppress a civic uprising.”

## **The Aftermath**

After the coup, ethnic Russians in the east and south were outraged that their elected president had been removed violently and illegally. In the southern peninsula of Crimea, the local parliament voted to arrange a referendum on secession in order to rejoin Russia, which had controlled Crimea dating back to the 1700s.

Russia did not “invade” Crimea since Moscow already had some 16,000 troops stationed in Crimea under an agreement with Ukraine for Russia to retain its historic naval base at Sevastopol. Russian troops did back up the local Crimean authorities as they planned their referendum which showed overwhelming public support for secession.

It became another U.S. conventional wisdom that the referendum was “rigged” because the turnout was high and the vote in favor of secession was 96 percent. But exit polls showed a similarly overwhelming majority of around 93 percent and no serious person doubts that most Crimeans favored escaping from the failed Ukrainian state.

Russia then agreed to accept Crimea back into its federation. So, while the Crimean referendum was surely hastily organized, it reflected the popular will and was central to the Russian decision to reclaim the historical peninsula.

Yet, the Times summarized those events as “Russia’s invasion and annexation of Crimea,” creating the image of Russian troops swarming across the border and seizing the territory against the will of the people.

If Herszenhorn’s paragraph were the first time that he or the newspaper had offered such a misleading account on Ukraine or other international hotspots, one might excuse it as just a rushed and careless synopsis. But the summary is only the latest example of the Times’ deeply biased pattern, marching in lockstep with the State Department’s propaganda themes for years.

The Times’ failures in the run-up to the disastrous Iraq War were infamous, particularly the “aluminum tube” story by Michael R. Gordon and Judith Miller. The Times showed similar bias on the Syrian conflict, including last year’s debunked Times’ “vector analysis” tracing a Sarin-laden rocket back to a Syrian military base when the rocket had less than one-third the necessary range.

But the Times’ prejudice over the Ukraine crisis has been even more extreme. Virtually everything that the Times writes about Ukraine is so polluted with propaganda that it requires a very strong filter, along with additives from more independent news sources, to get anything approaching an accurate understanding of events.

Since the early days of the coup, the Times has behaved as essentially a

propaganda organ for the new regime in Kiev and the State Department, blaming Russia and Putin for the crisis. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Will Ukraine Be NYT's Waterloo?](#)"]

### **Embarrassing Gaffes**

In the Times' haste to perform this function, there have been some notable journalistic gaffes such as the Times' front-page [story](#) touting photographs that supposedly showed Russian special forces in Russia and then the same soldiers in eastern Ukraine, allegedly proving that the east's popular resistance to the coup regime in Kiev was simply clumsily disguised Russian aggression.

Any serious journalist would have recognized the holes in the story since it wasn't clear where the photos were taken or whether the blurry images were even the same people but that didn't bother the Times, which led with the scoop.

However, only two days later, the scoop [blew up](#) when it turned out that a key photo – supposedly showing a group of soldiers in Russia who later appeared in eastern Ukraine – was actually taken in Ukraine, destroying the premise of the entire story.

Herszenhorn himself has been one of the most biased Times' reporters. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Ukraine, Though the US 'Looking Glass.'](#)"]

Now, since Ukrainian voters with the exception of those in the rebellious eastern provinces have selected a new president, billionaire businessman Petro Poroshenko, the question is whether the twisted and distorted U.S. narrative will stop President Barack Obama from taking pragmatic steps to defuse the crisis.

Poroshenko, who has done past business in Russia and knows Putin personally, appears ready to deescalate the crisis with Ukraine's neighbor. After Sunday's election, Poroshenko vowed to repair relations with Russia and Putin, who himself has made conciliatory comments about respecting the election results.

"Most probably the meeting with the Russian leadership will certainly take place in the first half of July," [said](#) Poroshenko,. "We should be very ready tactically in approach to this meeting, because first we should create an agenda, we should prepare documents, so that it will not be just to shake hands."

Poroshenko also has voiced a willingness to accept greater federalism that would grant a degree of self-rule to the provinces in eastern Ukraine. And, there are tentative plans for Obama and Putin to meet on June 6 in Normandy around

ceremonies honoring the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of D-Day.

Despite these few positive developments, the violence in eastern Ukraine continues to escalate with scores of ethnic Russian separatist rebels and pro-Kiev troops killed in clashes around the Donetsk airport on Monday.

Still, the major remaining obstacle to some reconciliation of the Ukraine crisis may be the deeply biased reporting at the Times and other mainstream American news outlets, which continue to insist that the story has only one side.

**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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## Can Obama Speak Strongly for Peace?

**From the Archive:** President Obama is preparing a speech to address neocon charges that he's shown "weakness" toward U.S. adversaries, but the greater challenge would be for him to tell the people why cooperation with those adversaries is vital for real peace, as Robert Parry wrote in March.

By Robert Parry (Originally published on March 15, 2014)

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 the New York Times on March 15, 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 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 in Kiev 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 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.

**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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# Doubting Obama's Resolve to Do Right

**From the Archive:** As President Obama prepares to make another speech explaining his foreign policy, the question is whether he can climb out of the rut of his previous whiny apologies for continuing many of George W. Bush's abuses, as ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern wrote last year.

By Ray McGovern (Originally published on May 28, 2013)

An article in the Washington Post on July 6, 2010, reported me standing before the White House, announcing a new epithet for President Barack Obama: "Wuss a person who will not stand up for what he knows is right."

The report is correct and so, I believe, is the epithet. And after the sleight-of-tongue speech given by the President of the United States at the National Defense University on May 23, 2013, I feel I can rest my case. (Caution: my wife insists that I mention at the outset that I've been angry since I listened to the speech.)

The day after Obama's speech I found myself struck by Scott Wilson's article on the front page of the Post, in which he highlighted the "unusual ambivalence from a commander-in-chief over the morality of his administration's counterterrorism policies."

And someone at the Post also had the courage that day to insert into a more reportorial article by Karen DeYoung and Greg Miller a hitting-the-nail-right-on-the-head quote from Benjamin Wittes, a senior fellow at Brookings: "To put it crassly, the President sought to rebuke his own administration for taking the positions it has but also to make sure that it could continue to do so."

Call me naive for putting the wish before the thought, but two days later my hopes zoomed when I saw that page A5 of the Post was dominated by a long article by Glenn Kessler, the Post's normally soporific "fact checker." After the first seven words of the banner headline "Red herrings, dissemblance and misleading statements " Kessler had me, so to speak.

You will understand my disappointment, then, when I read the rest of the headline: " from the IRS's Lerner," not from Obama.

And so I read Obama's speech again, initially with the thought of doing Kessler's job for him. But the lies, half-truths and pettifoggery are legion and

the task truly Herculean. Besides, many readers will decipher Obama's new "transparency" as transparently self-serving, without any help from me.

### **Hooray! Obama 'Gets It'**

Some progressive pundits have noted, correctly, that Obama's speech shows that he does "get it" when it comes to the many constitutional problems with his preferred violent approach to meeting external threats and his infringement on civil rights at home.

But it seems to me that this now-open sensitivity-to-the-problem is to be applauded ONLY if he also summons the courage to change course. One gets the idea from Obama's words that he may indeed wish to, IF only this, or IF only that. Have we not tired of applauding Obama in the subjunctive mood? I certainly have.

He has now been unusually candid about the dilemmas he faces. But lacking is any real sign there is just hope that he will change character. From his speech we know that he understands he needs to change course in order to discharge his duty to "take care that the laws be faithfully executed."

But I, for one, see little basis for hope that he will go beyond the carefully crafted all-things-to-all-people rhetoric in his speech. In my view, this makes him even more culpable an even more transparent flouter of his oath to defend the Constitution.

Ah, but what about the oft-expressed hope that Obama will be freer to act more responsibly in his second term? The four months we have witnessed thus far in his second term bring to mind Samuel Johnson's quip that a second marriage is "the triumph of hope over experience."

We have had four (now five) years and four months of experience with Obama. Those of us who care about the Constitution and rule of law now need to be guided by experience and to stop cutting him still more slack.

### **Presidential Whining**

The whiny tone of Obama's speech offended me as much as his faux transparency and disingenuous words. I asked myself, are we supposed to find reassurance that, while our President is a wimp, he is an empathetic one?; that from time to time he experiences a pang or two of conscience when ordering people killed by drone?; that he claims that being responsible for the deaths of innocent civilians will haunt him for as long as he lives? Can we feel his pain?

"I have taken an oath to defend the Constitution of the United States," the

President reminded us. "I do not believe it would be constitutional for the government to target and kill any U.S. citizen with a drone or a shotgun without due process," says he the day after the Attorney General admitted that this is precisely what happened to New Mexico-born Muslim cleric Anwar al-Awlaki.

Could it be that the commander-in-chief has a trace of PTSD? He seems to be appealing for our understanding about how conflicted he is about ordering people killed, entreating us to imagine his anguish, to appreciate how hard it is for him a constitutional lawyer, no less to do these terrible things anyway.

And then the kicker: "Remember," he adds, "that the terrorists we are after target civilians." (Whatever happened to the "But we are better than that.")

On Guantanamo, Obama expressed regret over how the prison "has become a symbol around the world for an America that flouts the rule of law" (and in the very next sentence trivializes this, lamenting only that "our allies won't cooperate with us if they think a terrorist will end up at GTMO)."

Again regarding Guantanamo, he asks, "Is that who we are? Is that the America we want to leave to our children?" And he notes disapprovingly that "we are force-feeding detainees who are holding a hunger strike."

And so I keep asking myself, who is this "we?" Does the President style himself as some sort of extraterrestrial creature looking from afar on the abomination of Guantanamo? Has he forfeited his role as the leader of "we?" What kind of leadership is this, anyway?

## **History of Leadership**

In a speech on March 21, 2013, second-term Obama gave us a big clue regarding his concept of leadership one that is marked primarily by political risk-avoidance and a penchant for "leading from behind": "Speaking as a politician, I can promise you this: political leaders will not take risks if the people do not demand that they do. You must create the change that you want to see."

*John Kennedy* was willing to take huge risks in reaching out to the USSR and ending the war in Vietnam. That willingness to take risks may have gotten him assassinated, as James Douglass argues in his masterful *JFK and the Unspeakable*.

*Martin Luther King, Jr.*, also took great risks and met the same end. There is more than just surmise that this weighs heavily on Barack Obama's mind. Last year, pressed by progressive donors at a dinner party to act more like the progressive they thought he was, Obama responded sharply, "Don't you remember what happened to Dr. King?"

It is not as though Obama had no tutors. He entered Harvard Law School 113 years after one of its most distinguished alumni, Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis, began to study there. I find myself wondering if Brandeis has been redacted out of the lectures at Harvard Law.

Slick lawyers have done an effective job over the past dozen years trying, in effect, to render one of Brandeis's most penetrating remarks "quaint" and "obsolete." Following is a paragraph, acutely relevant to today's circumstances; Brandeis wrote it to warn us all about how the government sets a key example on respect for the law:

"The government is the potent omnipresent teacher. For good or ill it teaches the whole people by its example. Crime is contagious. If the government becomes a lawbreaker, it breeds contempt for law; it invites every man to become a law unto himself; it invites anarchy. To declare that the end justifies the means, to declare that the government may commit crimes, would bring terrible retribution."

### **Protesting Too Much**

Let me provide a couple of examples from Obama's speech that illustrate the value of Brandeis's warning:

One could easily infer that the President is protesting too much (four times in the speech) in claiming that his "preference" is to capture terrorists rather than kill them. Clearly, though, Obama has made targeted killing his tactic of choice. What do former insiders say? The lawyer who drew up the initial White House policy on lethal drone strikes has accused the Obama administration of overusing them because of its reluctance to capture prisoners. Holding prisoners is such a nuisance.

John Bellinger, who was a lawyer on George W. Bush's National Security Council and worked on the legal framework for both detention of suspected terrorists and targeted drone killings, said on May 1, 2013, at the Bipartisan Policy Center in Washington: "This government has decided that instead of detaining members of al-Qaida, they are going to kill them."

It should be noted that Bellinger is not opposed to targeted killings and argues that they are not only lawful but "can be good." He said the big issue was not the administration's claimed legality of targeted killings but rather international acceptance of Washington's so-called global war on terrorism:

"The issue really here is that there is a fundamental disagreement around the world, which I experienced when I was the legal adviser, as to whether the United States really is in a war at all. And we are about the only country in

the world that really thinks that we are in an armed conflict with al-Qaida.”

But Obama said, four times, that his preference is capture over killing. Someone is not telling the truth.

Here’s how Spencer Ackerman posed the question in [a recent piece](#) for Wired: “Obama turned more than a few heads by declaring his ‘strong preference’ for ‘the detention and prosecution of terrorists’ over sending an armed robot to end their lives. It’s hard to know what to make of that. The simplest interpretation is that it’s a lie. Whatever Obama’s preferences are, he has killed exponentially more people than he has detained and prosecuted.”

### **Guantanamo Prison**

Over 100 hunger strikers in the Guantanamo prison are being force-fed to prevent them from the only method of release they see open to them death. In this part of his speech, too, Obama keeps giving a bad name to hypocrisy. His handwringing sounds as though he were some kind of liberal pundit on MSNBC; as though he were powerless to do anything; as though his hands are tied by Congress. He said:

“Look at the current situation, where we are force-feeding detainees . Is that who we are? Is that something that our Founders foresaw? Is that the America we want to leave to our children.”

Interrupting Obama, Code Pink’s Medea Benjamin appealed to the President to “release those 86 prisoners” (more than half of the 166 prisoners still held at Guantanamo as of May 2013) already cleared for release. On Jan. 22, 2010, those 86 were pronounced cleared after a year-long investigation of their individual cases by an interagency task force of officials at the Departments of State, Defense, Justice, Homeland Security and others.

But Congress has tied the President’s hands, you may be thinking. Congress, to be sure, has posed legal obstacles, but is not the only fly in the ointment. Congress has also given Obama considerable leeway; but he has not had the courage to take advantage of it. One of Congress’s most powerful members, Sen. Carl Levin, Chair of the Armed Services Committee, sent the White House a letter on May 6, 2013, reminding the President that, thanks to the efforts of Levin and others, Obama can release the 86 without further delay.

In other words, Medea Benjamin was right, though you would never know it from the mainstream media. Referring to congressional restrictions on detainee transfers, Levin reminded Obama: “I successfully fought for a national security waiver that provides a clear route for transfer of detainees to third countries in appropriate cases; i.e., to make sure the certification requirements do not constitute an effective prohibition.”

Moreover, Obama did say that he will lift the restrictions he himself imposed on sending detainees to Yemen. After Obama's speech, attorney Michael Ratner, President Emeritus of the Center for Constitutional Rights, told Paul Jay of the Real News Network:

"All that has to happen is for the President to certify, as he is required to do by law, and send the detainees to Yemen. But then he [the President] says, "I'm going to do this on a case-by-case basis. They have already been cleared on a case-by-case basis. So Obama is going to go back through it?"

"The proof will be in the pudding even on Yemen. Will he actually do it? How slowly will he do it? You know, what he should actually do is just do it and get it done and then move on to the next thing. So we'll have to see"

(After the release of an Algerian prisoner in March 2014, the number of detainees at Guantanamo was 154, only 12 fewer than at the time of Obama's May 23, 2013 speech.)

### **Summing Up: An Epochal Speech**

Benjamin Wittes of Brookings (quoted above) is hardly alone in characterizing Obama's May 23, 2013 speech as a rebuke to his own administration for taking the positions it has and then a defense of its intention to continue to do so.

Here's what Norman Pollack had to say about all this, in an article he titled "Obama's Militarism-Imperialism Lite":

"A tissue of lies? No, the whole Kleenex box one tissue interleaved with all the others. Obama is fortunate to be presiding over a country steeped in false consciousness on essentials (war, sacrifice of the social safety net for the glories of militarism, and authoritarian submission, a political-cultural disposition to strong leadership reinforced by appeals to patriotism and pressures toward conformity).

"His May 23<sup>rd</sup> address therefore fell on receptive national ears, a desperate will to believe that immorality is moral, illegality, legal, and war, the necessary defense of Homeland in its centuries'-old quest for peace, honor, the rule of law. How comforting!

"Liberals and progressives especially have taken heart in POTUS's rhetoric that a new day in American foreign policy is dawning, has already dawned, by the simple fact of self-declaration that the United States is always bound by the constraints of the rule of law. All else is enemy propaganda.

"With that as background (and a solid phalanx of flags as his backdrop) Obama

spoke with becoming assurance, to me, arrogance, as the leader of the Enlightened World in its struggle against the forces of ignorance, darkness, covetousness, wholly oblivious to America's moral sense and good intentions. Such a masterful speech (as judged by the New York Times and mainstream media opinion) deserves a closer look, but not too close, lest the luster wear off."

My gratitude to those who have read down this far. And my apologies for not coming across Pollack's article earlier. It's pretty much what I wanted to say all along; and he says it better and shorter.

**Ray McGovern works with Tell the Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. A former CIA analyst, he has been dissecting speeches of foreign leaders for 50 years, and of American presidents for the past 12. He is co-founder of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS).**

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## Last Call for Spring Fund Drive

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journalism possible.

**Robert Parry is a longtime investigative reporter who broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for the Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. He founded Consortiumnews.com in 1995 to create an outlet for well-reported journalism that was being squeezed out of an increasingly trivialized U.S. news media.**

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