

# The Liberal Idiocy on Russia/Ukraine

**Exclusive:** American pundits are often more interested in scoring points against their partisan rivals than in the pain that U.S. policies inflict on people in faraway lands, as columnists Paul Krugman and Thomas L. Friedman are showing regarding Russia and Ukraine, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Among honest and knowledgeable people, there really isn't much doubt about what happened in Ukraine last winter. There was a U.S.-backed coup which ousted a constitutionally elected president and replaced him with a regime more in line with U.S. interests. Even some smart people who agree with the policy of going on the offensive against Russia recognize this reality.

For instance, George Friedman, the founder of the global intelligence firm Stratfor, was quoted in [an interview](#) with the Russian liberal business publication Kommersant as saying what happened on Feb. 22 in Kiev the overthrow of President Viktor Yanukovich "really was the most blatant coup in history."

Brushing aside the righteous indignation and self-serving propaganda, Stratfor's Friedman recognized that both Russia and the United States were operating in what they perceived to be their own interests. "The bottom line is that the strategic interests of the United States are to prevent Russia from becoming a hegemon," he said. "And the strategic interests of Russia are not to allow the U.S. close to its borders."

Another relative voice of reason, at least on this topic, has been former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger who in [an interview](#) with Der Spiegel dismissed Official Washington's conventional wisdom that Russian President Vladimir Putin provoked the crisis and then annexed Crimea as part of some diabolical scheme to reclaim territory lost when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991.

"The annexation of Crimea was not a move toward global conquest," the 91-year-old Kissinger said. "It was not Hitler moving into Czechoslovakia" as former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had suggested.

Kissinger noted that Putin had no intention of instigating a crisis in Ukraine: "Putin spent tens of billions of dollars on the Winter Olympics in Sochi. The theme of the Olympics was that Russia is a progressive state tied to the West through its culture and, therefore, it presumably wants to be part of it. So it doesn't make any sense that a week after the close of the Olympics, Putin would take Crimea and start a war over Ukraine."

Instead Kissinger argued that the West with its strategy of pulling Ukraine into the orbit of the European Union was responsible for the crisis by failing to understand Russian sensitivity over Ukraine and making the grave mistake of quickly pushing the confrontation beyond dialogue.

While the comments by Henry Kissinger and Stratfor's Friedman reflect the reality of what demonstrably happened in Ukraine, an entirely different "reality" exists in Official Washington. (Note that both interviews were carried in foreign, not U.S. publications.) In the United States, across the ideological spectrum, the only permitted viewpoint is that a crazed Putin launched a war of aggression against his neighbors and must be stopped.

Facts, such as the declaration in September 2013 from a leading neocon, National Endowment for Democracy President Carl Gershman, that Ukraine was "the biggest prize" and an important step toward ousting Putin in Russia, do not fit into this story frame. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[A Shadow U.S. Foreign Policy.](#)"]

Nor do the comments of neocon Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland, who was caught in a [pre-coup phone call](#), handpicking Ukraine's future leaders and discussing how to "glue this thing." Nor her public statements about the United States investing \$5 billion in Ukraine's "European aspirations."

### **White Hats, Black Hats**

Instead of dealing with what actually happened in Ukraine, U.S. pundits and politicians from conservative to liberal have bought into a fantasy version of events in which the coup-makers all wore white hats and the elected president and his eastern Ukrainian supporters along with Putin all wore black hats.

But there are, as always, rhetorical differences across the U.S. partisan liberal-conservative divide. On Ukraine, the American Right urges an escalation of military tensions against Russia while chiding President Barack Obama for weakness (when compared with Putin's toughness) and liberals cheer on Obama's supposed success in driving the Russian economy into a painful recession while accusing the Right of having a man-crush on Putin.

This liberal "theme" of jabbing the Right for its alleged love of Putin takes the Right's comments about his forcefulness out of context, simply to score a political point. But the Right-loves-Putin charge has become all the rage with the likes of Paul Krugman, Thomas L. Friedman and other liberals who are bubbling with joy over the economic suffering being inflicted on the people of Russia and presumably eastern Ukraine.

Krugman, who is quickly jettisoning his reputation for thoughtfulness, published

a second column on this topic in a row, showing that he has fully bought into all the propaganda “themes” emanating from the U.S. State Department and the compliant U.S. mainstream news media.

In Krugman’s mind, it was Putin who instigated the crisis with the goal of plundering Ukraine. Operating from that false hypothesis, Krugman then spins off this question: “why did Mr. Putin do something so stupid? The answer is obvious if you think about Mr. Putin’s background. Remember, he’s an ex-K.G.B. man, which is to say, he spent his formative years as a professional thug. Violence and threats of violence, supplemented with bribery and corruption, are what he knows.

“And for years he had no incentive to learn anything else: High oil prices made Russia rich, and like everyone who presides over a bubble, he surely convinced himself that he was responsible for his own success. At a guess, he didn’t realize until a few days ago that he has no idea how to function in the 21st century.”

But Krugman is not only operating from a false hypothesis the reality was that the Ukraine crisis was forced on Putin, not that he went seeking it Krugman also has a simplistic view of the KGB, which, like the American CIA, certainly had its share of thugs but also had a significant number of smart analysts. Some of those KGB analysts were in the forefront of recognizing the need for the Soviet Union to reform its economy and to reach out to the West.

Putin was generally allied with the KGB faction which favored “convergence” with the West, a Russian attitude that dates back to Peter the Great, seeking Russia’s acceptance as part of Europe rather than being shunned by Europe as part of Asia.

Putin himself pined for the day when Russia would be accepted as a part of the First World with G-8 status and other big-power accoutrements. I’m told he took great pride in his success helping President Obama in 2013 resolve crises with Syria over the mysterious sarin-gas attack and with Iran over its nuclear program.

As Kissinger noted, Putin’s hunger for Western acceptance was the reason he obsessed so much over the Sochi Olympics and even neglected the festering political crisis in neighboring Ukraine.

In other words, Paul Krugman doesn’t know what he’s talking about regarding Ukraine. His stab at offering a geopolitical analysis suffers from what an economist should recognize as “garbage in, garbage out.” [See also Consortiumnews.com’s “Krugman Joins the Anti-Putin Pack.”]

## A Spreading Idiocy

Still, this liberal mindlessness appears to be catching. On Sunday, the New York Times' star columnist Thomas L. Friedman weighed in with his own upside-down analysis, smirking about the economic suffering now being felt by average Russians because of the U.S.-led sanctions and the Saudi-spurred collapse of oil prices.

Friedman wrote: "In March, the House Intelligence Committee chairman, Mike Rogers, was asked on 'Fox News Sunday' how he thought President Obama was handling relations with Russia versus how President Vladimir Putin had been handling relations with the United States. Rogers responded: 'Well, I think Putin is playing chess, and I think we're playing marbles. And I don't think it's even close.'

"Hmmm. Marbles. That's an interesting metaphor. Actually, it turns out that Obama was the one playing chess and Putin was the one playing marbles, and it wouldn't be wrong to say today that Putin's lost most of his, in both senses of the word."

Ha-ha-ha. Putin has lost his marbles! So clever! Perhaps it also wouldn't be wrong to say that Tom Friedman has lost any credibility that he ever had by getting pretty much every international crisis wrong, most notably the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 when he was just as smarmy in paving the way for that bloody catastrophe.

Washington Post liberal columnist E.J. Dionne Jr. also joined in the "group think" on Monday, writing "even some of [Obama's] older bets were paying off. The Russian economy is reeling from sanctions imposed in response to its invasion of Ukraine (and from low oil prices). An approach seen by its critics as not tough enough is beginning to show its teeth."

Beyond the propagandistic quality of these columns refusing to recognize the complex reality of what actually happened in Ukraine, including the overwhelming referendum by the voters of Crimea to secede from Ukraine and rejoin Russia there is this disturbingly smug pleasure at how the U.S. actions are hurting the people of Russia.

Whatever you think of Putin, a key reason why he has remained so popular is that he brought some stability to the Russian economy after the "shock therapy" days of plunder under Boris Yeltsin when many Russians were pushed to the brink of starvation. Putin pushed back against some of the corrupt oligarchs who had amassed vast power under Yeltsin (while also striking alliances with others).

But the cumulative effect of a more stable Russian economy was that a fragile

middle class was taking shape in a country that has notoriously failed to generate one over the centuries. Because of the U.S.-backed coup in Ukraine, which essentially forced Putin's response and then led to Obama's sanctions, the Russian middle class is losing its modest savings as the ruble's value collapses.

In other words, the part of Russia's population that could best propel Russia toward a more democratic and progressive future is being dismantled, in part, by punitive U.S. policies while liberals Krugman, Friedman and Dionne celebrate.

### **Insider Rivalries**

What really seems to matter to these pundits is getting a shot in at their conservative rivals, not the fate of average Russians. This attitude reminded me of an earlier phase of these mindless liberal-conservative food fights in 1990 when conservative Robert Novak looked for ways to resolve Iraq's invasion of Kuwait by accepting Saddam Hussein's private offers to withdraw rather than resorting to war.

Yet, when Novak appeared on CNN's "Capital Gang," Al Hunt, a centrist who played the role of liberal pundit on the show, ridiculed the old "Prince of Darkness" for his uncharacteristic peaceful bent. Hunt hung the nickname "Neville Novak" around Novak's neck, comparing him to British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain who sought to appease Adolf Hitler before World War II.

When I later asked Hunt why he had derided Novak for looking at more peaceful solutions to an international crisis, Hunt defended the "Neville Novak" line by noting all the times that Novak had baited opponents for their softness against communism. "After years of battling Novak from the left, to have gotten to his right, I enjoyed that," Hunt said.

Yet, the human consequences from the failure to resolve the Kuwait crisis peacefully have been almost incalculable. Beyond the hundreds of U.S. and coalition deaths and the tens of thousands of Iraqi soldiers and civilians killed, the Persian Gulf War set the stage for a decade of harsh economic sanctions against Iraq and marked a turning point for Saudi Osama bin Laden to begin targeting the United States.

Arguably, if Novak had been listened to if Hussein's peace feelers had been taken seriously history might have taken a very different and less violent course. However, among Washington's insiders, it seems that nothing is more important than their sparring with each other, in television and in print.

Now, these liberal columnists are enjoying bashing conservatives over their supposed love of Putin and their tolerance for Putin's "invasion" of Ukraine.

Not only are the likes of Paul Krugman, Thomas L. Friedman and E.J. Dionne Jr. spreading dangerous propaganda, they are setting the stage for a new Cold War and possibly even a nuclear confrontation.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest 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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