

The Berlin Wall and Missed Opportunities

Exclusive: The U.S. State Department's obsession with "information warfare" as a strategic weapon has made U.S. credibility one more casualty of the Ukraine crisis, along with any remaining trust in the mainstream U.S. media. It was not always thus, laments ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

Which President to believe on Ukraine: Obama or Putin? Which top diplomat: Kerry or Lavrov? Which country is more to be trusted: USA or Russia?

For the first half of my adult life, "USA" was the instinctive answer one that seemed undergirded by real-life evidence, not simply blind patriotism. Now, white hats and black hats have merged into a drab gray; in fact, at times the hats seem to have switched heads, as inconvenient reality shatters instincts and preconceptions. And, as Aldous Huxley once put it, "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you mad."

To cite a small but telling example, is it really being "sanctimonious," as President Barack Obama would have us believe, to think that those who ordered and implemented torture in our name should be held accountable? It was not always thus.

I have lived through a lot of war and not enough peace in my 75 years. I was born on the day that Stalin and Hitler formally agreed to carve up Poland, a week before German tanks invaded that country. Yet, by far the saddest sequence of events during the second half of my adult life began 25 years ago, when the fall of the Berlin Wall brought with it a genuine opportunity for peace in a Europe "whole and free."

That is how then-President George H. W. Bush foresaw the implications of that epochal event. But, as has now become abundantly clear, that opportunity was squandered by those preferring a divided Europe and the perceived advantages of continuing to marginalize Russia as a preternatural, perpetual *bête noire*.

The current hysteria around Official Washington over Russia's reaction to hostile developments in neighboring Ukraine simply does not measure up to genuine concerns that existed during the Cold War.

On Aug. 13, 1961, the East Germans, with Moscow's blessing, began to build a wall separating Communist-controlled East Berlin from West Berlin, and sealing off the well-worn "escape route" from the East to West Berlin and ultimately freedom somewhere in the West.

What a graphic demonstration of the bankruptcy of Communism, that millions living in East Germany and other East European "satellites" of the USSR had already chosen to leave home for an uncertain but hopeful future in the West via Berlin. For skeptics who saw little difference between East and West, John Kennedy's famously advised, "Let them come to Berlin."

The Communist leaders running East Germany were so desperate to stem the flow of emigrants that they gave orders to shoot those attempting to climb over or chisel through the Wall. And how alarming was the weeklong standoff between American and Soviet tanks just 100 meters apart at the Wall's Checkpoint Charlie in late October 1961.

In the fall of 1961, I had just completed a stint as "adjunct instructor" of Russian at Fordham University in a New York State-designed program to equip high school teachers to teach Russian. I was a year away from an M.A. in Russian Studies.

The building of the Berlin Wall was the second clear affirmation given me that I had chosen a field of study that enabled me easily to respond to Kennedy's inaugural challenge, fresh in my ears, to "ask what you can do for your country." The first affirmation had come on Oct. 4, 1957, when the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, the world's first artificial satellite, just three weeks after I had chosen, as a college freshman, to study Russian.

The strategic danger from Russia took ominous shape when, in the fall of 1962, the Soviets emplaced medium-range nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles in Cuba. (We learned only later that some of them were actually armed and ready to fire.)

Through a tough but flexible combination of public and private diplomacy seldom seen in Washington before or since, President John F. Kennedy got the Soviets to back down. A pivotal moment came when U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Adlai Stevenson unveiled high-altitude reconnaissance photos of the Soviet missile base in Cuba, top-secret information that convinced the world that the United States was telling the truth.

Soviet President Nikita Khrushchev eventually removed the missiles (as part of a negotiated arrangement with Kennedy), but Moscow's brazen attempt to steal a strategic march on the U.S. had brought the world very close to a nuclear exchange and left deep traumatic scars.

How close we came to war over Cuba became clear to me in a very personal way when I reported on active duty at Fort Benning, Georgia, on Nov. 3, 1962. The Infantry Officer Orientation Course in which I was enrolled had virtually no weapons for us to train with. Most had been swept up a few weeks earlier by an

Army division headed south to Key West less than 100 miles from Cuba.

Later, while posted in West Germany I was not far from the border with Czechoslovakia when, on Aug. 21, 1968, the Soviets sent in tanks to crush the experiment in democracy called the "Prague Spring." A subsequent assignment as chief of CIA's Soviet Foreign Policy Branch left me in little doubt as to which country was America's "main enemy" or "glavniy vrag," the term used by the Soviets for the U.S.

There was widespread feeling that this Cold War could not basically change in any near future. But just two decades later, the Berlin Wall fell amid widespread unrest in the rest of Eastern Europe. And there was a real chance for lasting peace in a Europe "whole and free" from Portugal to the Urals.

Blowing a Unique Opportunity

The unwelcome truth is that it was the U.S. that bears primary responsibility for sabotaging that unique opportunity; Washington decided to expand rather than disband NATO to match the disbanding of the Warsaw Pact. To those who cared about the U.S. relationship with Russia, this was a profound disappointment.

Regarding U.S. assurances that NATO would not be expanded, former Ambassador to the USSR Jack Matlock took copious notes at the summit between U.S. President George H. W. Bush and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev in Malta just three weeks after the Berlin Wall fell. Matlock was there again two months later (early February 1990) in Moscow when promises were made during the visit of then-Secretary of State James Baker, who told Gorbachev that if Russia would acquiesce to the peaceful reunification of Germany, NATO would not move "one inch" eastward. [See "[U.S. Welched on Promise NATO Would Not 'Leapfrog' Over Germany.](#)"]

Some of the brightest thinkers about East-West relations have lamented the U.S. failure to live up to those assurances. For example, former Democratic Sen. (and Rhodes scholar) Bill Bradley called NATO's expansion eastward, reneging on Washington's explicit promise not to do so, a fundamental blunder of monumental proportions." In a speech on March 4, 2008, Sen. Bradley bemoaned what happened as a "terribly sad thing."

A month before Bradley's speech, U.S. Ambassador to Russia William Burns (now Deputy Secretary of State) was warned by Sergey Lavrov, Russian foreign minister then as now, that Moscow was unalterably opposed to NATO's plan to make Ukraine a member of the military alliance, regarding that as a dire strategic threat to Russia.

We have unique insight into this critical warning, courtesy of Pvt. Chelsea

(formerly Bradley) Manning and WikiLeaks, who made available the text of a State Department cable dated Feb. 1, 2008, from the U.S. Embassy in Moscow bearing the unusual title: "NYET MEANS NYET: RUSSIA'S NATO ENLARGEMENT REDLINES."

The IMMEDIATE precedence that the cable bears shows that Ambassador Burns was addressing a priority issue under active consideration in Washington. Here is Burns's introduction to the message that he sent to Washington after his lecture from Lavrov:

"Summary. Following a muted first reaction to Ukraine's intent to seek a NATO membership action plan at the [upcoming] Bucharest summit, Foreign Minister Lavrov and other senior officials have reiterated strong opposition, stressing that Russia would view further eastward expansion as a potential military threat. NATO enlargement, particularly to Ukraine, remains 'an emotional and neuralgic' issue for Russia, but strategic policy considerations also underlie strong opposition to NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia.

"In Ukraine, these include fears that the issue could potentially split the country in two, leading to violence or even, some claim, civil war, which would force Russia to decide whether to intervene."

Ambassador Burns continued: "Russia has made it clear that it would have to 'seriously review' its entire relationship with Ukraine and Georgia in the event of NATO inviting them to join. This could include major impacts on energy, economic, and political-military engagement, with possible repercussions throughout the region and into Central and Western Europe."

In his closing comment Burns wrote: "Russia's opposition to NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia is both emotional and based on perceived strategic concerns about the impact on Russia's interest in the region. While Russian opposition to the first round of NATO enlargement in the mid-1990s was strong, Russia now feels itself able to respond more forcefully to what it perceives as actions contrary to its national interests." [For more details, see Consortiumnews.com's "[How NATO Jabs Russia on Ukraine.](#)"]

But the Lavrov/Burns warning fell on deaf ears. On April 3, 2008, a NATO summit in Bucharest formally announced: "NATO welcomes Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO."

(Paragraph 23 of the NATO Declaration)

This past spring, with real trouble brewing in Ukraine, Lavrov returned to the subject in an interview with Bloomberg News on May 14, 2014. He said Russia remains "categorically against" Ukraine joining NATO, recounting Moscow's

longstanding concerns about NATO's eastward expansion. He thus explained Moscow's position to a large English-speaking international listeners, many of whom were learning about this history for the first time.

Ukraine's NATO Membership

Even earlier, in a Memorandum for the President dated May 4, 2014, the Steering Group of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity called on President Obama to ask NATO to rescind the part of the April 3, 2008 Bucharest summit declaration that states: "We agreed today that these countries [Georgia and Ukraine] will become members of NATO."

The memo added: "Once that intention is disavowed, you, [Russian President Vladimir] Putin, and Ukrainian leaders should be able to work toward a Ukraine with considerable regional autonomy domestically and neutrality in foreign policy. Finland is a good model. It lives in Russia's shadow but, since it shuns membership in NATO, it is not seen as a threat to Russian national security and is left alone to prosper."

The Memorandum, which called for an early Obama-Putin summit, got considerable coverage in Russian print and electronic media, both controlled and independent. It got none in U.S. media; and we are still awaiting a response from the White House.

It will be highly interesting to watch how NATO's leaders choose to deal with this central issue or to duck it at the upcoming NATO summit on Sept. 4-5 in Wales, since it seems a safe bet that the violence in Ukraine will continue.

Meanwhile, the steady flow of anti-Russian propaganda coming from the U.S. State Department and the simplistic good guy/bad guy narrative favored by the U.S. media (with Putin as the ultimate villain) have done a huge disservice to Americans trying to understand the actual background to the Ukraine crisis and the role played by the U.S. and NATO.

It is certainly no longer easy to say which side in this and other global controversies is more trustworthy. [For more details on this credibility question, see Consortiumnews.com's "Who's the Propagandist: US or RT?"]

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Ignoring Ukraine's Neo-Nazi Storm Troopers

Exclusive: You might think a story about modern-day Nazi storm troopers attacking a European city without mercy would merit front-page coverage in the U.S. press, but not when the Nazi paramilitaries are fighting for the U.S.-backed Ukrainian government and are killing ethnic Russians, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The U.S.-backed Ukrainian government is knowingly sending neo-Nazi paramilitaries into eastern Ukrainian neighborhoods to attack ethnic Russians who are regarded by some of these storm troopers as “Untermenschen” or subhuman, according to Western press reports.

Recently, one eastern Ukrainian town, Marinka, fell to Ukraine's Azov battalion as it waved the Wolfsangel flag, a symbol used by Adolf Hitler's SS divisions in World War II. The Azov paramilitaries also attacked Donetsk, one of the remaining strongholds of ethnic Russians opposed to the Kiev regime that overthrew elected President Viktor Yanukovich last February.

Yet, despite this extraordinary reality modern-day Nazi storm troopers slaughtering Slavic people in eastern Ukraine the Obama administration continues to concentrate its criticism on Russia for sending a convoy of humanitarian supplies to the embattled region. Suddenly, the administration's rhetoric about a “responsibility to protect” civilians has gone silent.

This same hypocrisy has permeated nearly everything said by the U.S. State Department and reported by the mainstream U.S. news media since the Ukraine crisis began last year. There was fawning coverage of the Maidan protesters who sought to overthrow Yanukovich and then an immediate embrace of the “legitimacy” of the regime that followed the Feb. 22 coup. As part of this one-sided U.S. narrative, reports about the key roles played by neo-Nazi activists and militias were dismissed as “Russian propaganda.”

But the ugly reality has occasionally broken through the blinders of the Western press. For instance, on Sunday, in the last three paragraphs of a long article about the Ukraine conflict, the New York Times reported that the Ukrainian military strategy has been to pound rebel-held cities from afar and then turn loose paramilitary forces to carry out “chaotic, violent assaults.”

“Officials in Kiev say the militias and the army coordinate their actions, but

the militias, which count about 7,000 fighters, are angry and, at times, uncontrollable. One known as Azov, which took over the village of Marinka, flies a neo-Nazi symbol resembling a Swastika as its flag.” [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“NYT Discovers Ukraine’s Neo-Nazis at War.”](#)]

Actually, the Azov fighters do more than wave a Swastika-like flag; they favor the Wolfsangel flag of Hitler’s SS divisions, much as some of Ukraine’s neo-Nazis still honor Hitler’s Ukrainian SS auxiliary, the Galician SS. A Ukrainian hero hailed during the Maidan protests was Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera whose paramilitary forces helped exterminate Jews and Poles.

Yet, this dark side of the Kiev regime generally gets ignored by the mainstream U.S. media despite the fact that the idea of modern-day Nazi storm troopers wreaking havoc on Slavic “Untermenschen” would seem like a very juicy story.

But it would destroy the white-hat/black-hat narrative that the State Department and the MSM have built around the Ukraine crisis, with the Kiev regime in the white hats and the ethnic Russian rebels and Russian President Vladimir Putin wearing the black hats. It might be hard to sell the American people on the notion that neo-Nazis waving an SS flag and ranting about “Untermenschen” deserve white hats.

Kiev’s Tolerance of Neo-Nazis

More details about the Azov battalion’s role in the fighting were reported in the conservative London Telegraph. In [a somewhat sympathetic article](#), Telegraph correspondent Tom Parfitt wrote that “In Marinka, on the western outskirts, the [Azov] battalion was sent forward ahead of tanks and armoured vehicles of the Ukrainian army’s 51st Mechanised Brigade.

“[Despite some casualties] Andriy Biletsky, the battalion’s commander, told the Telegraph the operation had been a ‘100% success’. ‘Most important of all, we established a bridgehead for the attack on Donetsk. And when that comes we will be leading the way.’”

The Telegraph then added: “But Kiev’s use of volunteer paramilitaries to stamp out the Russian-backed Donetsk and Luhansk ‘people’s republics’, proclaimed in eastern Ukraine in March, should send a shiver down Europe’s spine. Recently formed battalions such as Donbas, Dnipro and Azov, with several thousand men under their command, are officially under the control of the interior ministry but their financing is murky, their training inadequate and their ideology often alarming. The Azov men use the neo-Nazi Wolfsangel (Wolf’s Hook) symbol on their banner and members of the battalion are openly white supremacists, or anti-Semites.”

In interviews, some of the fighters questioned the Holocaust, expressed admiration for Adolf Hitler and acknowledged that they are indeed Nazis, a fact also known by Kiev authorities.

Biletsky, the Azov commander, "is also head of an extremist Ukrainian group called the Social National Assembly," according to the Telegraph article which quoted a recent commentary by Biletsky as declaring: "The historic mission of our nation in this critical moment is to lead the White Races of the world in a final crusade for their survival. A crusade against the Semite-led Untermenschen."

The battalion itself is founded on right-wing views, Biletsky acknowledged, adding that Nazi allegiances are not grounds for exclusion. "The most important thing is being a good fighter and a good brother so that we can trust each other," he said.

The Ukrainian offensive against the ethnic Russian rebels also has attracted neo-Nazis from around Europe. "Mr Biletsky says he has men from Ireland, Italy, Greece and Scandinavia," the Telegraph reported.

These foreign recruits include Mikael Skillt, a former sniper with the Swedish Army and National Guard who leads and trains a reconnaissance unit. Skillt identified himself as a National Socialist who has been active in the extreme right-wing Party of the Swedes. "Now I'm fighting for the freedom of Ukraine against Putin's imperialist front," he said.

The Kiev government is aware of the Nazi sympathies among the fighters that it has sent into eastern Ukraine to crush the ethnic Russian resistance. "Ukraine's government is unrepentant about using the neo-Nazis," the Telegraph reported, quoting Anton Gerashchenko, an adviser to Interior Minister Arsen Avakov, as saying:

"The most important thing is their spirit and their desire to make Ukraine free and independent. A person who takes a weapon in his hands and goes to defend his motherland is a hero. And his political views are his own affair."

President Petro Poroshenko even hailed one of the militiamen who died in fighting on Sunday as a hero, the Telegraph reported.

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](#).

Giving Israel a Pass on Civilian Deaths

The Obama administration, which touts its “responsibility to protect” civilians when it wants to intervene somewhere in the world, went silent when Israel engaged in massive attacks on civilian targets in Gaza, killing hundreds of non-combatants including many children, notes Gareth Porter for Inter Press Service.

By Gareth Porter

United Nations officials and human rights organizations have characterized Israeli attacks on civilian targets during the IDF war on Gaza as violations of the laws of war. During the war, Israeli bombardment leveled whole urban neighborhoods, leaving more than 10,000 houses destroyed and 30,000 damaged and killing 1,300 civilians, according to U.N. data. Israeli forces also struck six schools providing shelter to refugees under U.N. protection, killing at least 47 refugees and wounding more than 340.

But the Obama administration’s public posture during the war signaled to Israel that it would not be held accountable for such violations. A review of the transcripts of daily press briefings by the State Department during the Israeli attack shows that the Obama administration refused to condemn Israeli attacks on civilian targets in the first three weeks of the war.

U.S. officials were well aware of Israel’s history of rejecting any distinction between military and civilian targets in previous wars in Lebanon and Gaza. During the 2006 Israeli War in Lebanon, IDF spokesman Jacob Dalal had told the Associated Press that eliminating Hezbollah as a terrorist institution required hitting all Hezbollah institutions, including “grassroots institutions that breed more followers”.

And during Israel’s “Operation Cast Lead” in December 2008 and January 2009, the IDF had shelled a school in the Jabaliya refugee camp, killing 42 civilians. The IDF’s justification had been that it was responding to mortar fire from the building, but officials of the United Nations Relief Works Agency (UNRWA) who ran the school had denied that claim.

Given that history, Obama administration policy makers knew that Israel would certainly resort to similar targeting in its Gaza operation unless it believed it would suffer serious consequences for doing so. But the administration’s public stance in daily briefings in the early days of the war suggested little

or no concern about Israeli violations of the laws of war.

On July 10, two days after the operation began, State Department spokesperson Jan Psaki was asked in the daily briefing whether the administration was trying to stop the Israeli bombardment of Gaza, as well as the firing of rockets by Hamas. Psaki's answer was to recite an Israeli talking point.

"There's a difference," she said, "between Hamas, a terrorist organization that's indiscriminately attacking innocent civilians in Israel, and the right of Israel to respond and protect their own civilians."

After four children playing on a beach were killed as journalists watched on July 16, Psaki was asked whether the administration believed Israel was violating the international laws of war. She responded that she was unaware of any discussion of that question.

Psaki said that "tragic event makes clear that Israel must take every possible step to meet its standards for protecting civilians from being killed. We will continue to underscore that point to Israel; the Secretary [of State John Kerry] has made that point directly as well."

The IDF shelled Al-Wafa Rehabilitation and Geriatric Hospital on July 17, claiming it was a response to launches of rockets 100 meters from the hospital. Psaki was asked the next day whether her failure to warn the Israelis publicly against bombing the hospital had "made any difference".

She said, "We're urging all parties to respect the civilian nature of schools and medical facilities." But she refused to speculate about "what would've happened or wouldn't have happened" had she issued an explicit warning,

On June 16, two days before the ground offensive began, the IDF began dropping leaflets warning the entire populations of the Zeitoun and Shujaiyyeh neighborhoods to evacuate. It was a clear indication they were to be heavily bombed. IDF bombing and shelling leveled entire blocks of Shujaiyyeh July 20 and 21, citing rockets fired from that neighborhood.

Kerry was recorded commenting to an aide on an open microphone July 20 that it was a "hell of a pinpoint operation," revealing the administration's private view. But instead of warning that the Israeli targeting policy was unacceptable, Kerry declared in a CNN interview that Israel was "under siege from a terrorist organization," implying the right to do whatever it believed necessary.

State Department Deputy Spokesperson Marie Harf said on July 21 that Kerry had "encouraged" the Israelis to "take steps to prevent civilian casualties," but she refused to be more specific.

On July 23, Al Wafa hospital was hit by an Israeli airstrike, forcing the staff to evacuate it. The IDF now charged that it had been used as a "command center and rocket launching site." Joe Catron, an American who had been staying at the hospital as part of an international "human shield" to prevent attacks on it, denied that claim, saying he would have heard any rocket launched close to the hospital.

On the same day, three missiles hit a park next to the Al Shifa hospital, killing 10 and wounding 46. The IDF blamed the explosions on Hamas rockets that had fallen short. The idea that three Hamas rockets had fallen short within such short distances from one another, however, was hardly a credible explanation.

The IDF also appeared to target facilities run by the UNRWA. On July 23 and 24, Israeli tank shells hit Palestinian refugees at two different school compounds designated as U.N. shelters, despite intensive communications by U.N. officials to IDF asking to spare them.

An attack on a U.N. refugee shelter at Beit Hanoun elementary school July 24 killed 15 civilians and wounded more than 200. The IDF again claimed a Hamas rocket had fallen short. But it also claimed Hamas fighters had fired on Israeli troops from the compound, then later retreated from the claim.

At the July 24 briefing, Harf read a statement deploring the Beit Hanoun strike and the "rising death toll in Gaza" and said that a UNRWA facility "is not a legitimate target." Harf said Israel "could do a bit more" to show restraint. But when a reporter asked if the United States was "willing to take any kind of action" if Israel did not respond to U.S. advice, Harf said the U.S. focus was "getting a ceasefire," implying that it was not prepared to impose any consequences on Israel for refusing to change its military tactics in Gaza.

On July 25, a reporter at the daily briefing observed that the hospital and schools had been targeted despite reports confirming that there had been no militants or rockets in them. But Harf refused to accept that characterization of the situation and repeated the Israeli line that Hamas had used U.N. facilities to "hide rockets." She said she could not confirm whether there were rockets in "the specific school that was hit."

The IDF hit another UNRWA school sheltering refugees at Jabaliya refugee camp July 30, killing 10 and wounding more than 100. The IDF acknowledged it had fired several tank shells at the school, claiming again that mortar shells had been fired from there.

That was too much for the Obama administration. White House spokesman Josh Earnest called the attack "totally unacceptable and totally indefensible" and

even made it clear that there was little doubt that Israel was responsible. Even then, however, the administration merely repeated its call for Israel to “do more to live up to the high standards that they have set for themselves,” as Earnest put it.

On Aug. 3, the IDF struck yet another refugee facility at the Rafah Boys Prep School A, killing 12 refugees and wounding 27. The IDF said it had been targeting three “terrorists” riding a motorcycle who had passed near the school. “The suspicion that militants operated nearby does not justify strikes that put at risk the lives of so many innocent civilians,” said Psaki.

But that criticism of Israeli attacks was far too restrained and too late. The IDF had already carried out what appear to have been massive violations of the laws of war.

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Wisdom in Obama's ‘Don't Do Stupid Stuff’

Hillary Clinton and other war hawks are scolding President Obama for not asserting U.S. power more aggressively around the world to deal with a rash of crises, but there is wisdom in Obama's saying, “Don't do stupid stuff,” observes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Much current debate in the United States about foreign policy can be boiled down, at the risk of the sort of oversimplification that too often characterizes the debate itself, to the following. On one side are calls for the United States to do more (exactly what it is supposed to do more of often does not seem to matter) in response to untoward happenings in hot spots such as Iraq, Syria or Ukraine. On the other side, which includes most of the time the Obama administration, is a tempered restraint based on the limitations and complications of trying to do anything more in such places.

This line-up has some similarities to age-old confrontations between hedgehogs, who know (or think they know) one big thing, and foxes, who pay attention to a

lot of things without having any one big idea.

The nature of the debate has even more to do with the highly asymmetric nature of any argument between incumbent policy-makers, who have the burden of taking real action with real consequences and of dealing with all the messy and costly details, and of outside critics, who have the luxury of bemoaning bad things happening in the world without actually having to take any practical steps to do anything about them, and without having responsibility for the consequences.

This asymmetry has seemed especially marked with the current president, and not only because some of the biggest burdens of his foreign policy have involved cleaning up leftovers from his predecessor's foreign policy (including the premiere threat *du jour*, the group usually known as ISIS, whose birth was a direct consequence of the Iraq War).

The current clear preference of the American public to avoid new entangling military encounters naturally gives rise to the charge that President Barack Obama is merely bowing to that public opinion rather than exerting leadership.

The principal features of the non-incumbent side of the debate are seen over and over again, even if looking beyond such prominent and stalwart members of that side as Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham, who never met an entangling military encounter they didn't like.

One sees these features in the pronouncements of, for example, the ranking Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, [Bob Corker](#), or of [the Washington Post editorial page](#), which has beaten its drum particularly hard for getting more deeply involved in the Syrian civil war. One familiar feature is the implicit assumption that if there is a nasty situation out there, the United States ought to be able to do something to solve it, coupled with the further assumption that the more actively involved the United States becomes in the problem, the more good will come out of the situation.

Another feature is a fondness for applying (again without supporting analysis) the most optimistic assumptions about how some hypothetical alternative policy in the past would have come out. E.g., the idea that if only the United States had done more earlier to assist a "moderate" opposition in Syria, we wouldn't have Assad, or ISIS, or both to deal with today.

Or, if only we had come down harder on Russian President Vladimir Putin he wouldn't be mucking around in eastern Ukraine today. Yet another repeated feature is an equation of leadership with forceful action, especially military action, as illustrated by Corker's charge that President Obama is "uncomfortable being commander in chief".

Also recurrent is the invoking of very hedgehog-like calls for a single “coherent strategy” or “organizing principle” or some such thing, with those making the calls secure in the knowledge that rhetorically such formulations always have an advantage over anything that can be belittled as ad hoc or reactive.

The oversimplification involved is grossest when applied to U.S. policy toward the entire world, but there is still oversimplification when such a call is applied even to a single country. We hear, for example, that problems of U.S. policy toward Iraq are a simple matter of deciding whether the United States has a mission of stabilizing Iraq.

Actually, it’s not really anywhere near that simple. Instability in Iraq has many different facets, some of which should concern the United States and some of which should not, and some of which are amenable to U.S. influence and some of which are not.

Hillary Clinton, whose recent pronouncements must be dismaying to progressive realists fearing they will not have any acceptable choice at the top of the ballot in November 2016, has been talking in the same mode. She tells us that not doing stupid stuff is not an “organizing principle,” and a great nation like the United States needs an organizing principle for its foreign policy.

Two things about that comment make it, well, not quite smart. One is that the world is a very disorganized place, and any single organizing principle is too simple to be effective in dealing with all, or even most, of the problems the world throws at us.

The other thing wrong with that comment is that not doing stupid stuff is so important that it deserves to be at the top of any president’s checklist, just as Hippocrates taught that “first do no harm” should be at the top of any physician’s checklist.

Think about the Middle East, and ask what development, whether involving an action or inaction by the United States, has had the biggest effects, for good or for ill, on U.S. interests in recent years. The answer has to be, firmly implanted on the “for ill” side of the ledger, the Iraq War. The most important thing any U.S. president should do is *not* to do stupid stuff like that, or to get into a position with a serious risk of sliding into something like that.

Mr. Obama’s interview with Tom Friedman last week was a clear statement of the other side of the foreign policy debate. Friedman writes that “the president has a take on the world, born of many lessons over the last six years, and he has feisty answers for all his foreign policy critics.”

The President's observations reflected at least as comprehensive view of the world as those throwing out the buzz phrases of *comprehensive strategy* and *organizing principle*, coupled with an awareness of the unavoidable complexities whether one is dealing with the whole world or with a single troubling country.

His answers were not just feisty but insightful, such as explaining why the idea that putting more arms in the hands of "former doctors, farmers, pharmacists and so forth" was never going to be a solution to the problems of Syria, and why in Iraq the incentives for political deal-makers in Baghdad will have at least as much to do with that country's future stability as munitions in Nineveh. The least persuasive aspect of his comments concerned his unwillingness to recognize intervention in Libya as a mistake.

One should hope that Mr. Obama, as a second-term president, will not let his policies over the next two years be diverted by ill-aimed screeching of hawks. Even if he doesn't, however, the shape and tenor of current debate risks creating a narrative, the effects of which might not be felt until the next administration, that most of the world's maladies exist because the United States didn't do something more, whatever that something might be.

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